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Did Huckabee go too far by showing the negative Romney ad he decided not to run?

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Mike Huckabee may have finally gone too far.

After running an unconventional, surprisingly strong and sometimes strange race to the top tier of the Republican presidential campaign, the former Arkansas governor topped himself Monday with an eyebrow-raising campaign stunt.

He called a news conference to unveil a negative ad that he had just withdrawn from Iowa television stations because, he told a room full of journalists recording the ad, he had a sudden aversion to negative politics. Quite a convenient epiphany.

"If people want to be cynical about it," Huckabee said, "they can be cynical about it."

If he loses Iowa's caucuses on Thursday, New Year's Eve will forever mark the day Huckabee blew it the day a group of reporters stopped laughing with the witty Republican and laughed at him.

If he wins a possibility that even Huckabee now thinks he put at risk he sealed victory in a weird way Monday.

Here's what happened:

Huckabee came out of nowhere a few weeks ago to overtake former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in Iowa polls, despite being massively outspent and out-organized. Romney answered back with television ads criticizing Huckabee's record in Arkansas.

While guilty of cherry-picking the worst aspects of Huckabee's resume, the negative ads stuck with the facts. For example, Huckabee did grant 1,033 pardons and commutations, including for 12 convicted murderers, as Romney's ad stated.

Huckabee's lead evaporated, which suggests the ads worked or that a series of gaffes had caught up to him.

Or both.

So he did what desperate candidates do. Huckabee took himself off the campaign trail Sunday to shoot a negative ad. He bought \$30,000 in television time to air the spot and called a news conference to unveil it.

While awaiting the late-arriving Huckabee, more than 50 reporters and a dozen photographers got to read five huge cards placed on easels by Huckabee's staff all highly critical of Romney's record as governor.

"Enough is enough," the signs said.

When Huckabee arrived, he announced he had just changed his mind. The ad wouldn't run. It was too negative.

"I believe the people of Iowa deserve better, and we are going to try and give them better ...," he said.

But he didn't. Instead, Huckabee showed off the spot to the journalists, knowing full well his negative message would seep out of the room. He told the media to pay close attention.

"You're not going to get a copy of it," he warned, "so this is your chance to see it, then after that you'll never see it again."

The media laughed.

One of the funniest, most charming presidential candidates in recent memory, Huckabee normally makes reporters and voters laugh at his one-liners. On Monday, he made himself the butt of his own joke, urging journalists to take careful note of the negative ad he had withdrawn because he wanted to run a positive campaign.

"It's never too late to do the right thing," he said.

The ad criticizes Romney's record as governor, fairly so, but goes on to question his character. "If a man is dishonest to obtain a job," Huckabee says in the ad, "he'll be dishonest on the job."

Funny that Huckabee decided at noon that that line was too negative, because he used it six hours earlier during a national TV interview.

He used it on a Sunday news show, too.

And he didn't disavow the line Monday. "I said what I said. I spoke the truth," Huckabee said.

If he loses Thursday, Huckabee said, "I'll be the last guy to do this. But I want to be the first who will at least try."

Iowans have a reputation for punishing politicians who go negative. The question is whether voters, particularly evangelicals who make up his political base, will believe Huckabee had the political equivalent of a deathbed conversion.

Or will they think he's treating them like rubes appealing to their sense of fair play while being foul?

Either way, the bizarre news conference was the latest twist in a campaign that has given new meaning to the word paradox. Huckabee is an immensely talented communicator and successful former governor who is nonetheless a flawed candidate.

He is mistake prone, particularly when it comes to commenting about foreign policy.

He can be thin-skinned and rash. Two of his advisers, speaking on condition of anonymity, said privately Monday that the production of the ad was fueled by Huckabee's white-hot anger with Romney, and that his change of mind was jarring to the campaign staff.

He has a paltry political organization in a state that values the ground game, according to an informal survey of GOP county chairs and co-chairs. "I haven't seen much of a sign of him or his people," said Jim Conklin, chairman of the Linn County GOP.

He can also be disarmingly honest. Asked whether Romney should stop running negative ads, Huckabee said, "I'm not going to try to run his campaign."

"I'm having enough trouble running mine."

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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