

The GOP Establishment's Anti-Trump Attacks Intensify

Just hours before the Republican presidential candidates were set to take the stage in Detroit at 9 p.m. EST Thursday for a debate hosted by FOX News, the GOP's 2012 nominee took a stage in Salt Lake City and unloaded on the current front-runner.

"Here's what I know. Donald Trump is a phony, a fraud," Romney said during blistering speech. "He's playing the members of the American public for suckers. He gets a free ride to the White House, and all we get is a lousy hat."

The Republican Party establishment has been concerned about many of Trump's policy proposals, but have failed to provide an electable alternative. Romney's speech, which he said he wrote himself, was a reflection of that frustration.

A short time later, the 2008 GOP nominee, U.S. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), joined in:

"I would also echo the many concerns about Mr. Trump's uninformed and indeed dangerous statements on national security issues."

Wednesday, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) offered his own critique of the billionaire businessman. He resumed his pressure on the 2016 front-runner Thursday.

"Here's what I can control. If I see episodes where conservatism is being disfigured, if I see comments that mislead the people as to who we are as Republicans, I'm going to speak out on those," he said. "I'm going to speak out for who I am and what I believe and what we as House Republicans believe, and what conservatism is as we understand it."

However, with nearly 90 percent of Republican voters saying

they feel betrayed by the party, some political strategists suggest this new round of attacks on Trump could have the direct opposite result. For his part, the businessman reflected Thursday morning on the large number of voters who have joined the GOP rank and file as a result of his campaign.

In response to Romney's comments, Trump called the 2012 Republican nominee a "failed candidate" who "begged" him for an endorsement. "Mitt Romney is a stiff," he told NBC's *Today* program.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, himself a former presidential candidate who has since endorsed Trump, convened a press conference Thursday afternoon that served as equal parts assurance and warning for the GOP. In a not-so-subtle reference to Trump's previous threats to leave the party if he was "respected," he said he "urged" him not to leave the Republican Party.