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Did Cruz Make a Mistake by Playing Nice With Trump?

The Texas senator has positioned himself close to the celebrity mogul for much of the campaign. Trump is not returning the favor.

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🕒 January 11, 2016

With a “friend” like Donald Trump, Ted Cruz may not need enemies.

The senator from Texas and Republican presidential candidate has plenty of the latter: He has dueled, often personally and bitterly, with his own party’s congressional leadership.

But it’s not Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell or former House Speaker John Boehner or anyone else from official Washington who has been making Cruz’s life difficult in recent days. Instead, it’s Trump, the fellow candidate in the 2016 race with whom Cruz has aligned himself most closely—refusing to criticize the mogul when other candidates sought to drive down Trump’s poll numbers.

In return, Trump has begun floating questions about Cruz’s Canadian birth (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/71485/is-ted-cruz-american-enough>), and whether it makes him ineligible for the presidency under the Constitution. Worse for Cruz, it started just as he was kicking off a six-day bus tour of Iowa—a state he’s hoping will springboard his campaign to a string of primary victories.

So instead of selling his own storyline each day, Cruz found himself arguing that his mother's U.S. citizenship means he himself is a "natural-born" citizen—and in a matter of days seriously straining a months-old "be-nice-to-Trump" strategy designed to pick up the developer-turned-reality-TV-star's supporters.

Does that mean Cruz made a mistake by refusing to rip Trump when other candidates started doing so?

Cruz's establishment critics certainly think so: "Cruz was feeding the alligator in hopes it would eat him last," said Florida GOP strategist Rick Wilson, who has worked for a super PAC supporting Sen. Marco Rubio. "But Cruz never expected the alligator would live this long. Cruz misread Trump."

Cruz spokesman Rick Tyler downplayed the possible damage Trump might be doing with his attacks, and said there is no reason to change tactics. "We'll always be nice," Tyler said. "Everybody else treated him one way, and we treated him another way. The way everyone else was treating him didn't seem to be working."

Cruz's campaign has premised its kid-gloves approach to Trump on that idea that when the voting starts and Trump starts losing, whatever actual GOP primary voters Trump has drawn will gravitate toward the candidate who had been the kindest and most respectful of their hero.

And pretty much from the time Trump entered the race in June, Cruz has been that candidate.

"I like Donald Trump," Cruz told Fox News on June 30 (<http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/30/ted-cruz-comes-to-the-defense-of-donald-trump/>). "I think he's terrific, I think he's brash, I think he speaks the truth."

On July 15, following a visit to Trump Tower in Manhattan, Cruz told reporters that the two had had "a delightful" meeting. "I'm a big fan of Donald's, and we talked about the race," Cruz told reporters (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/07/15/politics/donald-trump-meeting-ted-cruz/>). "We talked about how we are each enjoying it and how there is a need for more truth tellers."

He added: “He’s running, I’m running, and we both agreed that we started out as friends, and will end as friends.”

A few days later, when Trump said that Sen. John McCain was a war hero only because he’d been captured, and Trump preferred those who weren’t captured (McCain had been shot down over North Vietnam and was held captive and tortured for five and a half years), Cruz refused to criticize Trump.

(The alliance seemed on the brink of fracture last month, when Trump criticized Cruz’s confrontational style in the U.S. Senate, calling him a “maniac” for alienating colleagues on both sides of the aisle. Cruz responded with humor, sending out a video clip of the 1980s movie *Flashdance* that featured the song “Maniac” by Michael Sembello. Shortly thereafter at the most recent GOP debate, Trump seemed to restore the truce when he was reminded of his criticism but said he had nothing bad to say about Cruz from the stage. “He’s just fine,” Trump said, and gave Cruz a pat on the back.)

Even last week, as Trump started the Canada talk, Cruz did not hit back. “As others have thrown rocks and others have tossed insults, I haven’t reciprocated,” he told reporters covering his bus tour (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2016/01/06/ted-cruz-is-refusing-to-take-trumps-chump-bait-heres-why/>). “And I don’t intend to start now.... The best way to respond to this kind of attack is to laugh it off and move on.”

Of course, the repayment Cruz has gotten for all of his kind words has been the elevation of an issue that could give Republican voters who desperately want their party to win the White House this November second thoughts about his electability.

Because while Trump has gone after other opponents with grade-school taunts—Jeb Bush is “low-energy,” Marco Rubio is a kid, Rand Paul and Carly Fiorina are ugly—his jab at Cruz raises the specter of a GOP nominee hobbled by lawsuits challenging whether he can even legally hold the office.

And while it seems highly unlikely that the U.S. Supreme Court or any federal court, for that matter, would undo the results of a national election, it’s still unclear what effect the mere possibility of Democrats using his Canadian birth to block a Cruz presidency might

have on the primary race.

Tom Jensen of Democratic-leaning Public Policy Polling said the group actually included a Cruz-and-Canada question in a late August survey (http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/pdf/2015/PPP_Release_National_90115.pdf), and found that only 22 percent of Republicans nationally, and 29 percent of Cruz supporters, knew that he was born in Canada. Forty percent of all Republicans and 62 percent of Cruz supporters believed, incorrectly, that he was born in the United States. (That same poll also showed that a near majority of Republicans continue to believe, also incorrectly, that President Obama was born outside the United States.)

“I think it really raises awareness of where Cruz was born,” Jensen said. “We’ll just have to see if this hurts Cruz.”

Jensen’s sense, though, is that it will not. Those who believe that Obama was born in Kenya or Indonesia do so largely because they dislike Obama intensely, Jensen said. Conversely, those who support Cruz are likely to continue to support Cruz, regardless of where he was born, he said. “I’ll be surprised if Cruz’s position in Iowa is hurt even after a week of this,” he added.

Cruz spokesman Tyler, in fact, said Iowans who have heard Trump’s attacks and then Cruz’s response seem to be more supportive of Cruz than before. “It’s actually helpful,” Tyler said. “It’s a marginal benefit.”