

# Back Channels: Corbett can learn from Pawlenty

***The former Minnesota governor's book shows how to stand firm on taxes.***

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If Tom Corbett is wondering whether a low-key, mild-mannered governor can keep a no-new-taxes pledge in turbulent economic times, he might want to pick up a copy of *Courage to Stand*.

The new book is former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty's way of introducing himself to a national audience before the anticipated announcement that he'll seek the presidency in 2012. The memoir traces Pawlenty's life from his blue-collar roots in the meatpacking town of South St. Paul through his recently ended eight years as governor.

Neither the book nor its author will ever be described as flashy, but both are worth a look if readers (and voters) are looking for steadiness, decency, and results when it comes to fighting to keep spending and taxes low.

And it should be required reading for new governors facing a \$4 billion deficit who don't intend to raise taxes - just as Pawlenty was when he took office in 2003. Not because the book is a guide to success - though the Minnesotan had plenty of that. But because it's a frank account of how difficult it will be for Corbett to fulfill his Inauguration Day pledge to "dedicate each and every day over the next four years to fiscal discipline and a responsible, limited government."

Pawlenty's goals were similar, but getting there was a "constant battle," he says in *Courage to Stand*.

"My eight years in office would be rife with head-on collisions, special sessions, constitutional issues, even a government shutdown," he writes.

Fiscal discipline in Pennsylvania will start with balancing a budget. Corbett has two advantages over what the new Gov. Pawlenty faced. One, there's a GOP-controlled legislature in Harrisburg this year. Pawlenty had a Democratic Senate and a Republican House. Two, Corbett has an asset to sell, the state stores, which could make up a good chunk of that \$4 billion deficit. But that's only this year. As Pawlenty makes painfully clear, the job of saying no to tax increases never ends.

Pawlenty was successful in his first budget go-round in 2003. Democrats didn't take him seriously at first. Governors often say no on taxes, or promise to cut spending, but few, if any, follow through. Pawlenty notes that his state's average two-year spending increase was 21 percent.

But, finally, a special session later, Pawlenty got his way: a balanced budget with spending cuts, and no tax increase.

Two years later, at budget time (Minnesota has a two-year budget cycle), the projected deficit was about \$350 million. How hard could that be after \$4 billion? Well, harder, actually.

Pawlenty wanted spending and tax cuts. Democrats wanted tax increases and all the cuts of 2003 restored.

There was no deal made in the regular session. Nor in the special session by the time a new fiscal year began. By law, if there's no budget, the government shuts down. And it did. For the first time in Minnesota history.

The stalemate ended nine days later, when Pawlenty agreed to what he still insists on calling a 75-cent "health-impact fee" on cigarettes. He writes that he still regrets that deal, even though he won concessions on linking teacher pay to performance and lower-cost health-care reforms for state workers.

His next two budget fights were equally bruising. So, too, were his struggles to make even reasonable changes in public-employee benefits. Again, Corbett, who will also be facing a state-worker pension crisis, should take note.

When Pawlenty took office, drivers for Minnesota's bus system could retire after as few as 15 years of service and receive health benefits for life - even if they took another job. That benefit was bankrupting the system, and the governor sought changes in 2004 contract negotiations. The union balked. Pawlenty stood firm. The drivers went on strike, assuming that rush-hour chaos and public support would eventually win the day for them. They figured wrong. The reason? "The union's position was simply indefensible," Pawlenty writes.

The governor got the changes - but it took a 44-day strike.

Looking back, Pawlenty still kicks himself for that cigarette "fee," but overall he has a solid record to talk about should he decide to run for president. In fact, he's one of only four governors who received an "A" rating in the Cato Institute's recent fiscal report card.

Corbett and other governors can look at the same record and be comforted by the fact that change can happen - so long as they are ready to fight. And they should also take note of how fleeting is their time to act against powerful special interests in state capitals.

As one longtime Democratic lawmaker told Pawlenty during a disagreement: "I can wait you out."

