

The Star-Ledger

Christie-Paul feud underscores what's in store for 2016 GOP primary

By: Jenna Portnoy – August 5, 2013

One year ago, Gov. Chris Christie made a faux pas that sent groans through the black-tie dinner crowd at Washington's Cato Institute.

"He called us conservative," recalled a bristling Gene Healy, a vice president at the libertarian think tank. "That's not really the way we describe ourselves."

Christie had no problem confusing the two last week, when his comments triggered a weeklong verbal brawl with U.S. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.). The fight attracted attention as a possible prequel to the 2016 GOP presidential primary but also highlighted a rift within the party on matters of national security.

Christie implored an Aspen Institute audience to remember the fear Americans felt in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and he labeled the "strain of libertarianism" coursing through both parties "dangerous."

Paul took the dig as an attack on those who are concerned about warrantless surveillance as the nation grapples with how to fight terrorism without eroding civil liberties. The war of words escalated when Christie attacked Paul over Kentucky's share of federal dollars, prompting Paul to call him the "king of bacon."

The row has helped Christie and Paul — two politicians with national ambitions — introduce their philosophies to potential 2016 voters.

"You don't go off alienating people without good reason," said Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University. "I think he sees this as an issue that he can use among other kinds of Republicans, national security Republicans, of which there are quite a few."

The bold stance is not out of character for Christie, who likes to remind people he learned President George W. Bush would appoint him U.S. attorney on Sept. 10, 2001, the day before the terrorist attacks killed 746 people with ties to New Jersey.

In his Cato keynote address, Christie bookended his story about bipartisan compromise in Trenton, with soaring rhetoric about democratic principles.

"If anything, the path that the United States has taken over the past decade has proven that who we are at home primarily defines our role and our significance in the world. Principle should never stop at the water's edge," Christie said, speaking on the one-year anniversary of the killing of terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden.

Still, Cato's Healy said he was surprised to hear Christie's recent comments falling in line with the party's hawks like U.S. Sen. John McCain, who has called Paul and other lawmakers "wacko birds."

"That'll teach me to say something nice about a national political figure," Healy said. "He's essentially saying channel how you felt on Sept. 11, when the towers had just come down and everyone was terrorized and horrified ... You should put yourself in that frame of mind when you think about issues like surveillance. That in itself is a very dangerous thought."

Baker said Christie began to lay out his early foreign policy platform.

"The whole idea is to make Rand Paul and the libertarians look like dangerously naive people who suffer from amnesia about the attack on 9/11," Baker said.

A new survey by the Pew Research Center shows 55 percent of Republican voters see Paul favorably, and 47 percent have a positive view of Christie. But those who approve of National Security Agency surveillance of Americans' personal data are less likely to give Paul a thumbs up, and those who disapprove of the program have a less favorable opinion of Christie than GOP voters in general. The snapshot was taken before their spat.

U.S. Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) came to Christie's defense, even though they have tangled in the past.

"(Paul) is perpetuating this big lie, talking about pork and somehow trying to demean Gov. Christie because he fought so hard for his state, or me, because I fought so hard for mine," King said on CNN.

Likewise, Christie foes used the spat as an excuse to rehash their displeasure with him.

Ann Coulter called his beef with Rand a "bitch fight" in an interview with Sean Hannity.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich praised what he called "the courage" it took for Paul and others to break from the party establishment. "Apparently in a New Jersey tradition (Christie) thinks that bluster and strong language without facts can carry you a long way," Gingrich told Laura Ingraham.

Before making the comments that caused so much controversy in Colorado, Christie noted that his children are offended by the tone of politics today.

"What they're offended by is the personal nature of it and how it's not good enough just to say you just disagree, but you have to say the other person is a bad person and has ill motives," he said.

Days later, Christie batted away Paul's invitation to make nice over beers, which Baker said is unsurprising.

"It's well before the time when fence mending is necessary," Baker said. "This is the time when differences are being emphasized."

