

WHO CARES ABOUT A GLIB NARCISSIST WHEN A MUGSHOT WON THE DEBATE?

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This can't be the mugshot his many enemies hoped for.

Instead of looking cowed, concerned, deflated and defeated, Donald Trump looks strong, defiant, unbowed.

And his somewhat sinister scowl denotes that he is already contemplating revenge against those who would persecute him.

It looks more like the product of a photoshoot for a glossy magazine than a picture taken in the hellhole that is Georgia's Fulton County Jail, where one prisoner, found covered in filth, was recently reported to have died from insect bites.

Not for the first time, attempts to denigrate Trump have backfired badly. Instead of being ashamed to be the first former U.S. President ever to pose for a criminal mugshot, he has already uploaded it to his campaign website to raise funds for his bid to retake the White House (and pay his multimillion-dollar legal fees).

He even posted it on the social media platform formerly known as Twitter (from which he was once exiled) to give it the widest currency. It all plays to his claim that he is an innocent victim of the 'deep state' establishment. His people reckon the picture will be worth \$20 million in fighting funds. I suspect it will be far more.

The intangible benefits are even more valuable — it has already almost erased from memory the fact that the night before the mugshot was taken, the first televised debate in the Republican primary race for the 2024 presidential election was broadcast from Milwaukee in the swing state of Wisconsin.

It involved eight hopefuls – minus Trump, of course, who said he was too far ahead in the polls to bother turning up. (He is indeed at least 30 points ahead of his nearest rival.)

During the debate, Trump was ‘the elephant not in the room’, as Fox News put it, because his presence was never far from the proceedings. Few dared to criticize him for fear of aggravating the Republican base, which still adores him – even more so after that mugshot.

Most said they would still back him for the presidency if he won the Republican nomination. One, Vivek Ramaswamy, said that if he became President he would pardon Trump for any convictions ‘on day one’.



Ramaswamy is an interesting character with a backstory not unlike that of Britain’s own prime minister Rishi Sunak. The son of Indian immigrants, with a conventional bourgeois upbringing, who went to an elite university and made a ton of money (in his case as a biotech entrepreneur) before making a late entry into politics. In Ramaswamy’s case, that’s obvious.

He is the glib, arrogant millennial of the Republican field, whose gobby overconfidence blinds him to the fact that often, especially on foreign policy, he has no idea what he’s talking about.

There is also something of the narcissistic snake-oil salesman about him. It’s a trait not uncommon among presidential primary candidates, but still unattractive.

In the run-up to Wednesday night’s debate, he posted videos of himself playing tennis, shirtless, and working out in the gym with his wife, saying he was eschewing the traditional prep for political debates on TV because, unlike his rivals, he wasn’t really a politician.

This conceit was quickly punctured when a picture emerged of him with his aides, suited and booted, standing behind a podium rehearsing for the debate like a normal politician.

It's not the first time he has been a stranger to the truth. A sucker for conspiracy theories, he flirts with the idea that the Saudi government was really behind 9/11, even that the U.S. government itself was somehow involved.

When a CNN anchor asked him to explain why he'd suggested to Atlantic Monthly that U.S. federal agents might have been aboard the 9/11 planes (exactly why baffles belief), he claimed to have been misquoted.

The magazine then released the audio of the interview, proving he'd said exactly what he'd been quoted as saying. His response was to describe the CNN anchor as a 'petulant teenager', though in this encounter she was clearly not the petulant one.

"You have no foreign policy experience," Nikki Haley, a grown-up Republican hopeful (and former ambassador to the UN), said to him bluntly during the debate, *"and it shows."*

It was the understatement of the night. He espouses a series of ludicrous policies which, taken together, would destroy America's position in the world.

His "peace plan" for Ukraine is to stop all military aid to Kyiv and force it to hand over huge chunks of its territory to Russia. In return, he would expect the Kremlin to loosen its ties with China.

It is fantasy foreign policy – but a dangerous fantasy. It would signal to America's European allies that their territorial integrity could not be taken for granted if it suited America's wider purpose.

Not just the European allies. Ramaswamy's other wheeze is to remove security guarantees from Taiwan (global center of sophisticated semiconductor production) after 2028, when he would expect America to be self-sufficient in microchips. So much for the principled defense of a democratic ally against Chinese totalitarianism.

It would destroy the alliances America is building with key Pacific powers, from Japan to Australia. They would scurry off to make their peace with Beijing. As for China, it has already indicated that it might invade Taiwan in 2027. With Ramaswamy in the Oval Office, it would just have to wait a year to do so unopposed.

Then there is his obsession with re-litigating the Saudi role in 9/11. That Saudis were involved has never been in doubt. That the Saudi government was involved has never been proved.

But, not content with angering one Middle East ally, Ramaswamy goes for two: he also wants to cut off all aid to Israel. A double whammy.

The stupidity of his foreign policy means he cannot be regarded as a serious contender for President. At a stroke, he would finish America's position in Europe, Asia and the Middle East and leave its reputation across the globe in tatters, its allies in disarray, its enemies triumphant.

Of course, none of this is going to happen, even in the unlikely event that Ramaswamy reaches the White House. But it illustrates the collective madness that has overtaken the Republican Right when it comes to foreign policy.

Once, the Left pushed policies designed to undermine America's position in the world. Now the Right, in the shape of Ramaswamy and other populist Republicans who think like him, is a far greater threat to U.S. global leadership than anything the Democrats espouse. Ronald Reagan must be turning in his grave.

In many ways Trump is to blame. He is too capricious, too idiosyncratic, too unpredictable for America and its allies to feel safe in his hands.

Perhaps, in positioning himself as a younger iteration of Trump, Ramaswamy realizes he can't win the nomination when he's up against the 'real deal' and hopes for a place in a future Trump Cabinet. Time to start praying it's not as U.S. Secretary of State.

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