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Trump makes a lot of noise, but is he serious about running?

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WASHINGTON — Donald Trump may have looked and sounded like a presidential candidate as he paraded around New Hampshire on Wednesday, the site of the first 2012 primary, but GOP insiders remain dubious that he's going to mount a serious campaign.

For all his highly publicized talk, the real estate tycoon and TV show host hasn't hired a campaign brain trust of experienced political advisers. He has no foot soldiers in the early campaign test states of Iowa or New Hampshire. And some political veterans say that a serious campaign might damage the Trump brand and injure his wealth, something they doubt he wants to risk.

"Trump is a master of self-promotion," said Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University. "The question is, is he a serious candidate for president, or hopes to help his TV show and other enterprises? He's led an edgy life — the business life, the personal life — he's unlikely to pass the threshold."

Some Republican congressional leaders also have cast doubt on a Trump candidacy. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., said earlier this month that he doubted Trump would run largely because Trump was spending most of his time questioning whether President Barack Obama was born in Hawaii and is a U.S. citizen.

"I don't think he is really serious when we see a campaign launch on the birther issue," Cantor said.

The White House sought to quash the so-called "birther" issue Wednesday by releasing Obama's long-form birth certificate, a move that Trump took credit for at a news conference in Portsmouth, N.H.

Trump sounded every bit the candidate as he made the rounds through the Granite State. He bashed the president's policies, claimed credit for forcing Obama to release his birth certificate and vowed to put heat on China to devalue its currency and on Arab nations for holding back oil production and driving up U.S. gasoline prices.

"What I would do differently is come down really hard on OPEC," Trump said. "If you look at these nations, they wouldn't be there except for us."

But when pressed about whether he'll enter the presidential race, Trump sounded like one of those commercials hyping his "Celebrity Apprentice" show.

"When the show is over, I will be free to announce," he said. The show's season finale airs May 22. "I think you will be surprised at a number of things, but I think you will be surprised at what my announcement is."

Whatever it is, Trump faces a difficult time convincing Republican insiders that he's a serious candidate.

To be sure, his showmanship has catapulted him into the top tier of Republican presidential possibilities, judging by recent polls. A McClatchy-Marist poll conducted April 10-14 put Trump third when weighed by Republican voters and GOP-leaning independents. He was the choice of 13 percent, within striking distance of Mitt Romney at 18 percent and Mike Huckabee at 17 percent.

But polls 18 months before an election don't mean much, and name recognition — which Trump has in abundance — is the biggest factor.

"He reminds me of Fred Thompson, Wesley Clark, people who come in late and generate a lot of attention," Wayne Lesperance, a political science professor at New England College in Henniker, N.H., said of those flash-in-the-pan candidates of 2004 and 2008. "Usually these candidates liven up — or have the prospect of livening up — what's perceived to be lackluster fields. But often they can't withstand scrutiny."

Scrutiny could be particularly tough for Trump, who's lent his name and image to gambling casinos and whose companies have declared bankruptcy at least four times.

While Trump's finances made headlines, so has his personal life. Like former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a 2008 GOP candidate, and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who's weighing a 2012 run, Trump has been married three times and divorced twice. That could be particularly damaging in conservative states such as South Carolina, traditionally the first Southern primary test.

"He has some viability because of name recognition, but will he win a primary in South Carolina? I don't think so," Clemson University political analyst David Woodard said. "He's got the same baggage as Newt Gingrich and that don't work here. But who knows? Desperate times call for desperate measures."

So far, Trump's baggage hasn't slowed his appeal in some circles. He's scheduled to speak Thursday in Las Vegas to "Bring Back the Reagan Revolution." The speech is billed as "From Ronald to Donald."

He's also scheduled at the Iowa Republican Party Lincoln Day dinner June 10.

Several GOP analysts warn that Trump can last only so long on star power.

"He's a potential candidate who could bring substance to the table, but he'll have to do his homework, get the right advisers around him," which he hasn't done yet, said Bill Dal Col, who ran publisher Steve Forbes' 1996 presidential campaign. "The media hype and celebrity will only take him so far."

Former New York Mayor Ed Koch called Trump one of America's "greatest hucksters" and a braggart, but also a very good real estate developer. Koch said he doubted that Trump would run, but added: "One of the problems is the (politics) bug bites you. He's well-received and may believe his own ridiculous comments. I believe he'll withdraw, but he may be gripped by his own press clippings."

Trump has explored building a campaign apparatus. Michael Cohen, a Trump executive, traveled to Iowa in February to meet with potential campaign workers, according to state Republican officials.

His camp also has talked with Republican campaign experts including pollster Tony Fabrizio and John McLaughlin. Fabrizio, in an email to The Daily Caller news website this week, indicated he'd said thanks, but no thanks, to working for Trump.

Fabrizio, who was presidential candidate Bob Dole's pollster in 1996, said a Trump candidacy would provide "an important voice" to the GOP field. But he indicated he intends to work with another candidate, saying he looks forward to meeting Trump's team "on the field of battle."

McLaughlin, meanwhile, was noncommittal.

"We'll see," said McLaughlin, who worked on the campaigns of Forbes and Thompson. "I think he's serious. I think what's made him serious is his message has connected with Republicans."

But Lee Miringoff, director of the Marist Institute for Public Opinion, warned that Trump has a lot of work to do to be taken seriously. "He hasn't crossed that threshold of credibility with the American electorate by any means."

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