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McClatchy DC: S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley zings 2016 race and Donald Trump at Gridiron Dinner  
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Vera Bergengruen

WASHINGTON - South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley poked fun at the chaotic 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump, and herself as the featured Republican speaker at Saturday night's annual Gridiron dinner in Washington, D.C.

"Even though I gave the [State of the Union] response, I won't really feel like I made it until Donald Trump demands to see my birth certificate," she joked at the dinner, a 130-year old event where journalists and politicians roast each other in speeches and songs.

Haley and the Democratic speakers, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julian Castro and Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-Texas, were serenaded with songs that teased them for being vice presidential wannabees on their respective tickets.

"By the way when I endorsed Marco [Rubio] everyone assumed we cut a deal," Haley said in her speech. "We did - he promised I could borrow his boots."

Haley found the humor in the state of her party, which is in the midst of a panicked scramble to stop Trump from being the Republican nominee.

"Reince Priebus, who I saw earlier, used the RNC to control the debate so they didn't damage the Republican brand," Haley said, turning to the Republican National Committee Chairman. "Heck of a job, Priebus."

Haley reserved some of her best jabs for the Republican frontrunner, who was declared the winner of the Kentucky and Louisiana primaries during the dinner.

"The truth is you all have made me feel so welcome - not once have I felt like Megyn Kelly at a Trump rally," she quipped.

"You know, I visited Donald's office a few years back. It's exactly what you would expect - understated, refined, tasteful. I'm glad I got to see it when I did, I couldn't get in there now with the new ban on brown people entering Trump Tower," she said to cheers from the audience. "Sorry I got another text - Donald's suing me for that joke. Bless your heart."

Haley also joked about how much the year's Academy Award-winning movies have in common with what is happening in politics.

"'The Big Short' attacked Wall Street - or as Bernie Sanders calls it, the 'feel good movie' of the year! 'Spotlight' was about crusading reporters working at a thriving newspaper, so that was definitely science fiction. And 'The Room' was about people trapped against their will by a rambling older man. You know

what that sounds like? Chris Christie on stage with Donald Trump.”

As to who will end up as the Democratic nominee?

“Well, that’s up to the people,” Haley said. “And the FBI. You can tell Hillary’s getting worried – today she asked if they made orange prison pantsuits.”

Vice President Biden, who represented the White House at the dinner, praised Haley for her role in removing the Confederate flag from the Columbia, S.C. statehouse last year.

“Full disclosure, I love Nikki, and she’s always been gracious to me when I’m in South Carolina,” he said, joking that she was doing so well that “I predict in four years you’re going to be a Democrat.”

The Castro brothers also praised Haley for taking down the flag, calling it “a profile in courage” to loud applause from the audience, and joked that she is “a real rising star in the GOP – which used to be a compliment.”

For her part, Haley also poked fun at the Texan brothers.

“Didn’t Ben Carson do a great job separating them? Speaking of, we know they’re identical twins but earlier on I overheard Joaquin bragging that he has the bigger hands,” she said.

As she cracked up with the audience, Haley added “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

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