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DeSantis's Puddin' Head Campaign

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WASHINGTON — Back in the more openly sexist days of Hollywood, writers would get notes on their scripts about women characters. The studio suits would ask questions like, “Can they go to a strip club here?” or “Can you chain her to a wall?”

The most common note from male executives was, “Make the girl more likable.”

No doubt Ron DeSantis’s advisers are getting notes from donors these days with the message, “Make the guy more likable.”

As David Axelrod told me, the Florida governor is coming across like “the high school quarterback who throws the geek against the lockers to get a laugh from the cheerleaders — and that’s not a good look.”

He said DeSantis is learning a lesson: “The kind of tricks you use to get elected to other offices don’t work in a presidential race because you get scrutinized so closely.”

Even in a world made crueler by social media and Donald Trump, DeSantis seems mean, punching out at Mickey Mouse, immigrants, gays and women; pushing through an expansion of his proposal to ban school discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity to include all grades, as well as a draconian ban on abortion after six weeks. He even admonished some high school kids during the pandemic for wearing masks. On Thursday, DeSantis signed a bill cutting the number of jurors needed to give a defendant the death sentence from 12 to 8.

DeSantis seems contrived with Tucker Carlson, weak against Robert Iger, robotic against Trump and inept with potential donors and endorsers. The 76-year-old Trump and the 44-year-old DeSantis can both be nasty, but Trump’s base finds him entertaining, with his “DeSanctimonious” and “DeSanctus” nicknames for the rival he deems “dull.”

Trump is so eager to trash DeSantis that he jumped in on the side of woke Disney and later posted an MSNBC headline on his social media site, “Ron DeSantis’ D.C. charm offensive was a massive failure.”

On Friday, speaking at a Heritage Foundation event outside D.C., DeSantis took a shot at Trump, saying he could send Florida workers to finish Trump’s wall.

But as Axelrod dryly noted, “If they’re going to get into a food fight, Trump always comes with more food.”

Trump 2024 put out a slashing attack on DeSantis the same day, describing Florida as tumbling into destruction (even though Trump seems quite happy living there), harkening back to Bush père’s vicious attacks on Massachusetts when he ran against Michael Dukakis.

The bitchy Trump has plenty of ammunition when DeSantis wears white boots redolent of Nancy Sinatra, as Jimmy Kimmel said, to tour Southwest Florida after a hurricane; or when a report alleges (denied by the governor) that DeSantis ate chocolate pudding with his fingers. (Trump backers already have an ad up about that beauty.) DeSantis let Fort Lauderdale go underwater, inundated by flash floods, while he gallivanted around testing the waters.

The word “likable” became a flashpoint for Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris, with some women supporters claiming it was sexist to talk about that with women candidates.

But as Jerry Brown once told me: “I think we’re always judged on likability and I think that’s something a lot of politicians don’t want to admit. But I can tell you, when they throw you out, most times they didn’t like you. They got tired of you.”

Ken Langone, a Republican megadonor who gave \$200 million to the N.Y.U. medical center, told The Washington Post that he was concerned about DeSantis's rigid manner and his strict abortion ban. Former Representative David Trott, a Michigan Republican, told Politico's Playbook that in the two years he sat next to DeSantis on the Foreign Affairs Committee, "he never said a single word to me," even hello. "If you're going to go into politics, kind of a fundamental skill that you should have is likability," Trott said, adding, "He's just a very arrogant guy, very focused on Ron DeSantis."

Representative Greg Steube of Florida also told Playbook that the governor had never reached out to him — or replied to his efforts to get in touch — even when he was in the hospital after falling 25 feet off a ladder in January. Trump was the first to call him, he said. Trump has also wined and dined Florida lawmakers at Mar-a-Lago.

On Monday, Steube endorsed Trump (as of Friday, 11 Florida representatives were for Trump and one for DeSantis) and he later tweeted, "Sad to see the Florida House and Senate, two bodies I had the honor to serve in, carrying the water for an unannounced presidential campaign."

DeSantis had declared himself "kind of a hot commodity" to The Times of London. Now the governor is prowling in that uncomfortable place best conjured by Hemingway in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro."

People are wondering: What is *that* leopard doing at *this* altitude?

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