

[Transcript] The Daily / A Fiery First Republican Debate — Without Trump

Hi, I'm Cardiff Garcia and I'm returning for a second season as the host of The Next Chapter by American Express Business Class.

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We'll cover topics ranging from why generalists often outperform specialists and how to assess risk like a poker playing psychologist.

We'll hear from bestselling authors like James Clear, Susan Cain, and more.

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From New York Times, I'm Michael Bilbaro.

This is The Daily.

On Wednesday night, Republicans held their first debate of the 2024 presidential race without the campaign's most dominant candidate on the stage.

Today, Maggie Haberman, on which candidates broke through, which faded into the background and how the debate might influence the rest of the race.

It's Thursday, August 24th.

Maggie, thank you for being here.

Thank you for being on time.

I don't get thanked for that very often, so I'm very happy to have it be.

We said we'd start at midnight and it's only 12.23.

That is so true.

That is so on time in our world.

Yes, it is.

Definitely is.

So, Maggie, the backdrop to this debate has been all this drama around whether Donald Trump would participate.

He did not participate.

Can you briefly, based on the reporting you have done, explain why he chose not to show up?

So basically, Michael, from his perspective and his aides perspective, why would he debate?

That was their question.

Trump has literally said that himself repeatedly, and they have made that point for many, many weeks now, going back to the spring.

What do they mean?

Why not debate?

Because it was not in his interests as the front-runner by a wide margin in the Republican primary to be on stage with people who are polling so much lower, in some cases, really in low single digits.

In their minds, it could only hurt him.

It could take the shine off of him.

It could allow someone else to shine, to have a moment at his expense.

And on top of that, he has this long-running feud with the network that hosted the debate, Fox News, who he complains bitterly, has treated him poorly, despite the fact that he got a number of solicitations from the network's hosts on air encouraging him to show up, privately

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to network executives when and met with him at dinner with him at his club in Bedminster. The Republican National Committee chairwoman, Rhonda McDaniel, also made a pilgrimage there. None of it worked.

And so despite all of these solicitations, he said no, and instead, he decided to do a counter-programming competing event with a former Fox News host, Tucker Carlson.

Right, just to stick the knife in, it seems.

Trump's not only not going to do the Fox News primetime debate, he's going to do an interview with a fired former Fox star, Tucker Carlson.

Exactly.

And right off the bat in that interview with Tucker Carlson, Trump said, why would I go to a place where I'm just going to get harassed all night long?

And it feels like Trump's absence created a real dilemma for everyone who ultimately did decide to participate in the debate.

And the dilemma was, should they focus their attention on Trump and attack him, even though he's not there, given just how far ahead he is in the polls, or should they focus their fire on each other, those in the room and therefore perhaps improve their own standing in the poll, since with the exception of Rhonda Santis, Governor of Florida, they're all so far back.

That was the question, and the answer came really fast once the debate started.

Tonight, the race for the White House takes flight.

Welcome to the first debate of the 2024 presidential campaign.

No one, neither the candidates nor the moderators, wanted to talk about Trump.

They are here to lay out their vision for America.

And so instead, the moderators tried right out of the gates during the conversation toward issues.

More than 65% of Americans say the country's headed in the wrong direction.

And they all ended up using it as a moment to give an opening statement, although moderators had asked them not to do that.

And we heard from eight candidates on the stage.

So first, let me just address a question that is on everybody's mind at home tonight.

Who the heck is this skinny guy with a funny last name, and what the heck is he doing in the middle of this debate stage?

We heard from entrepreneur and first-time candidate Vivek Ramoswamy.

Our country is in decline.

Rhonda Santis.

This decline is not inevitable.

It's a choice.

Now, I was elected as a conservative Republican in a blue state.

Chris Christie, the former governor of New Jersey.

Well, I don't care about polls.

What I care about the fact is that no one is telling the American people the truth.

Nikki Haley, who was the governor of South Carolina.

Our Republicans did this to us, too.

And it doesn't take long for them to all start going after each other.

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You have Rhonda Santis.
You've got Tim Scott.
You've got Mike Pence.
They all voted to raise the debt.
Vice President Mike Pence went after Vivek Ramoswamy.
Now is not the time for on-the-job training.
We don't need to bring in a rookie.
We don't need to bring in people without experience.
Vivek Ramoswamy attacked back at Mike Pence.
I just want to respond to Mike for one second because he invoked me back.
Listen, now that everybody's gotten their memorized, pre-prepared slogans out of the way, we can actually have a real discussion now.
The reality and the fact of the matter is...
Is that one of yours?
Not really, Mike, actually.
We're just going to have some fun tonight.
And then Chris Christie went after Vivek Ramoswamy.
I've had enough already tonight of a guy who sounds like ChatGPT standing up here.
And the last person in one of these debates, Brett, who stood in the middle of the stage and said, what's a skinny guy with an odd last name doing up here, was Barack Obama.
And I'm afraid we're dealing with the same type of amateur standing stage tonight.
Saying that he was invoking a pretty similar line to something that President Obama once said.
Give me a hug just like you did to Obama.
The same type of amateur.
Right.
Explain exactly what's going on here.
We had assumed that in the absence of Trump, that the Republicans on this stage were quite likely to go after the number two in the polls, which is Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida.
But instead, a number of them are going after Vivek Ramoswamy, this, as you said, political newcomer who's kind of unknown to a lot of the national audience.
Why is that happening?
So there are a few reasons, Michael.
One is because they're pulling beneath him and he is gaining on Ron DeSantis in a number of these polls.
And because he's rising in the polls, while DeSantis has been losing steam, he's going to be a natural target.
And he also represents something very specific in the Republican field, which is he's a far right upstart, a younger generation.
He's the most closely aligned with Trump.
And candidly, he was something of a Trump stand-in on that stage.
So you could attack Ramoswamy and in that sense, you're kind of attacking Trump?
Basically, yeah.
I mean, essentially, Ramoswamy is offering the most full-throated defense of Donald Trump

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on that stage, even more than the person who served with Donald Trump, Mike Pence. And going after Trump in absentia worked better when it took on a physical form. And that was Ramoswamy.

Right.

And in the next series of exchanges in this debate, it felt like Ramoswamy was both dominant as a figure in that room and extremely far to the right, as you suggested he was.

That's right.

And so when they started talking about issues like climate, it was clear that Ramoswamy is just much, much, much further right than some of the other candidates.

So for example, on that issue, DeSantis was asked about it and didn't really answer the question.

As somebody that's handled disasters in Florida, you've got to be activated.

You've got to be there.

You've got to be present.

You've got to be helping people who are doing this.

Can we stop?

Who wants to answer the question?

And who's the deal?

So is that a yes?

Is that a yes?

He gave this sort of wishy-washy answer, whereas Vivek Ramoswamy was quite clear.

The climate change agenda is a hoax.

I remember thinking by this point, Maggie, that Ramoswamy's answers are lucid and they are firm.

DeSantis a little more muddled and that this debate is not really playing out the way we thought it might in terms of who was rising to the surface, standing out and emerging as the debate's kind of protagonist.

Yeah, Vivek Ramoswamy had a dominant night.

He just did.

And DeSantis had much less of a memorable one.

He was less interested in standing out.

He seemed as if he was basically just trying to survive.

And Vivek Ramoswamy was trying to create memorable moments.

Right.

Soon enough, we're at the end of the first half of the debate.

And everyone has successfully steered clear of Trump.

The moderators are asking big, smart questions about important issues.

Everyone's behaving as if this were a conventional Republican primary, a pre-Trump Republican primary.

But it's not.

He's a candidate.

He wasn't on stage.

He's in the race.

And this primary will be about Trump.

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And yet no one's talking about Trump.

He's conspicuously absent from it.

Right.

It was almost like the moderators and the candidates were acting as if the Trump administration and the crazy events at the end never happened.

And that this campaign really is actually focused on issues like climate change, as opposed to reflecting on one man.

And it's really slightly untethered to the reality of what this campaign has been about so far.

And it did feel like, okay, so when is what happened in 2020 and on January 6th, 2021, when is this going to come up?

But it becomes clear that in the second half of the debate, this is going to come up.

Right now you are looking live at Fulton County Jail, where former President Donald Trump will be processed tomorrow.

So next the candidates will have an opportunity to talk about the coming trials of Donald Trump. We'll be right back.

But we have a lot to get to in this second hour of this GOP primary debate, policy discussions the Americans want to hear you all on, China, Ukraine, immigration, education.

But we are going to take a brief moment and talk about the elephant not in the room.

Former President Trump has been indicted in four different states on 91 counts.

So eventually the debate does in fact turn to Donald Trump and to the events of 2020 and even to January 6th.

Yes, thanks to the moderators.

Would you still support him as your party's choice?

Please raise your hand if you would.

Who raised the fact that Trump has been indicted several times and could be convicted criminally before the general election.

They ask everyone to raise their hands and say if they will still be behind him if he's convicted.

Right.

And it felt like the opposite of everyone raising their hands at the same time or keeping them down.

It was this kind of strange, reluctant, mushy thing.

It was like watching the wave at a ballpark and so some hands went up, some stayed down, DeSantis in a clip that Trump's team posted pretty quickly on Twitter, waited and looked at one half of the stage to see where the wave was, where was everyone else and then raised his hand.

So just to be clear, Governor Christie, you were kind of late to the game there, but you raised your hand.

No, I'm doing this.

Look.

And Christie did like a half hand raise, half wave.

It was hard to know what it was and I don't think the moderators really understood what it was either.

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Right.

So they asked him about it.

Look, I'm doing this.

I know you didn't.

No.

Look, here's the...

Christie finally uses that moment to get his whack in at Trump, which is what everyone had expected he would do and it mostly landed.

Here's the bottom line.

Someone's got to stop normalizing this conduct.

Okay?

Right.

This is an attack we expected because Christie from the moment he announced his candidacy said, I'm going to be the Republican who's willing to say the tough, difficult things about Donald Trump and the charges against him and what happened on January 6th.

That's right.

And he had not done that throughout the debate up until that point and he finally took that moment to do it.

Now, whether or not, whether or not you believe that the criminal charges are right or wrong, the conduct is beneath the office of President of the United States.

But it didn't land that hard.

He was booed pretty loudly by some in the audience for it.

It doesn't change the truth.

Mr. Ramaswamy, you raise your hand supporting...

No.

I'd like to get in and respond.

I'd like to speak the truth, okay?

And then Ramaswamy had his moment and used it to praise Trump and attack Christie.

President Trump, I believe, was the best president of the 21st century.

It's a fact.

And Chris Christie, honest to God, your claim that Donald Trump is motivated by vengeance and grievance would be a lot more credible if your entire campaign were not based on vengeance and grievance against one man.

You make me laugh because you sit here in an answer.

You sit here in an answer.

Once again, Ramaswamy shows himself to be a pretty skilled performer.

Taking on Chris Christie on a debate stage, Christie is known as a slayer of candidates.

And yet, in exchanges like this, Ramaswamy is getting a little bit of the best of him.

That's right.

It's not so raucous between them that the audience kept booing and the moderators had to step in.

The more time we spend doing this, the less time they can talk about issues you want to talk about.

So let's just get through this section.

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Governor Christie.

But they kept going at it.

And Christie ultimately attacked Ramaswamy for his lack of experience.

I know a lot better than you two.

You've never done it like you've never done anything to try to advance the interests of this government except to put yourself forward as a candidate tonight.

And here's the thing.

Right.

It got quite heated.

And then of course, Pence, who is at the center of all of that drama around January 6th and the end of the Trump presidency, finally gets his say about what happened on January 6th.

Right.

And so Pence ended up talking about what happened that day, January 6th, 2021, amid this pressure campaign from Donald Trump.

And how he got to the point of saying no.

But the American people deserve to know that the president asked me in his request that I reject or return votes unilaterally, power that no vice president in American history had ever exercised or taken.

He asked me to put him over the Constitution.

And I chose the Constitution and I always will.

I had no right to return the election.

It seems worth noting that Mike Pence might be polling in the single digits as he enters this debate, but he gets a tremendous amount of time and space in this debate and is assertive in a way that I don't think a lot of us who think of him and his vice presidency, which has often been defined by a kind of compliance and solicitousness, expected him to be what he was on this debate stage.

Pence really came out swinging in this debate.

He had something to say and he said it.

And we got to see that several times.

And so the others on stage were asked about Pence's actions to rebuke Trump and how he went ahead and certified the 2020 election.

And he got praise from many on the stage.

Including DeSantis.

Including DeSantis and including Christie and Nikki Haley.

They all said that Pence did his job that day.

Right.

Everyone said it except Vivek Rama Swami.

Well, Mike, why don't you say this?

Join me in making a commitment that on day one you would pardon Donald Trump.

I'm the only candidate on the stage who had the courage to actually say it.

That is how we move our nation forward.

Instead, Rama Swami challenges Pence to agree to pardon Donald Trump if he's elected on day one.

And of course, Pence refuses to commit to that.

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Correct.

Now we are moving on to other issues.

The U.S. has committed nearly \$77 billion in aid to the Ukraine war.

Then the moderators turn to foreign policy.

They turn to the war in Ukraine, U.S. support for it.

And this dynamic we have been talking about, Maggie, where Vivek Rama Swami is very firm and very clear and Pence is very assertive.

And DeSantis is kind of fading is very much on display again.

Is there anyone on stage who would not support the increase of more funding to Ukraine?

Yeah, DeSantis gets asked to articulate his position on support for Ukraine.

But you're saying you would not too, Governor DeSantis?

I will have Europe to pull their weight right now.

They're not doing it.

Right.

Will the U.S. keep sending billions of dollars to Ukraine?

Yes.

And he doesn't quite say whether he would or wouldn't.

I think our support should be contingent on them doing it.

And I would have support.

And then he tries to change the subject.

I'm not going to send troops to Ukraine, but I am going to send them to our Southern border when these drug pushers are bringing.

But then Rama Swami, by contrast, gave a very clear answer.

Mr. Rama Swami, you would not support an increase of funding to Ukraine.

I would not.

And I think that this is disastrous.

No more U.S. funding to Ukraine.

Right.

Ukraine is not a priority for the United States of America.

And this leads everyone to pile on Rama Swami.

Anybody that thinks that we can't solve the problems here in the United States and be the leader of the free world.

There's a pretty small view of the greatest nation on earth.

That is incorrect.

We can do both.

Move back.

Pence gives his position and attacks Rama Swami again.

Haley does the same.

The false lies of a professional politician.

Under your watch, you are like America.

Lessa, you have no foreign policy experience.

And it shows.

And you know what?

The whole policy experience that you have.

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And the pattern where Rama Swami is just a clear target.

And again, taking positions that align pretty cleanly with Donald Trump's.

Continuous.

So Maggie, I'm really curious what you make of the fact that DeSantis is operating in the way that he did in this debate.

Not being as unambiguous as Rama Swami, but perhaps more importantly, shying from the kinds of exchanges and conflicts that would have gotten him more attention because of course in these debates, if you get attacked, you get more time to respond, you get more minutes of the debate.

Was that just DeSantis trying to stay above the fray?

Was that strategic or is this just a reflection of his disposition and manner as a candidate or what?

You could see him at some points trying to be an alpha, which is part of his whole political persona and using lines from his stump speech, but a bunch of them just landed with a thud that said his goal was clearly not to have the kind of viral moment that would be bad and would be what people would remember him for. So he sort of faded into the background, particularly later on as the debate went on. But I think that he preferred that to having a really bad moment.

It was an unremarkable performance, but that probably was better than the alternative.

Around this point, the debate comes to an end.

And I want to talk about who's candidacy in your mind might have changed the most because of this debate, because of the way it unfolded and ultimately where this debate leaves this primary in which Donald Trump looms so large.

There were two people who had standout performances.

And one was Rama Swami, his star definitely rose.

He left the debate in a better position than he went into it, which is generally what candidates want.

Right.

And which might lead to a rise in fundraising and attention, perhaps even polling.

Who knows how long that lasts, but this was that kind of moment.

It's only a help to him as we head into the months before Iowa.

The other person who had a standout night was Mike Pence.

He was surprising.

He was a guy who has been struggling in the polls and who is not known as a strong presence in the Trump administration, but he showed that he was a good debater and something of an adult in the room.

Nikki Haley had a decent night, but she was delivering a general election message in a primary.

I don't know how much that helps her.

Meaning her positions were ultimately just too far to the left of the Republican primary electorate.

Yes.

And delivering a message that this Republican primary electorate isn't that interested in Chris Christie will continue on because he has an audience for

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what he's saying, but most of the rest of the candidates are going to struggle in the coming months.

Well, what does it mean that the two people who had a really good night had the night they had, because it would seem like it might end up just complicating the state of this Republican field in which there's such a vast gap between Trump and everybody else.

And I want to talk through that.

This debate did very little to clarify anything, Michael, especially because the two people who had stand out performances represent, in one case, Mike Pence's, the historic version of conservatism and Vivek Rumsamy, who's trying to represent Trumpism and the future of the party.

Right.

And so what does it mean if, let's say, both of them benefit from this moment?

It means the party is still figuring out what it might be in a post-Trump world.

But it's not a post-Trump world.

There is no post-Trump world yet.

As long as there are multiple people battling it out underneath Donald Trump, Donald Trump is going to do well.

And this is not a debate that did much to eliminate a ton of people.

Now, they all, if they qualify, get to do it again in September.

But this is not going to do much to change the trajectory of a race where Donald Trump is so far ahead.

So Maggie, back to where we began.

Did this debate and the way it played out and the infighting among the people on that stage tonight, did it validate Trump's decision not to show up at the debate?

And do they think it validated it?

Yeah, I got a message from Chris Lasavita, one of Trump's top advisors, toward the end of the debate, saying that his decision to skip it was validated within the first 30 minutes of the debate.

Huh.

People might disagree, but it's hard to argue that he made any kind of tactical error by not showing, at least as best as we can tell right now.

Because if he'd been there, there wouldn't be this muddling of things.

There would just be Trump the pinata.

And so ultimately, as perverse as many people might think it is to not participate in the democratic process of debating for the country and the party.

Strategically speaking, Trump feels like it was the right call.

Right.

They're trying to win an election.

They're not trying to win a debate.

Well, Maggie, thank you very much.

Thank you, Michael.

Have a good rest of your morning.

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And you.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you need to know today.

Yevgeny Progozhin, the founder of the mercenary group that staged a brief rebellion against Russia's military leadership this summer, was listed as a passenger on a plane that crashed on Wednesday, killing all 10 people aboard. Little information is known about the cause of the crash or whether Progozhin was in fact on the plane, but it immediately raised the question of whether Putin or his allies had sought to take out Progozhin, who posed the greatest threat to Putin's leadership in decades.

And the altitude is being brought down from 800 meters and we are nearing and approaching the lunar surface.

On Wednesday, India successfully landed a set of spacecrafts in the southern polar region of the moon, making it the first country to ever reach that part of the moon's surface in one piece.

The landing touched off jubilant celebrations at mission control and across India.

The polar regions of the moon have long interested researchers because it is believed that craters there contain frozen waters, which in theory could eventually be used by visiting astronauts.

Today's episode was produced by Rachel Cuester, Carlos Prieto and Mary Wilson, with help from Summer Tomod and Rob Zipko.

It was edited by Paige Cowett, contains original music by Marion Lazano and was engineered by Chris Wood.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsberg of Wonderly.

That's it for the daily.

I'm Mike Maborow.

See you tomorrow.