

OPINION: GOV. CHRIS CHRISTIE, HARDLY YOUR TYPICAL LAME DUCK

CARL GOLDEN | FEBRUARY 21, 2017

The governor isn't just good at political brawling and trading shots, he likes doing so: Don't look for that to change anytime soon



Carl Golden

With little more than 10 months remaining in his final year in office, Gov. Chris Christie has made it clear he does not intend to “go gentle into that good night.” Rather, he expects to be an active participant and loud voice as the campaigns to succeed him unfold.

In his comments, for instance, before the annual Chamber of Commerce dinner in Washington, D. C., the governor warned his audience of business executives and politicians that they should be wary of promises made by those seeking the office —

Democrats and Republicans alike — because they are, for the most part, empty rhetoric and cannot be fulfilled.

Furthermore, he said, much of what he's heard already — if implemented — would undo the progress his administration has achieved in economic recovery and fiscally prudent governance.

His definition of “progress” will be severely challenged in light of 10 downgrades of the state's credit rating, the highest average property taxes in the nation, a public pension system teetering on insolvency, the highest home foreclosure rate in the country, and lackluster job creation.

He stands ready to defend his record against the anticipated onslaught from Democratic candidates, but will, if necessary, not hesitate to react to criticism from Republicans as well.

He emphasized his record of controlling spending while opposing new or increased taxes (the dedicated gasoline tax increase to replenish the Transportation Trust Fund aside) and ridiculed some of the proposals already offered by Democrats, saying there is no checkbook fat enough to support them.

While most governors spend their final year in office polishing their legacy and planning a farewell victory lap, Christie seems ready and eager to leap into the campaign combat, a role he not only relishes but engages in with considerable proficiency.

Lame duck though he may be, he's still the governor until January 20, 2018, and continues to occupy the state's most visible public platform. He still commands the lion's share of media attention and retains a firm grip on the broad executive powers of the office.

His ability to deal effectively with the Legislature is largely undiminished, evidenced clearly by the rapid approval of his far-reaching program to combat opioid abuse and provide treatment and rehabilitation services to those addicted.

He submitted his recommendations to the Legislature in his State of the State message in January and by mid-February it had cleared committee, passed both houses and was signed into law — an

unmistakable sign that not only was the program desirable policy but also an indication that Christie remained a dominant force capable of exercising considerable personal muscle and administrative clout of his office.

While the candidates for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination won't be deterred by Christie's willingness to engage them in public debates, his potential campaign visibility is a matter of some sensitivity and delicacy for Republicans, notably Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno, the presumptive frontrunner for the nomination.

She's served loyally at Christie's side, promoting the administration agenda and establishing herself as an insider voice in developing policy and direction. She is, in brief, of and by Christie.

As she mulled her own future, she broke with the governor over the increase in the gasoline tax and his support for then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. When she announced her candidacy, she took a few tentative steps further away, criticizing his plan for a \$300 million renovation of the State House, for instance, and expressing a half-in-jest-half-serious remark about the governor's use of the state police helicopter.

For his part, Christie, asked for his assessment of her candidacy, said she'd be a good governor, but stopped short of an endorsement.

Given her service as the second in command, one of Guadagno's troublesome issues is avoiding identification as a candidate for a third Christie term. His refusal to endorse her may have come as a bit of relief to her campaign.

It brought to mind a remark attributed to former Gov. Brendan Byrne, who pledged to a gubernatorial candidate that he'd either support or oppose his candidacy, "whichever one did the most good."

With his public-approval standing south of 20 percent and a majority of self-identified Republicans dissatisfied with him, Christie need not concern himself with tailoring his activities or softening his rhetoric to avoid embarrassment or controversy.

He clearly enjoys the heat of battle, the confrontations, and the political uproar. As someone on the way out of the State House door, he is free to indulge his pugnacious personality, belligerence, and bare-knuckled style.

Should he decide to enter the world of sports talk radio after leaving office, as has been frequently reported and as he himself has mused about, these character traits will prove valuable, indeed.

He is not a shy, retiring type and New Jersey voters have not seen nor heard the last of him. He has no intention of coasting through his final 10 months in office, cutting ribbons, signing congratulatory proclamations, or greeting visiting dignitaries.

The call of battle that's reached Christie's ears makes no allowance to "go gentle into that good night."

Carl Golden served as press secretary for Republican Gov. Thomas Kean for eight years and as communications director for Republican Gov. Christie Whitman for three years. He is currently a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.