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DeSantis' feud with Disney is self-defeating. Here's why | Opinion

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The old admonitory advice “When you’re in a hole, stop digging” is frequently aimed at political figures to warn them they should cease engaging in an activity or issue that will surely turn out harmful to them.

Ron DeSantis, the Florida governor and Republican presidential candidate in waiting, is currently in such a hole and not only has continued digging but has sent out for more shovels.

His feud with The Walt Disney Co. is a self-defeating exercise driven by his seeming obsession with securing some sort of victory over the entertainment and resort giant in response to the company’s public disagreement with a Florida law, supported by the governor, to ban teaching sexual orientation and gender identity in the state’s public schools.

As the governor stands in the hole and continues to toss one shovelful of dirt after another over his shoulder, one can almost hear him mumble between exertions, in his finest grade-school tantrum mode, “I’ll show you I’m right.”

Though not yet officially a candidate, DeSantis is running second — a distant second in some surveys — to former President Donald Trump for the Republican presidential nomination but has faltered in recent weeks under a relentless onslaught of Trump attacks and his failure to respond effectively.

His refusal to be deterred from his bitter and increasingly contentious confrontation with Disney has called into question his judgment and temperament as a viable candidate and as a potential leader of the country.

Dealing with Congress and with leaders of nations around the world demands a sober and calm demeanor rather than holding angry grudges over perceived slights or disagreements.

His initial pushback on Disney was an unforced error that could have been overcome; escalating the conflict and making it personal will cling to him forever.

More: McCarthy offers DeSantis advice on Disney fight: 'Sit down and negotiate and talk'

Not only is DeSantis embroiled in an unwinnable wrestling match with a three-fingered, large-eared cartoon mouse wearing short pants, he is in direct conflict with historical Republican Party orthodoxy: Keep big government off the back of private-sector business and do not use official power and authority to punish or stifle dissent.

These are sins Republicans have always attributed to Democratic opponents in portraying them as committed to a government overreach that destroys private freedoms.

DeSantis was outraged when Disney issued a statement criticizing Florida's law — nicknamed "Don't Say Gay" — and moved to revoke the special self-governing and taxation status the company enjoyed for its Orlando resort. He was thwarted when the company discovered a loophole that retained its position, leading the governor to threaten to develop land adjacent to the resort for use as a prison, among other things.

Disney responded by filing a lawsuit in federal court alleging that DeSantis has orchestrated a campaign of retaliation to harm the company economically.

While both sides have dug in their heels and prepared for a protracted conflict, it is DeSantis who stands to lose the most.

He comes across as petty and vindictive, willing to continue to fight to bring the company to heel and bend it to his will, ignoring the damage he's already brought on himself.

As he moves closer to a presidential candidacy, his conflict with Disney has become the defining moment of his term as governor and will most certainly be used by opponents as evidence of immaturity and seriously flawed judgment that disqualifies him for the presidency.

The restiveness of party leaders has surfaced, with critical comments from Florida Sen. Marco Rubio and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Others in the upper reaches of the party fret anonymously that DeSantis' self-inflicted wounds will overshadow campaign efforts to portray him as ready and able to assume national and global leadership.

The governor has insisted that the issue with Disney is merely a component of his overall strategy to combat the so-called "woke" ideology, a far-left movement that critics say would introduce socialism and destroy traditional American values.

Adopting a scorched-earth policy in his feud with Disney, however, is badly misguided.

The company's decision to publicly oppose the teaching ban was presumably reached by top-level executives of the company who weighed their posture against the threat of a backlash and chose to move ahead.

To be sure, the company could have remained above the fray and allowed the controversy to play out to a resolution in the political/legal system.

It was willing to accept whatever economic consequences resulted from its decision and to defend the company. It was a classic business cost-benefit ratio decision, and if there was a price to be paid, the executives were willing to pay it.

DeSantis' move against an iconic American company and its wildly successful half-century in his state is baffling.

Disney employs 75,000 people and is the largest single-site employer in the world. Its total of 60 million visitors annually also leads the world, and it contributes \$75 billion to the state's economy and \$6 billion in state tax revenue.

Its 40-square-mile footprint in central Florida is nearly double that of the 22 square miles of New York's Manhattan Island.

Why any governor would launch a jihad against a private business that provides jobs and billions of dollars rather than spend time and energy to resolve differences amicably is difficult to fathom or justify.

When confronted by Disney's statement of criticism, DeSantis and his advisers should have put pen to paper and issued something like the following:

"The Disney company and my administration have profound differences over the legislation in question. I believe the company's position is out of touch with the majority of Floridians who support their government's action to protect students who should not be exposed to or taught the proposed curriculum. The Disney company, as a private entity, enjoys the right to speak out if it so chooses. I remain steadfast in my view, however, that the company's position is badly misguided."

The wisest move for the governor was to declare victory and move on.

DeSantis seems immovable, however, despite the growing sense that the war is unwinnable, and it is time to sue for peace.

He's deep in the hole he has dug and shows no sign of climbing out. He's in peril of being there when voters decide to fill it in.

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