



OPINION: BUDGET WILL INDICATE IF CHRISTIE STILL GOVERNS FROM POSITION OF STRENGTH

CARL GOLDEN | JANUARY 28, 2014

The governor -- and his team -- may be battered and beleaguered, but it's far too early to count Christie out



As Gov. Chris Christie and his staff -- beset by scandals -- struggle to regain their footing and return to normalcy, they'll likely confront a newly empowered Legislature, one not disposed to acquiesce when faced with demands from a chief executive they perceive to be distracted and weakened by ongoing multiple investigations of his administration and his 2013 reelection campaign.

Ever since it was revealed that a deputy chief of staff in the governor's office set in motion the closing in September of access lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, the Administration has absorbed more body blows than Rocky Balboa.

While the administration was occupied with responding to inquiries over who was aware of the lane closures and why the plan was carried out, Hoboken Mayor Dawn Zimmer unleashed a political and media frenzy when she claimed that Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno told her that favorable consideration of the city's request for Hurricane Sandy relief funds hinged on the mayor's support for a redevelopment project whose principals were represented by David Samson, close friend of the governor and chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Christie apologized for the bridge-closing scheme, denied any advance knowledge of it (nothing has surfaced thus far to implicate him), and fired the deputy chief of staff who he said lied about her involvement.

Guadagno likewise denied Zimmer's version of events and the administration began an aggressive pushback campaign, questioning the mayor's veracity and using surrogates to argue that the chairman of the Assembly committee investigating the lane closings should step down because he had already concluded Christie was guilty.

The counterattack had little impact, though, as subpoenas from the United States Attorney's office and the legislative committee poured into the governor's office, the reelection campaign committee, the Republican State Committee, and the Port Authority.

The impact of the daily beatdown in the media was predictable: Christie's performance, credibility, personality, and honesty suffered steep declines in the polls.

In the midst of all of this, Christie still must govern. He still must deal with issues large and small, complex and trivial, which flow through the executive office on a daily basis. There are nominations to be made, bills to be reviewed and signed or vetoed, public appearances scheduled, and -- always lurking just offstage -- political discussions to be had and decisions reached.

What impact the distractions and investigations have had on Christie's ability to secure the level of legislative support he enjoyed in his first term will become clearer with his presentation of the fiscal year 2015 budget in another month.

The legislative agenda he laid out in his State of the State message -- modest compared to prior years -- provided a framework for his second-term priorities, but it will be the budget that defines those goals and specifies how he proposes to achieve them.

The reaction to the budget proposal will be an unmistakable signal of whether Democrats have concluded Christie's public standing has been so undermined that considerable power has shifted back to the Legislature.

If they are convinced the governor can no longer deal from a position of strength, severe and frequent policy and partisan confrontations are inevitable.

Without question, the scandals have taken a toll on the administration and there is no indication