



Opinion: Christie's new normal

By: GORDON MACINNES - NOVEMBER 25, 2012

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SANDY hit New Jersey precisely as predicted. Misery ensued. More than 70,000 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed. Bridges washed out. Railroads shut down. Millions went powerless for days. Beaches disappeared.

And, Governor Christie returned home.

For the first 32 months of his governorship, it was not always clear which came first — the national Republican Party or the growing needs of New Jersey. Early on, the governor was seen as the most effective out-of-town cheerleader who could be recruited for Republican candidates around the nation. He is refreshingly clear, outspoken, funny and smart — in short, charismatic.

The Cato Institute, the Reagan Library and the Manhattan Institute invited him to sold-out events. Hedge-fund billionaires urged him to run for president and financed private jet trips to ease his travel to fundraisers, conferences and billionaire powwows.

His party was in the throes of an apparent takeover by a radical Tea Party that pursued visions of a new, severe America, where government was shrunk, taxes slashed, abortion outlawed, public schools privatized and all were on their own. It also saw itself as the protector of a white America unwelcome to Kenyan-American presidents (hence, the posters depicting President Obama with a bone through his nose).

For most of his first term, Christie has appeared comfortable with the Tea Party. His agenda for New Jersey was to cut taxes, attack public employees (especially teacher unions), make abortion illegal, promote vouchers for religious schools and endorse the Ryan budget plan.

Sandy called forth the governor's pragmatic bent. Instead of continuing the conservative message about the failed Obama presidency, Christie celebrated the president's immediate and strong support for accelerating the state's recovery.

Standing his ground

Anonymous Romney insiders fumed, as did notable conservative media pundits, but the governor stood his ground with the sensible observation that his early support of Mitt Romney's presidential bid did not preclude his honest assessment of President Obama's help in dealing with Sandy's devastation.

There's no textbook for contending with the results of a once-in-a-century hurricane – not yet. But maybe the governor should write one.

Be decisive and emphatic about evacuating low-lying areas. Be calm and empathetic. Enlist support from everyone who can help. Ration if necessary. Emphasize community, not ideology.

New York City residents think Christie out-performed their governor and their mayor. Last week, the cast of "Saturday Night Live" invited

Christie to burnish his Jersey Tough image and show his comedic abilities.

Now, choices. Assume for the moment that Governor Christie would like to be President Christie. Pretty quickly, he must make some tricky decisions:

- ◆ Should he run for reelection or seek a well-financed sinecure at, say, Fox News, where he can regularly preach to the base of the Republican Party?
- ◆ If he runs, should he promise to serve a full four years or begin his presidential campaign by breaking what will be characterized as a solemn promise?
- ◆ Should he become the first Republican governor to accept the expansion of Medicaid and opt for a state-operated health insurance exchange so that hundreds of thousands of poor New Jerseyans can finally enjoy effective health care?
- ◆ After a full year of relentless advocacy of tax cuts as the most important action the state can take, should he acknowledge the financial battering the state has taken and put the priorities on restoring the state's infrastructure, its shore, and investing in higher education?

This is no complete list, but it's a fair start on the differences between energizing Tea Partiers in Oklahoma and concentrating on New Jersey's mounting problems.

Sandy put Christie at the top of his game. By early 2013, when potential Democratic opponents should be stirring, those with the most to lose – like Mayor Cory Booker – are now more likely to respond with “no thanks.” The polls will show the governor's approval ratings to be

gravity defying. When potential opponents must decide, it will look like a suicide mission.

That brings us to the financial minefield facing whoever takes the governor's oath in January 2014. The likelihood is now strong that the 2013 fiscal year will fall far short of the governor's super-optimistic revenue projections.

Facing tough cuts

While basking in the post-Sandy adulation, the governor may be forced to make very noticeable mid-year cuts to towns, school districts and public colleges. Worse, in February, his budget message for 2014 may be depressing as the generous surplus projected for 2013 is wiped out and revenues continue their fall.

So far, there is no solid evidence that New Jersey is joining its neighbors New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut in recovering from the Great Recession.

Pushing for federal aid

Christie has pushed hard for maximum federal support for relief and rebuilding. That's his job. But he has also said that the other burden will fall on local property taxpayers and that Sandy can be used to override the 2 percent property tax levy cap.

He refuses, thus far, to suggest that the state government should help out with an emergency and temporary increase in, say, the gas tax, which is the third lowest in the nation (35 cents less than New York) and hasn't been raised since 1988.

That is no way to start a new term. Such problems are not quickly solved. If the national economy remains sluggish, the next four years could be one fiscal migraine headache after another with no clear victory in sight.

Welcome to the New Normal, governor.