

Chris Christie ain't got it

By: Philip Klein

Date: April 10, 2014

There's a scene in the comedy film "High Anxiety" in which a driver meets Mel Brooks at the airport and offers to pick up his cumbersome trunk. "I got it, I got it, I got it," the driver insists as he struggles to lift the luggage before gasping, "I ain't got it!" It lands with a thud.

The sequence came to mind recently as I thought about why I'm so skeptical of New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's presidential prospects -- and it doesn't concern the scandal surrounding the George Washington Bridge lane closures.

Having observed Christie on the national scene for a number of years now, I've been left with the impression that he isn't aware of what he doesn't know. He's in love with his image as a tough-talking pragmatic governor and thinks he can go before just about any audience and rock em' and sock em' with his New Jersey humor and war stories about budget battles. I imagine that he goes before new audiences thinking to himself, "I've got this," without doing the homework necessary to really understand the nuances of national or international politics.

This struck me for the first time when I saw Christie speak at the annual dinner of the Cato Institute in May 2012, in which he rattled the libertarian audience at the outset by referring to them as "a small group of committed conservatives."

Anybody who has a basic understanding of the intellectual traditions of the limited-government movement would know that libertarians take great pains to differentiate themselves ideologically from conservatives. Referring to a Cato Institute audience as "committed conservatives" is kind of like speaking at a jazz conference and mixing up John Coltrane and Kenny G.

I was reminded of this incident when controversy ensued following Christie's appearance at the Republican Jewish Coalition conference in Las Vegas in late March. After failing to mention Israel at all during his opening remarks, he was asked to offer his reflections on his 2012 visit there.

"I took a helicopter ride from the occupied territories across and just felt personally how extraordinary that was to understand the military risk that Israel faces every day," Christie said during his remarks.

Christie's overall intention, of course, was to tell the pro-Israel audience that he's with them in steadfastly supporting the traditional U.S. ally. And yet he sloppily used the terminology "occupied territories." Not only is the term inaccurate (as even the internationally accepted definition of occupation requires that the area in dispute is part of another sovereign nation), but the term endorses the Palestinian narrative that says any Jewish presence in the area is illegitimate.

According to a source who works within the pro-Israel community, Christie has repeatedly declined offers from those friendly to the idea of his candidacy to receive more advice and briefing on the issue. So it's no surprise that the savvier RJC audience members were left with the impression that whatever his sympathies, he had little understanding of the dynamics of the Middle East.

To be clear, neither of these dustups are likely to be remembered much by the time the 2016 Republican primaries heat up. I'm not predicting a series of attack ads centered around his "occupied territories" remark. But Christie's candidacy will be killed in its crib if he thinks he can rely on razzmatazz to impress Republican audiences -- especially ones who are already suspicious of him.

His ego may have been inflated by the rousing reception he would receive when campaigning for Mitt Romney in Iowa, New Hampshire and other key states. But there's a huge difference between being the warm-up act and undergoing the scrutiny of a candidate himself, where every slip-up gets magnified.

If he continues to take his "everything I need to know I learned in New Jersey" approach to national politics, Christie's presidential candidacy is likely to end with a thud.