

Trump leads a crowded if underwhelming field as GOP primary wars kick off in earnest

Florida governor Ron DeSantis won some friends in crucial Iowa, but it wasn't for long



Marion McKeone
in the US

After Florida governor Ron DeSantis's botched campaign launch from the most obscure corner of Twitter, Iowa was his chance at redemption. In presidential politics, Iowa holds a unique position. No one is quite sure why, but this sparsely populated agricultural state (it boasts a population density of just 54 people per square mile, compared for example with New Jersey's 1,300 people per square mile) was selected as the first primary state in US presidential elections. This means that every four years, Iowa wields unaccustomed power.

And it milks every moment of it. Every presidential cycle, wannabe presidents descend like love-crazed suitors. And like Christmas, the Iowa caucuses seem to start earlier each cycle.

Because it's the first primary, public interest is at its peak. As a result, the winner gets hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of free media, which in turn begets tens of millions of actual dollars in political donations.

For Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump, Iowa's 91 per cent white, 85 per cent Christian conservative, Fox News demographic is an exact reflection of the America they're appealing to – it's a white nationalist's wet dream.

So it was no surprise that DeSantis hit the stump in Iowa immediately after the spluttering launch of his campaign on Elon Musk's Twitter. Or that he put on a show, along with his wife and de facto campaign manager Casey DeSantis, that shamelessly pandered to Iowa's evangelicals.

DeSantis, arguably the most buttoned-up, tightly wound politician in the US, gamely dressed in a sleeveless fleece jacket of the type worn by Iowan farmers. The down-home effect was slightly undercut by the stiff blue office shirt and the trousers of his thousand-dollar suit.

His wife, who has a penchant for wearing Disney princess dresses at strange hours of the day, wore a 1950s-style blue frock – full skirt, nipped in at the waist, bows on the shoulders – dutifully ticking the Stepford Wife box.

In between nodding faux-knowledgely as they examined John Deere tractors and plonking themselves awkwardly in front of workbenches full of farm tools, they delivered a display of wholesomeness and happy Christian families that veered between the cloying and the comical.

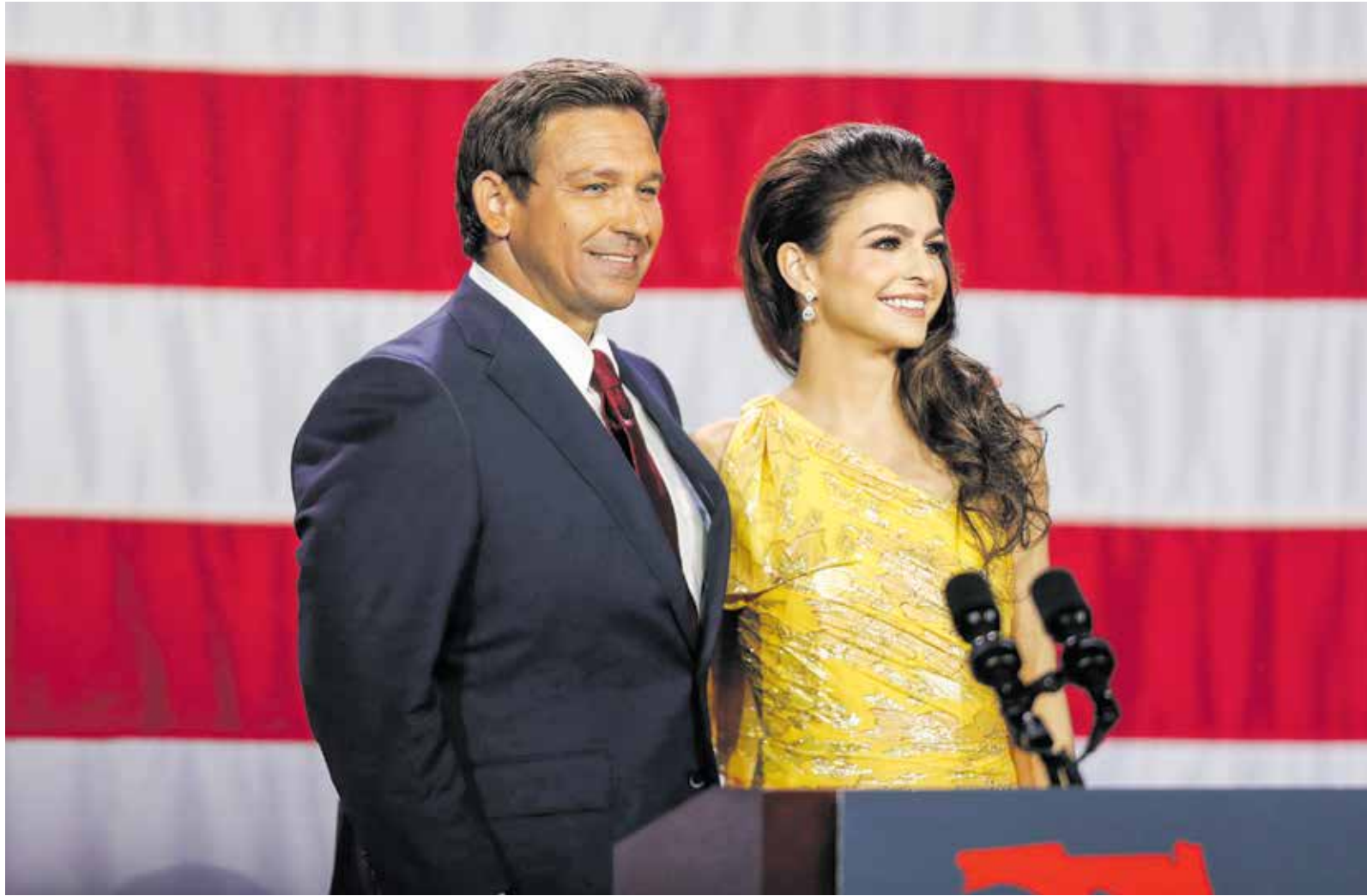
Because DeSantis has the social skills of a badger, he isn't much good at fielding questions, engaging in small talk, cracking jokes or looking remotely like he's happy to be pressing the flesh of the hoi polloi.

Like a poorly programmed robot, he seems to possess just two campaign trail options. The first is his standard stump speech, where he reads from notes in a robo-call voice, droning on about the "woke mind virus" and the Republican "culture of losing" that has dogged the party since, er... around 2016. Take that, Donald Trump!

The second mode is where he sits on stage with Casey and the two pretend they are entirely normal and not actually slightly but obviously weird. To this end, they trot out a series of anecdotes that highlight their white Christian wholesomeness, while providing cues for the audience to chuckle along at the cuter bits.

Unfortunately, a bit like DeSantis's terrifying eruption into simulated laughter a few weeks back, it doesn't always have the desired effect. The story about the Blessed Water they brought back from the Sea of Galilee to use for their three children's baptisms meets with vigorous nods of approval – until the "funny" bit, where Casey recounts how it was almost accidentally chucked out by a housekeeper in the governor's mansion. Ron and Casey had the crowd at "baptism" but lost them at "housekeeper" and "governor's mansion".

Time to reboot. And so next up is



Ron DeSantis with his wife Casey and their children. The couple delivered a display of wholesomeness and happy Christian families that veered between the cloying and the comical

Getty

the story of how the DeSantis children scrawled on the walls of their modest little shack with permanent marker. And how, no matter how demanding the day job as governor, DeSantis is on Daddy duty 24/7. And to prove his point, the audience is treated to an ex-haunting recital of the three DeSantis children's weekend schedules. The point being, Ron has no time in his busy God-fearing life for dalliances with porn stars.

Mason has dance practice at 8am while Mamie has Tee-ball practice – or surely it's the other way around. In DeSantis's world, boys don't have dance practice and girls sure as heck don't muscle their way on to Tee-ball teams. The three-year-old, meanwhile, has to be taken to swimming lessons and then there's a birthday party, music recital, trip to the beach and most importantly, Sunday school and church. See? they seem to plead. We're normal God-fearing Christians just like you. And not – this is the

really important bit – like Donald Trump, that multiply indicted, serial-adulterating, sex-abusing con man who'll be arriving here any moment now demanding your vote. So far, DeSantis, no slouch when it comes to belligerent exchanges, has shown absurd timidity when it comes to Trump. The governor has proven he can go ten rounds with Mickey Mouse, gay people, trans people and public-school teachers who'd like to mention Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King in their history classes. But when it comes to Trump, who kicks him around half a dozen times every day before breakfast, he dare not speak his name.

Instead, he hangs on to his virtuous Christian lifestyle like a political lifeline, hoping that the Iowa evangelicals who turn out to see him in super churches and country stores and tractor warehouses will choose wisely between vice and virtue.

And it seems to be working; in Sioux City, the crowd stamps and cheers after the DeSantis couple simulate a fire-side chat – complete with armchairs – on the floor of a welding factory. During their next stop in Cedar Rapids, they get a standing ovation.

But his incremental gains are obliterated when Trump comes barnstorming into Iowa on Thursday evening, with all the nuance of a bull in a china shop.

Trump doesn't do subtle. He doesn't do respectful undermining of his opponent. He doesn't try to hobble DeSantis with a discreet dig to the kidneys. Instead, he roars on stage, all six foot one (or three) and two hundred and fifty (or ninety) pounds of him, freshly blonded, bronzed and ready for battle. And punches his rival straight in the face, then kicks him squarely in the nuts.

And the Iowans can't help themselves. They roar with approval. They swoon over the bad boy of GOP politics. They're helpless in the face of his blistering charisma. The same feckless voters who nodded along earnestly while DeSantis delivered his Cliffs notes on agriculture and God and the sanctity of marriage, hoot with laugh-

ter as Trump mercilessly jeers at the man who would steal his crown. Et tu, Iowa?

Of course, turning up for the Trump circus in droves doesn't mean they'll vote for him in 2024. Eight months is several lifetimes in presidential primary politics and Trump is likely to be inside more courtrooms between now and then than DeSantis will land jokes. By the time Iowans cast their caucus votes on February 3, Trump will be staring down the barrel of at least one – and as many as four – separate criminal trials. Not that it seems to make much difference to his base.

This is the perennial conundrum for DeSantis. No matter what Trump does, the Maga bros cleave to him ever more fiercely. And no matter what De-

Santis says, the energy slowly drains from the room, leaving his audiences undeniably deflated. But like a dose of medicine, DeSantis doesn't have to be an enjoyable experience. It's all about the promised benefits – his pledge to cure America of all that ails it. And in DeSantis's book, that's anything that doesn't look, sound or think like Iowa.

Last Friday, the brawl rolled into New Hampshire, but yesterday Trump, DeSantis and six other likely and declared Republican candidates trekked back to Iowa for Republican senator Joni Ernst's "Roast and Ride", where they gamely rode motorbikes and displayed their prowess barbecuing beef.

In the way of presidential politics, nothing happens for a long time and then everything happens all at once.

On Wednesday, Mike Pence will formally declare his candidacy. Former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, once derided as Trump's lapdog, has also signalled his intent to enter the fray – this time as an attack dog.

Meanwhile, at least three other governors are waiting in the wings. A senior official with the New Hampshire Republican Party told the *Business Post* there was a "better than 90 per cent" chance that Chris Sununu, the popular governor of the critically important primary state, will declare his candidacy soon too.

Prominent Republicans, dismayed by DeSantis's botched launch and his obsession with far-right culture wars, are pressuring Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin to seek the nomination. Powerful never-Trumpers, Mitch McConnell among them, believe that Youngkin, the emollient former chief executive of a global investment firm, has a far better chance of defeating Trump in the primaries – and beating Biden in 2024 – than DeSantis. Youngkin has proven capable of manipulating the culture wars that are roiling America to his advantage – but his more genial disposition may appeal to a broad swathe of Republicans and independents who are exhausted by Trump and alarmed by DeSantis.

The newest arrival to the GOP party is North Dakota governor Doug Burgum, who has been championed by *Forbes* magazine with near-indecent enthusiasm.

Outside of *Forbes*, not everyone rates Burgum's chances. Certainly not Pence, who bigfooted him by deciding to declare his candidacy on the same day Burgum had planned to announce his. A Pence aide claimed the former vice-president was simply "unaware" of Burgum's plans, a none-too-subtle suggestion that the North Dakota governor's putative candidacy is irrelevant.

But even "Mother", as Pence creepily calls his wife Karen, would concede that Pence has never set the public pulse racing – the Maga mob's "Hang Mike Pence" chant of January 6 was a grim exception. If Burgum fails to gain traction, it won't be because Republicans were transfixed by Pence's formal entry into what is looking like it's going to be an overcrowded – and underwhelming – field.



Former president Donald Trump was met with roars of approval in Iowa, where he mercilessly ridiculed his wannabe successor

Getty

“The Iowans can't help themselves. They swoon over the bad boy of GOP politics, helpless in the face of his blistering charisma

Wyoming congresswoman Liz Cheney, the daughter of former US vice-president Dick Cheney, is all but certain to lose her seat to a Donald Trump-backed opponent in the Republican primary this Tuesday. But in pointedly swimming against the tide of MAGA mania in a red state, is she eyeing a bigger political prize on the horizon?

The unforgiven



By Marion McKeone
in Wyoming

Richard Young is a sprightly “ninety-something” veteran. “I forget what comes after ninety,” he grins as he digs into his nightly supper of trout and vegetables at his local restaurant in Dubois, Wyoming, a picture-perfect town that appears to be entirely fashioned from wood.

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Liz Cheney is facing near-certain defeat to Harriet Hageman in this week's Republican congressional primary in Wyoming, but may already have her eye on bigger things. GETTY



Richard Young, a former US Marine, outside his local diner in Dubois, Wyoming. 'She's got guts,' he says of Liz Cheney

“Local issues, that’s the stuff that matters around here. Cheney, she isn’t even from Wyoming. I’m voting for the other one, whoever she is”

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Log cabins dot Dubois’s main street. Its pocket-sized downtown is straight out of an old Western. Wooden boardwalks etched with the names of its deceased were hammered down more than 100 years ago. Its shops are purely functional. They sell cowboy gear to local ranch hands, fishing rods to elderly locals and liquor and ammunition to everyone else.

Only a jewellery shop, selling Native American-style necklaces fashioned from locally sourced turquoise and pewter, seems to cater to outside trade. Its owner is an equally sprightly octogenarian who plays ragtime tunes on an ancient wooden piano that is perched on the boardwalk outside his store. He also sells elk and moose antlers that he has hand-carved into all manner of creatures, from unicorns to angels.

It’s one of those little towns you only half-believe exists in 2022, with a square dance every weekend and a rodeo featuring local cowboys every Friday night during the summer months. It boasts a couple of no-frills diners and two bars one for the locals and one for the out-of-towners. About 85 miles east of Jackson, the refuge of Hollywood A-listers and billionaires, it may as well be on another planet.

But these little towns defy stereotyping. The waiter is a teenager from Paris working a summer job with a \$8,000 kilometres from home. An elegant cane. Black jeans are tucked neatly into knee high leather boots. “You need ‘em tall and thick when you’re working with horses,” he says, recalling the cautionary tale of a young female wrangler who scooped at his advice until a horse stomped her foot and kicked her shin. “The following day, she comes back on crutches and says, ‘Next time I’ll listen to you,’” he recalls with a chuckle. “Of course, by then she’d learned her lesson.”

Originally from Colorado, Young is a veteran of two wars: Korea and Vietnam. Somewhere along the way, he married a German ballerina. He was “gut-shot” in Korea, surviving for several days in a triage tent before he could be flown back to the US. Fifteen years later, he was shot in Vietnam. He’s lost track of how many surgeries he’s undergone since. The floors of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals from Virginia to Idaho are littered with bits of his innards, he jokes, and he’s currently waiting for a call from his surgeon at the VA hospital in Denver for yet another operation to remove scar tissue from a previous operation that’s partly obstructing his bowel.

Young is happy to chat about any number of topics from Korea to which horses have the best temperaments for each rodeo category. He spins yarns about his days as a bodyguard, after Vietnam he served as a member of security details for top Pentagon brass, and had a stint as a bodyguard for Texan rockers ZZ Top in the mid-1980s. He now spends his retirement breaking in

horses that are sent to him from as far away as Texas and California by his son in law. He’s a mix of conservative and libertarian that’s common in these parts, with some extras. He believes no one outside of the military has any business handling assault weapons and scorns climate change sceptics. “If they’d just open their fool eyes, maybe they’d see what’s going on around them,” he says. But he’s reluctant to talk politics. When we broach the subject of Liz Cheney, he acknowledges that “she’s got guts. Makes no difference what you think of what she’s doing. It takes guts to do it”.

He affirms what seems to be the general consensus following some 2,500 miles of travel across Wyoming’s towns, mining districts and heart-stoppingly beautiful vast open spaces: almost everyone in the state hates Liz Cheney. But Young isn’t one of them. Fighting in two wars, risking your life for your country, only to be scorned and ostracised by your fellow Americans on your return, has given him an insight into her predicament, he says. “When you’re a Marine you don’t get to pick where they send you,” he says. “She didn’t pick this fight neither.” He doesn’t declare himself a Cheney supporter. Nor will he share his views on Donald Trump – unless a vehement spit on the ground in front of him at the mention of the former president’s name can be interpreted as such. “This Tuesday, Liz Cheney, Congresswoman for Wyoming, and former Republican royalty will almost certainly lose the Republican primary – and her seat in Congress – to Harriet Hageman, a hitherto unknown Trump-backed challenger. “The message is as clear as it is intentional. The Republican Party remains the Party of Trump. No dissent is tolerated. If it can, congresswoman to Cheney – who was, until January 2021, one of the three most powerful Republicans in the House of Representatives and as the daughter of former vice-president Dick, who is regarded as royalty in the party – it can happen to anyone. And it has. Of the ten Congressional Republicans who voted to impeach Trump after the January 6 insurrection, all but one, a representative from liberal Washington state, has been defeated by a Trump-backed primary challenger or decided not to run again. Cheney is the last Congressional RINO (Republican in name only) standing. She has occupied the top slot on Trump’s RINO hit list since late 2020. Not only the most senior of the ten Republican Congressional Representatives who voted to impeach Trump, she has effectively led the charge against him as vice-chair of the January 6 Select Committee. And that is why things are not looking good for her right now.

Cheney is the last Congressional RINO (Republican in name only) standing. She now has the top slot on Trump’s RINO hit list



Inset: Liz Cheney and her father Dick on the campaign trail in Cody, Wyoming in recent days
Dewey Vanderhoff

Below: Harriet Hageman, who has been heavily backed by Donald Trump, recites the Pledge of Allegiance at a rally in Jackson, Wyoming
Getty



A hardy state
About 300 miles north-east of Dubois, Trudy Malory, the owner of the Big Horn Motel in Buffalo, wears her pro-Trump colours on her sleeve. Or to be more accurate, they’re on full display in the colourful reception area of her hotel. A Trump mask, complete with Trump 2020 cap, has pride of place alongside one of her paintings. It’s surrounded by an assortment of tchotchkes presented to her by long-term guests, mostly plumbers who board there during the winter months while fixing burst pipes and water mains. She’s owned the pristine motel for more than 30 years since she came north from Laramie. Right on Buffalo’s main street, it’s popular with out-of-state visitors during the spring and summer. She’s also an artist, which supplants her income during the winter months when Buffalo is snowed in and mostly inaccessible to outsiders. She doesn’t

talk politics with guests or visitors lest her views give offence, but she’s a committed Trump supporter and echoes his contempt for and distrust of the federal government. Like so many others in bear country, when she alludes to January 6, it’s with deep scepticism.

Wyoming is a hardy state, she points out: “We don’t ask for hand-outs or help. When winter comes, the local community hunkers down together until the spring. “Like grumpy old bears,” she grins. You can see how traditional conservative politics make sense in ruggedly self-reliant states like Wyoming. They want low taxes and the right to own as many guns as they want, but mostly they want to be left alone from what they regard as federal government meddling.

The way Malory sees it, the Cheneys are elitists who betrayed the very people they claim to represent. Trump is the champion of the ordinary American, the Joe Sixpacks who try to make ends meet on a crummy wage. “We used to like her dad,” she says, “but as soon as he became vice-president he forgot where he came from. Then he was all about the big guys with the big bucks. She’s just the same.”

She adds that Cheney has been bought by Democrat billionaire George Soros, whose name is frequently invoked in red states as the archetypal demon Democrat who is using his billions to convert the US into a Marxist state.

Buffalo’s historic hotel has a bar that you’d expect John Wayne to saunter into at any moment. Except for a stuffed cheetah (“that one’s visiting from South Africa” the barmaid tells me), almost every inch of its walls are stocked with the decapitated local wildlife. “You think Liz Cheney would look good up there?” Malory quips. The entire hotel looks like a taxidermist’s convention centre. In one corner, a life-size grizzly stands guard beside the bathrooms. His mate reclines, full length, over the bar. An old cowboy plays guitar and sings along with a young woman. In between a countrified version of Prince’s Purple Rain and Johnny Cash’s Ring of Fire, they belt out an album’s worth of their own songs. They’re so good you can’t believe they’re not in Nashville. Or maybe you can.

Views on Democrats here are mostly drawn from Fox News caricatures. Most Wyoming voters I spoke

with can’t understand why Democrats are so obsessed with “forcing men into women’s bathrooms” and banning Dr Seuss books in grade schools while pushing “kids who don’t know what the heck they are to get castrated,” according to Lynn Johnke, a dental technician. They’re not, of course, but when your out-of-state news is filtered through the Fox & Friends prism, that’s pretty much what it seems like. Which of course makes it all the more unthinkable that Cheney, a conservative from a deep red state, would throw in her lot with “a bunch of Marxists just to destroy Trump”. All the more so when the election was stolen by Joe Biden.

Alcohol and fury
“DON’T CALIFORNIA CODY”, a giant sign exhorts north of Cody’s city limit. About two hundred miles west of Buffalo, the home of “Buffalo Bill” Cody is a bigger and altogether livelier town. It’s also the last stop-off before the eastern entrance to Yellowstone Park. That, coupled with its mythic Western status, guarantees throngs of tourists from April to October. Certainly not the rooms or the decor in the historic Irma Hotel, which Buffalo Bill named after his daughter more than 120 years ago. The bar, lobby and dining areas are wall-to-wall stuffed buffalo and moose heads.

In the first week of August each year, tens of thousands of bikers flock from all over the US to a mega-rally in the South Dakota town of Sturgis. The previous night, hundreds of them made a stop in Cody, where they proceeded to carry on the time-honoured tradition of industrial-strength drinking and brawling until dawn. It is, as the Irma’s wifi password suggests, the Wild West.

By coincidence, I encounter two bikers I met at a Trump rally in Circleville, Ohio almost two years ago, one of whom had claimed to be the regional chairman of Bikers For Trump. They appear to be wearing the same Trump regalia, interrupted by a visit to the laundromat. Within moments, the conversation turns to Trump, the Stolten Election, the January 6 Committee and Liz Cheney. And from there, due to the potent mix of alcohol and incoherence, it becomes unrepeatable, unquotable and mostly incomprehensible. I make my excuses and leave.

The next morning when I come down, several of them lie slumped around a life-size bronze statue of Buffalo Bill. The hotel owner, Mike Darby, looks like he’s had a rough night. He didn’t get much sleep, he volunteers. “It’s always the same before the Sturgis rally,” he says. At the reception desk, four employees take turns at trying to correct a billing glitch, to no avail. Three of them are wearing Trump hats and T-shirts. Darby puts his head on the counter and quietly groans.

At the local Superfoods in Riverton, where the main items on sale are bear spray, elk and buffalo meat, alcohol and tobacco, opinions are muted. Customers are far more interested in candidates running in local elections for everything from sheriff to a seat on the local school board. “That’s the stuff that matters around here,” a harassed woman with several young children says as she packs her groceries into her car. “Cheney, she isn’t even from Wyoming. I’m voting for the other one, whoever she is.”

Every summer for the past 150 years or so, Cheyenne Frontier Days, the oldest rodeo in the United States, takes place. From all over the north and southwest, bronco Bull riders, steer rop-

ing and barrel racers gather to compete before tens of thousands of fans. It’s easily the biggest event on Cheyenne’s annual calendar and its organising committee is justifiably proud of its authenticity and longevity.

It’s also a ten-day jamboree of family gatherings, barbecues, cattle and horse trading, with some behind-the-scenes marathon drinking sessions, one cowboy turned committee member confides to me. “My liver is about to give out,” he says of his 11 nights straight of drinking into the small hours. “I’m not even sure I’ll be sobered up before next year’s rodeo.”

Talk about politics here is about as welcome as a monkey pox outbreak in the rodeo chutes. But a straw poll of attendees and a handful of organisers grudgingly make it clear they have no truck with Cheney – not since she “shook hands with the Devil”, as one volunteer puts it. “She’s come here before for this, and we made her real welcome. But not now,” she says.

Harriet Hageman, on the other hand, receives a rapturous welcome during her trip to the Frontier Days, even though no one seems to know what she stands for. But around here, the only thing that counts is who you stand with. And Hageman is unabashedly, avidly pro-Trump.

It’s not entirely clear that Trump knows who Hageman is. But he knows she’s the anti-Cheney candidate. And that’s enough for him. He has given her a full-throated endorsement, even dispatching his son Donald Jr to deliver his highly combustible political schtick at one of her rallies. Hageman’s campaign events are infrequent – albeit more frequent than Cheney’s, who has almost literally phoned it in from Washington. There’s a breadcrumb trail of Cheney billboards around Wyoming and a scattering of television ads featuring her and her father, exhorting Trump and urging Wyoming voters to reconsider their positions. But in a state that Trump carried by a margin of 46 points in 2020, it’s a forlorn hope.

If she does somehow win – or even lose by anything less than a 30-point margin – Wyoming is unlikely to accept the result, and will see it as more evidence of election fraud by Cheney and her Democratic cohorts.

When I ask a Cheyenne City Hall employee (who doesn’t want to be named) whether the Cheney For Wyoming signs, which outnumber those for Hageman in size and number, are an indication that she might have even an outside chance of winning, he scoffs openly. He assures me that the reason there are more Cheney posters than Hageman ones is because “George Soros bought and paid for ‘em”.

He adds: “And this BS about getting Wyoming Democrats to register as Republicans so they can vote for her, well everyone knows there’s no Democrats in Wyoming outside of Albany and Teton counties. She’s about the only Democrat here, so if there’s a bunch of votes for her, well then we know they’re [Democrats] doing the same thing they did in 2020 – rigging the election.”

Retiree Cathie Evans and her husband live in Cheyenne’s well-heeled neighbourhood, about a mile north of downtown. “We pray for her every day,” Cathie, a soft-spoken, friendly woman tells me solemnly. But her expression suggests this is Jesus-speak for “We hate her too”.

Cheyenne, home to the state capital, may be the biggest city in Wyoming, but it’s also one of the most desolate and depressing. Even on the final day of the Cheyenne Frontier Days an event that attracts tens of thousands of rodeo aficionados from all over the northwest, the town is effectively shuttered. Groups of men, women and teens gather furtively on benches around the Plaza district. At this stage, it’s easy to spot the signs of opioid and methamphetamine addiction in small-town America, and Cheyenne has not escaped its ravages.

The downtown has a hollowed-out, desolate air. On Sunday and Monday afternoon and evening, most of its shops, bars and eateries are either temporarily or permanently shuttered. Many storefronts have the dusty air of somewhere that has long since gone out of business.

Liz Cheney with supporters in Cheyenne, Wyoming; her chances of retaining her seat in Congress are slim at best
Stephen Speranza

“Covid did a real number on us here,” Kelly Harris, a heavily tattooed twentysomething who works in a local craft brewery, says. “By the time anyone believed it was a real thing, it was kind of too late. But she [Cheney] isn’t interested in any of the stuff that’s happening here.”

A 3rd Street bar near the shuttered Plains Hotel is crowded with men wearing MAGA gear. The atmosphere is one of pure menace. When a burly middle-aged man lumbers in, the barman gestures towards an area at the back with a scattering of tables. As he sits down, it becomes clear he’s openly carrying a gun, which is legal in Wyoming. No permit necessary.

For every picture postcard town – Cody, Buffalo, Laramie, even the suffocatingly twee Jackson – there is a Rawlins, a Cheyenne or an Evanston, small towns ravaged by poverty, drug addiction and crime.

But most of Wyoming is empty. The roads through its vast, glorious plains, towering rock-faces, snow-capped mountain ranges are deserted. Even Yellowstone Park is surprisingly free of humans, aside from the clusters of tourists who flock to the Old Faithful geyser to cheer and capture its daily eruption.

After an unforgettable drive through Yellowstone, where buffalo amble across the roads, wildflowers blaze across vast open spaces and the minerals spouting from ancient volcanoes turn scalding hot springs into shimmering rainbows, I reach the town of Jackson, where even a wooden shack costs upwards of a million dollars and ranches kitted out with Beverly Hills-style fixtures routinely change hands for upwards of \$30 million.

Jackson looks like and feels like a Western town designed by Martha Stewart and Kim Kardashian – whose ex-husband has a lavish property nearby. It has at least three billionaires in permanent residence with another dozen or so part-timers. Along with Palm Springs, Florida, it has one of the greatest concentrations of wealth of any small city in the US.

And on any given evening, a hefty chunk of that wealth is found in the bar of the Hot Hotel, a faux rustic mish-mash of varnished wood and neon pink backlighting. Attractive women survey the male pickings at the bar with the discerning eye of an antique collector. All the tables are occupied by groups of impeccably dressed couples. The barman tells me that during the summer months, groups of as many as a dozen young women rent houses in cheaper adjacent towns and come to the bar most nights in search of a billionaire.

I dismiss his banter as so much sexist nonsense. But later, I meet two of these young women, who have jacked in their jobs in Chicago and are subletting a room in a house near Jackson Hole. They’re friendly, outgoing and freely admit they’re looking for a billionaire-shaped adventure that might lead to a second residence in Jackson. Both say they secretly admire Liz Cheney, but would never admit it lest it spoil their targets.

They sit beside an elderly retired named Emkie. A former General Motors executive from Kansas City whose marital status is unclear, he pointedly sits his back on them. Later, he tells me he’s been living here for 35 years and “every summer it’s the same thing”. He owns a picture-framing shop in town because he “likes to do something besides sit around”. He reveals that he’s close friends with Liz Cheney’s parents, who own a property in nearby Wilson. He’s only met Cheney a few times, but he likes her. She’ll pick up a lot of votes around here, he predicts, but it won’t be enough to win.

A political outlook
Since she was first elected to Congress in 2016, great things were predicted for Liz Cheney. She was expected to become the Republican Nancy Pelosi. “Just watch. She’s going to be the next Republican House Speaker,” former Bush adviser Karen Hughes predicted to the Business Post. “And from there, who knows?” She was referring to Cheney’s better than average chance of following her father’s footsteps. Not as the most powerful vice-president in US history, but as the occupant of the Oval Office.

It’s a fair guess that Cheney, who was promoted to the third most senior position in the House Republican Party after just one term in office, envisaged a similar career trajectory. She voted for Trump-supported legislation 92 per cent of the time.

Now she’s gambling that Wyoming will be the minnow that lands the whale. With a population of around 560,000 and just one congressional representative, Wyoming is something of a

political outback. It has just three of America’s 538 electoral college votes. And, but for a quirk in the US democratic system that awards it the same number of Senate seats as California, New York, Texas and all 49 more populated states, it wouldn’t be on anyone’s political radar at all.

All of which is a long way of saying that Cheney’s eye is on a bigger prize. Wyoming is the sacrifice she’s willing to make to appease the political gods and stop the rot within the Republican Party. She may well emerge as the last woman standing in a party that has sold its soul for a fistful of Trump’s counterfeit political currency.

There has been talk of Cheney entering the fray in 2024 if Trump wins the Republican nomination, possibly as an independent candidate. But independent candidates don’t win presidential elections, no matter how well funded. And Cheney lacks the financial resources to function as a later-day Ross Perot, offering a protest vote to Republicans who abhor Trump but cannot bring themselves to vote for a milquetoast Democrat.

What is more likely is that she may enter the Republican presidential primary alongside Trump, and act as a thorn in his side, challenging him in every primary debate and exciting him at every event on the Republican primary calendar. She certainly couldn’t beat Trump. But she could make life on the trail very uncomfortable for him.

If Cheney’s vilification and ostracisation by her own party, and colleagues she previously considered friends, bothers her, she doesn’t show it. In public she’s flinty, with a dry sense of humour, articulate but not especially charismatic. She’s a tough, unabashed conservative whose political views are out of sync with the majority of Americans on abortion, gun control and climate change. She’s proved herself to be a formidable inquisitor and a tough adversary. But her lonely passion for democracy and willingness not just to take on Trump, but to exorcise the Republican Party that has caved before him, may yet prove to be her strongest suit.

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At 11pm on a Saturday night, with the jukebox almost drowned out by shouts and laughter, a mouse scuttles across the floor of the bar. Several student types charge at it, attempting to stamp it to pieces, when they are elbowed out of the way by a stocky six-footer in biker boots.

In a move of surprising speed and agility, he bends down, scoops up the terrified creature and elbows its tormentors out of the way. He walks across the road to a stretch of grass and trees adjacent to the train tracks and releases the mouse. When he returns to his beer, the entire bar erupted in cheers and applause.

We speak later, and the biker declares himself “a Trump guy all the way”. If that mouse was called Liz Cheney, he grinned, he might have left it to its fate.



Trudy Malory, owner of the Big Horn Motel in Buffalo: As soon as Dick Cheney became vice-president, he forgot where he came from. Then he was all about the big guys with the big bucks. Liz is just the same!

“Covid did a real number on us here,” Kelly Harris, a heavily tattooed twentysomething who works in a local craft brewery, says. “By the time anyone believed it was a real thing, it was kind of too late. But she [Cheney] isn’t interested in any of the stuff that’s happening here.”

A 3rd Street bar near the shuttered Plains Hotel is crowded with men wearing MAGA gear. The atmosphere is one of pure menace. When a burly middle-aged man lumbers in, the barman gestures towards an area at the back with a scattering of tables. As he sits down, it becomes clear he’s openly carrying a gun, which is legal in Wyoming. No permit necessary.

For every picture postcard town – Cody, Buffalo, Laramie, even the suffocatingly twee Jackson – there is a Rawlins, a Cheyenne or an Evanston, small towns ravaged by poverty, drug addiction and crime.

But most of Wyoming is empty. The roads through its vast, glorious plains, towering rock-faces, snow-capped mountain ranges are deserted. Even Yellowstone Park is surprisingly free of humans, aside from the clusters of tourists who flock to the Old Faithful geyser to cheer and capture its daily eruption.

After an unforgettable drive through Yellowstone, where buffalo amble across the roads, wildflowers blaze across vast open spaces and the minerals spouting from ancient volcanoes turn scalding hot springs into shimmering rainbows, I reach the town of Jackson, where even a wooden shack costs upwards of a million dollars and ranches kitted out with Beverly Hills-style fixtures routinely change hands for upwards of \$30 million.

Jackson looks like and feels like a Western town designed by Martha Stewart and Kim Kardashian – whose ex-husband has a lavish property nearby. It has at least three billionaires in permanent residence with another dozen or so part-timers. Along with Palm Springs, Florida, it has one of the greatest concentrations of wealth of any small city in the US.

And on any given evening, a hefty chunk of that wealth is found in the bar of the Hot Hotel, a faux rustic mish-mash of varnished wood and neon pink backlighting. Attractive women survey the male pickings at the bar with the discerning eye of an antique collector. All the tables are occupied by groups of impeccably dressed couples. The barman tells me that during the summer months, groups of as many as a dozen young women rent houses in cheaper adjacent towns and come to the bar most nights in search of a billionaire.

I dismiss his banter as so much sexist nonsense. But later, I meet two of these young women, who have jacked in their jobs in Chicago and are subletting a room in a house near Jackson Hole. They’re friendly, outgoing and freely admit they’re looking for a billionaire-shaped adventure that might lead to a second residence in Jackson. Both say they secretly admire Liz Cheney, but would never admit it lest it spoil their targets.

They sit beside an elderly retired named Emkie. A former General Motors executive from Kansas City whose marital status is unclear, he pointedly sits his back on them. Later, he tells me he’s been living here for 35 years and “every summer it’s the same thing”. He owns a picture-framing shop in town because he “likes to do something besides sit around”. He reveals that he’s close friends with Liz Cheney’s parents, who own a property in nearby Wilson. He’s only met Cheney a few times, but he likes her. She’ll pick up a lot of votes around here, he predicts, but it won’t be enough to win.

A political outlook
Since she was first elected to Congress in 2016, great things were predicted for Liz Cheney. She was expected to become the Republican Nancy Pelosi. “Just watch. She’s going to be the next Republican House Speaker,” former Bush adviser Karen Hughes predicted to the Business Post. “And from there, who knows?” She was referring to Cheney’s better than average chance of following her father’s footsteps. Not as the most powerful vice-president in US history, but as the occupant of the Oval Office.

It’s a fair guess that Cheney, who was promoted to the third most senior position in the House Republican Party after just one term in office, envisaged a similar career trajectory. She voted for Trump-supported legislation 92 per cent of the time.

Now she’s gambling that Wyoming will be the minnow that lands the whale. With a population of around 560,000 and just one congressional representative, Wyoming is something of a

political outback. It has just three of America’s 538 electoral college votes. And, but for a quirk in the US democratic system that awards it the same number of Senate seats as California, New York, Texas and all 49 more populated states, it wouldn’t be on anyone’s political radar at all.

All of which is a long way of saying that Cheney’s eye is on a bigger prize. Wyoming is the sacrifice she’s willing to make to appease the political gods and stop the rot within the Republican Party. She may well emerge as the last woman standing in a party that has sold its soul for a fistful of Trump’s counterfeit political currency.

There has been talk of Cheney entering the fray in 2024 if Trump wins the Republican nomination, possibly as an independent candidate. But independent candidates don’t win presidential elections, no matter how well funded. And Cheney lacks the financial resources to function as a later-day Ross Perot, offering a protest vote to Republicans who abhor Trump but cannot bring themselves to vote for a milquetoast Democrat.

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“Covid-19 did a real number on us here. But Cheney isn’t interested in any of the stuff that’s happening here

As Trump is arraigned, his circus of the absurd lets its freak flag fly

The ex-president's followers showed up to his arraignment, in full voice if perhaps smaller numbers than before



Marion McKeone
in the US

Florida is no stranger to the surreal and bizarre and disturbing. In the past ten days alone, the beloved mascot for the Miami Heat basketball team ended up in the emergency room, following a punch from UFC champion Conor McGregor; a shark sighting on a Florida beach turned out to be a black bear who swam alongside petrified holidaymakers before ambling nonchalantly on to the beach; and neo-Nazis flew swastika flags outside Disneyland in a show of support for Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

And outside a Miami federal courthouse, a sobering day in America's history – the arraignment of a former president on 37 federal criminal charges – provided another forum for the travelling carnival of *Maga* misfits.

There's Gregg Donovan, who has adapted his Uncle Sam outfit into a homage to Trump, accessorised with a heavy gold chain from which a laminated 'In Trump We Trust' medallion swings. There's Maurice Symonette, leading a dozen or so men all dressed in identical 'Blacks for Trump' T-shirts. There's Eric, waving an 18-inch wooden crucifix affixed with a down-cast-looking Jesus surveying the mayhem.

And there's a rival Uncle Sam, but this one is cresting the perimeter on a hoverboard with an amp giving volume to *Puppet Man*, an anti-Biden ditty that borrows heavily from Elton John's *Rocket Man*. "Puppet maaaannn, he's gonna go to jail for a long, long time," he sings over and over.

And of course, there are the Trump lookalikes from Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, and hundreds of other supporters who have fashioned the American flag into every possible permutation of clothing and accessory. They turn up faithfully at the opening of a Trump-themed envelope – particularly one that contains an indictment. Still, it's a long way from the 50,000-strong crowd that Trump and his surrogates predicted.

The outfits have become shabbier and the numbers have grown gradually but discernibly smaller over the past 18 months, but the rip tide of rage and frustration that propels them from event to event remains undiluted.

Jesus on a stick

Chants of "Biden is a paedophile" erupt as a dozen or so *Maga* bros surround an anti-Trump protester who waves a poster declaring "Orange is the New Trump". Then seemingly out of nowhere, Jesus on a stick rises up through the crowd to smack him smartly on the back of the head. The anti-Trump protester lets out a yelp but decides to turn the other cheek.

Completing the Grand-Guignol tableau, Oysame Eltrado, a 43-year-old Cuban immigrant, hoists a severed and decaying pig's head on a pike, an American flag skewering the greenish-grey tongue which lolls sideways from its mouth. A viscous pinkish-grey substance slides down the side of the stick. It's a gruesome sight, but these Trump-inspired connections have lost their ability to shock.

"These people: they are so stupid they think I am a Trump supporter," he says scornfully, after several beefy *Maga* types sporting Trump tattoos line up to have their photo taken with him. "They have never read *Lord of the Flies*. They have never read anything."

"MELANIA!!! Over here. Oh my God! It's Melania. It's Melania! I knew she'd be here," a stout middle-aged woman shrieks. Trump supporters speak about the former president and his family as though he were part of their extended family. Like fans of a soap opera or reality TV show that has become a daily or weekly fixture in their lives, they express a proprietorial interest in the central players of the Trump dramedy that has riveted its audience for the best part of a decade.

But it turns out that the woman in front of the courthouse who studiously ignores their imprecations is not just being aloof: she's not Melania. Melania's doppelgänger is Margo Martin, a 30-something assistant to Trump who looks astonishingly like his wife, from her artfully balayaged and waved hair to her form-fitting dress and five-inch stilettos. All of the women who populate the Trump soap opera – wives, daughters,



Former US president Donald Trump: the fury of his language peaked last Tuesday when he referred to the election as 'the final battle'

Getty



Kari Lake, one of Trump's most vociferous supporters

Getty

in-laws and wannabes – adhere to the same look: long hair, short dresses, high heels and heavy make-up.

Their ardour is cooled by the sight of a large man in a suit who lumbers towards the crowd, standing just behind Alina Habba, Trump's lawyer and spokeswoman du jour, who is dressed in a white trousersuit. "Look, it's Chris Christie!" the woman next to me fairly spits in disgust. "Who let that fat... How dare he show his face here?" A ripple of pantomime boos rises and falls as it dawns upon the crowd that Christie, who is possessed of a similar girth, does not have a shaved head. It's easy to understand how conspiracy theories can take root here.

The very real sight of Kari Lake, one of Trump's most vociferous supporters, rouses them to a frenzy. And lest there be any doubt, a woman walks in front of Lake lifting both arms like an orchestra conductor as she mimes "Kari, Kari", exhorting the crowd to do the same. They happily oblige and Lake smiles her dazzling smile, stops for selfies and shakes hands.

Another in the line of far-right Trump-worshipping firebrands, Lake isn't the only Republican who has turned up ostensibly in support of Trump – but also because it would be churlish to allow all those idling cameras and microphones to go to waste.



Trump supporter Gregg Donovan: adapted his Uncle Sam outfit into a homage to the ex-president

VIEWpress



Trump supporters outside the courthouse where Donald Trump appeared for his arraignment. Supporter turnout has gradually diminished

Getty

At one point, she's fairly shunted aside by Laura Loomer, another camera-mugging anti-Muslim Trump acolyte who eclipses Lake by grabbing a megaphone and shouting, "Where's Ron DeSantis? He should be here today to defend President Trump. He's a disgrace! Shame on him!"

Lake suffered her own humiliating defeat in the 2022 midterms when her bid to become Arkansas' next governor was thwarted by Katie Hobbs, an unassuming Democratic government official. Like Trump, Lake continues to insist she won – notwithstanding recounts and court rulings that clearly establish she didn't.

Armed threat

In a brief conversation with the *Business Post*, she scathingly dismisses Hobbs as a "dud" and a "drip" and reprises her warning that Democratic deep-staters who want to take down Trump will have to "get past me and millions of NRA members". The threat, which has become routine among Trump supporters, is that they will stop at nothing – not even armed violence – to ensure he becomes president again in 2024.



Fears that Trump fans may resort to violent tactics hoping to trigger a cataclysmic endgame are growing

"Cover your face, cover your face," a sixty-something nurse named Deanna exhorts me as a suit-wearing cameraman pans his camera along the pro-Trump crowd that has gathered on the far side of the yellow police tape that provides the flimsiest of ring fences for the vast Miami federal courts complex. "They're FBI – they're going to use this for facial recognition. We've been saying this stuff for years about the FBI, but no one's ever listened to us before Trump."

While the crowds are diminishing in size, fears that its members may resort to violent tactics hoping to trigger a cataclysmic endgame are growing. FBI and Homeland Security officials fret that the chance of lone-wolf acts of terrorism directed at Department of Justice personnel or prosecutors directly involved in Trump investigations increase with every escalation of his rhetoric. The fury and intensity of his language peaked last Tuesday night during his address to a crowd of around 200 donors at his Bedminster property, lambasting special counsel Jack Smith as "deranged" and describing the looming election as the "final battle".

But first he has to win the preliminary battle – the Republican primary. And while polls show he's still the front-runner, there are subtle but growing signs that support for his candidacy is softening and splintering – not just among the Never Trumpers and establishment Republicans whose loathing of Trump is

surpassed only by their fear of him, but among pragmatists who fret that a vote for Trump next spring is a vote for Biden next autumn.

Smith's indictment makes a compelling case that Trump betrayed the American people in the most egregious way possible for a US president – by displaying a reckless indifference towards national security. In order to turn that charge from a liability to an asset, Trump has to alter the parameters of the primary battle.

To save America from becoming a Marxist state, he's pledging to turn it into a fascist state. He finished his speech by promising that if he's elected he would appoint a special prosecutor to "go after Biden and his family" without providing any reason other than vengeance. Likewise with his pledge to "clean house at the Department of Justice and FBI".

The historic arraignment followed by an inchoate but furious defence of his actions reveal the authoritarian creep of Trump's 2024 game plan.

There's a basic rule of thumb in politics: that pollsters, strategists and politicians, pay more attention to than polls, which is, the differing points at which the main political groups – Republican, Democrat and independent – fracture over the same issue. From Trump's perspective, the most recent polls show his indictment is producing a worrying trend.

'Don't knows' grow

Overall, the number of Americans who believe the charges against Trump are serious outweighs the number who don't by a factor of around two to one. And the number of Americans who believe the charges are justified is greater than the number who don't believe charges should have been brought.

In both areas, the majority of Republicans are still rallying behind Trump. But the number that unreservedly support him is getting smaller, while the 'don't knows' are growing in number – as are, to a lesser degree, the number of Republicans who believe the charges are both serious and justified. This growing ambivalence among Republicans and independents is in contrast to polls that show Democrats are near-unanimous in their belief that the charges are serious and that Trump should be charged.

At this stage in any election cycle, Republican pollsters in particular tend to pay more attention to respondents who identify as independent as they tend to be Republican-leaning to the point where Democratic pollsters regard them as "moderate Republicans".

The results of an ABCNews/Ipsos survey published last Friday are consistent with a slew of other post-arraignment polls taken earlier in the week: 61 per cent regard the charges against Trump as serious, compared with 28 per cent who regard them as not serious. And 46 per cent believe the charges are justified compared with 35 per cent who believe they are not, with 19 per cent of Americans declaring themselves 'unsure'.

The growth of the 'unsure' sector is at the expense of those who are firmly in Trump's corner. In other words, more people are defecting from Trump as they learn more about the charges.