

Ad portrays DeSantis as divinely anointed candidate

November 8, 2022

WASHINGTON (RNS)—In a new advertisement, black-and-white images of Gov. Ron DeSantis and his family fade in and out as a narrator declares that “on the eighth day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, ‘I need a protector.’ So God made a fighter.”

The ad, unveiled Nov. 4 on the [Twitter feed](#) of Casey DeSantis, the Florida governor’s wife, is the latest sign he may be making a play to become the anointed candidate of conservative religious voters.

Doing so would likely challenge the electoral ambitions of former-President Donald Trump, who may end up facing off against DeSantis in the Republican presidential primaries.

Perhaps feeling a threat to his status as the vanguard of conservative Christian politics, Trump dubbed DeSantis “Ron DeSanctimonious” at a rally in Florida over the weekend.

‘Trying to position himself as God’s chosen’

Anthea Butler, chair of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, said the ad appears to target the framework for Trump’s political success with conservative Christians, in which God was thought to have chosen Trump for a special purpose.

Some compared the former president to biblical figures such as Cyrus, a Persian king who liberated the Israelites from Babylonian captivity. Still

others invoked prophecy to insist leaders of Trump's administration were agents of God tasked with instilling the government with "kingdom values."

Now DeSantis is "trying to position himself as God's chosen man," Butler said. "That's really coming up to challenge Trump on one of the things that makes him palatable to the QAnon people and all his loyal followers. They feel like God picked Donald Trump."

Marie Griffith, head of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, agreed. "If it worked for Trump, maybe it'll work for him—to be seen as almost a prophet and someone sent by God," Griffith said.

Griffith said the ad hints at other critiques of Trump that DeSantis may use to appeal to conservative religious voters. While Trump has expressed support for COVID-19 vaccines developed while he was in office, DeSantis has repeatedly cast doubt on the effectiveness of the lifesaving shots and pandemic restrictions in general, a view shared by many of the most conservative parts of Trump's base.

"It's reminding people of how he handled the pandemic," said Griffith.

And while DeSantis is Catholic and the "fighter" advertisement appears to be a riff on broadcaster Paul Harvey's 1978 speech "So God Made a Farmer"—substituting "fighter" for Harvey's encomiums about farmers—Griffith said the narrator's voice has the overtones of a mid-20th century Protestant preacher.

Conservative religious support

Several prominent conservative religious voices have begun to line up for DeSantis and used both the ad and Trump's jibes against the Florida governor to speak out.

Matt Walsh, a conservative Christian commentator, came to DeSantis' defense after the Florida rally, writing on Twitter: "DeSantis is an extremely effective conservative governor who has had real policy wins and real cultural wins. Trump isn't going to be able to take this one down with a dumb nickname."

Pastor Tom Ascol—a leader among the most conservative faction of the Southern Baptist Convention, who forced a runoff for the SBC presidency earlier this year—offered the invocation at a DeSantis event over the weekend and later characterized DeSantis similar to how Trump was framed by some during his time in Washington.

"I'm grateful for the privilege to pray for my governor (DeSantis) & his family," Ascol said in a tweet. "God has blessed the state of Florida by placing him in this office as His servant for our good."

Meanwhile, other conservative figures have begun to outline support for DeSantis. Conservative Christian writer Rod Dreher, who recently moved to Hungary, responded to Trump's name-calling by referring to the former president as an "idiot."

Tony Suarez, the COO of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference who was among Trump's evangelical advisers and now also counts himself a "huge Ron DeSantis fan," said he was impressed by the ad.

"My first reaction was: someone on the media team needs a raise, because it's impacting," he said. "Wow, it's strong."

Reservations about timing

But Suarez questioned the timing of the ad. Describing it as a possible "teaser" for DeSantis' presidential bid, Suarez expressed ambivalence

about anyone running against Trump in 2024. Rumors have already begun to swirl the former president may announce a third White House bid soon.

“This is not the moment to divide the party, and the support behind Trump—and I have no reason to believe he won’t run again—is so incredibly strong,” Suarez said.

Instead, Suarez outlined a scenario where Trump runs and wins the White House in 2024, with DeSantis running the next cycle.

“I fully expect to one day vote for DeSantis to be president. I just don’t know if it’s in 2024,” he said. “I do think DeSantis has the potential to be the president of the United States, biblically speaking, ‘in due season.’”

But Butler and Griffith agreed Trump may have reasons to be concerned if DeSantis decides to jump in earlier.

“What DeSantis has that Trump doesn’t have is an appeal to ‘positive family values,’” Griffith said, referring to a phrase long common in conservative Christian politics. “He’s a family man, he doesn’t have all this divorce in his past, he doesn’t have women, to my knowledge, suing him for sexual harassment and rape.”