

Donald Trump Draws Committed and Curious, but Did It Help or Hurt His Chances in Iowa?

Donald Trump shunned Thursday night's debate of the Republican presidential candidates hosted by Fox News and instead filled an auditorium a few miles down the road, trying to prove his widespread support only days before Iowa kicks off the U.S. nominating voting process.

Trump, with just one day's notice on a weeknight, was able to fill to capacity a hall at Drake University that holds 700.

"I didn't want to be here, to be honest, I wanted to be about five minutes away" at the debate, Trump told the crowd. "When you're treated badly, you have to stick up for your rights – whether we like it or not."

The back-and-forth between Trump and Fox News continued even after the debate had begun.

Trump said he skipped the debate because he would not be treated fairly by Fox News anchor and debate moderator Megyn Kelly.

He told the crowd that Fox News made repeated calls to try to persuade him to change his mind. He said officials, presumably the network's chairman, Roger Ailes, called him until moments before the debate began.

Fox News told the story differently.

The network acknowledged that Ailes had three conversations with Trump but said in a statement that Trump had offered to participate in the debate only if Fox News donated \$5 million to his charity.

Fox News declined to make the payment, calling it a “quid pro quo” in its statement.

Trump has made such a demand previously, telling CNN when it hosted a Republican debate that it should donate \$5 million to charity from the profits gained from advertising. CNN turned down that demand.

Trump was able to garner a tremendous amount of attention on Thursday without having to share much of the spotlight. Cable news networks CNN and MSNBC provided extensive coverage of his event.

In deciding to hold a competing event, Trump said the gathering would be to benefit veterans and he welcomed his rivals to attend. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania joined Trump after participating in the undercard debate held for the Republican candidates at the bottom of the polls. Both men spoke briefly about the need to help the nation’s veterans.

Trump told the crowd that in one day he raised more than \$5 million for a veterans group, although his campaign did not say which group was getting the funds. At the conclusion of the event, Trump announced that the total raised for veterans had risen to \$6 million.

Trump said he personally donated \$1 million.

THE COMMITTED AND THE CURIOUS

Trump’s decision to skip the debate was sharply criticized by his opponents.

U.S. Senator Ted Cruz opened the debate by mocking Trump in his absence. “I’m a maniac and everyone on this stage is stupid, fat and ugly,” Cruz said, imitating Trump. “And Ben, you’re a terrible surgeon. Now that we’ve gotten the Donald Trump portion out of the way.”

There are risks in holding his own event for Trump, who several recent polls have shown barely leading Cruz.

If Trump wins the Iowa caucuses, the move will be lauded as proof that he has built a movement capable of circumventing establishment media. If he places second, the skipped debate will be blamed as a fatal tactical error that allowed opponents to paint him as weak in the face of tough questions.

Trump acknowledged that he did not know whether the event would ultimately hurt or help his campaign.

Supporters and some curious onlookers waited in the sub-freezing cold in a line that wrapped around the building and down a block. Trump's campaign erected a large Jumbotron outside the auditorium to allow an overflow crowd to watch his remarks.

Before Trump took the stage, some of his well-known supporters spoke. Lynnette "Diamond" Hardaway and Rochelle "Silk" Richardson, two women with a large online video blog following, urged the crowd to back Trump.

Randy Bowling, a Trump supporter from Ottumwa, Iowa, said some of his friends who are undecided in the Republican contest said Trump's decision to not participate in the debate raised doubts about supporting him.

"We have mixed emotions," Bowling said. "We caught a lot of flak from our friends who are on the fence."

Sharon and Richard Lode drove three hours from Sioux Rapids, Iowa to see Trump's event, deciding they would make the drive with only one-day's notice.

Sharon Lode, who is 65, was not worried that skipping the debate could hurt Trump on caucus day.

"It took a lot of guts to stand up to them," she said.

Steven Doran, 19, was one of the many students and other curious area residents who attended the event with no plans to ultimately support Trump. Doran plans to participate in the Democratic caucus.

"The spectacle," Doran said, when asked why he was there. "I've never seen Trump in person."

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