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Christie vs. Cruz

By Margaret Carlson

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WASHINGTON — Chris Christie appeared recently on four of the five Sunday morning TV talk shows to celebrate his re-election as governor of New Jersey and not, repeat, not, his candidacy for president. True enough, he'd just pulled off a near miracle, winning women, immigrants, seniors, millennials, baby boomers, independents and vegans in a very blue state.

To his interviewers and much of the news media, and perhaps to the governor himself, that makes him the front-runner for the Republican nomination, but Christie is careful not to play along.

The coronation misses an important point. The very fact that Christie won in New Jersey makes him anathema to the activists who dominate the Republican primary process and who are angrier than ever after the establishment, for two elections in a row, nominated squishy moderates who lost. The establishment is making sounds about taking back the party from the don't-tread-on-me crowd. Good luck with that after bowing to their every whim.

In the meantime, there are two big reasons Christie may achieve his oft-repeated desire to finish his mission as governor: Ted Cruz and Rand Paul.

The two senators are locked in a pre-primary that is playing out in Washington, visits to Iowa and on late-night TV. Last week, while Christie was solidifying his primacy with one wing of the party, Cruz was enjoying the spectacle of Paul committing an unforced error and losing altitude with another wing.

Paul's behavior after being hit with accusations of plagiarism suggests he's not ready for prime time. It wasn't just the cribbing — though that got him relieved of his column in the conservative Washington Times — as much as his reaction to it. He went through the four stages of political grief, ending with the unfortunate standby that mistakes were made, but stopped short of acknowledging he was the one who made them.

Cruz, who lives to be attacked, aggrieved and aggressive, would have welcomed the charge: Wikipedia? What good is that if not to copy from? Cruz is likely to wipe the floor with Paul in a

primary where the contestants face much more vicious accusations than charges they copied something from a website.

Paul, however, let the accusation get under his thin skin without exactly refuting it. If it were legal, he said, he'd challenge his accusers to a duel. That was colorful enough to ensure an extra day of coverage. After accusations surfaced that he had also borrowed without attribution from publications put out by the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, Paul came up with the excuse of: What's a busy man to do but to rely on staff for "facts and anecdotes."

As the drip, drip, drip continued, he snapped that he didn't care anymore and would be perfectly happy packing up his medical bag and returning to the practice of medicine in Kentucky.

There are a couple problems with Paul's behavior. He is the nice tea party candidate with a high emotional IQ; he leaves nasty to the other guy. With his elfin smile, boyish curls and gentle manner, he is a guy with whom you might want to go have a beer or a shot of Kentucky bourbon. His snarky reaction was out of character yet not snarky enough to stop the criticism. His limited, modified hangout was Nixonian, as was his petulance.

Cruz, however, has skin that is so thick it's impermeable. He welcomes any pretext for a fight, even with his colleagues. He boasts that he didn't come to Washington to make 99 new friends in the Senate and in that he's succeeded. To show he doesn't care, he proudly displays in his office a hat emblazoned "wacko bird," a name bestowed upon him by Sen. John McCain, who didn't mean it as a compliment.

The Texas senator is so combative he might plagiarize someone else's work just to show Paul how a real man would brush it off like a piece of lint.

Paul is more substantive. His filibuster beat Cruz's talk-a-thon by a mile: Paul got the White House to refine its policy on drones. But on style, Cruz fits the mood of the Republican base. His pugilism made him a hero, and he earned extra credit for taking on the losing cause of ending Obamacare.

At the end of last week, Paul lashed out in, of all places, a Senate hearing, as if to show that the race was between him and Christie. He accused "somebody running for political office" (Christie) of spending \$25 million on ads to bring tourists back to areas hit by Superstorm Sandy, which happened to be New Jersey. "I'm thinking there might be a conflict of interest there."

It was pretty lame, and certainly not enough to deflect attention from copygate. He expressed fear that he was going to be in detention forever for "sins of omission." He might take comfort that he's reached the last stage of scandal and has become joke fodder. On the "Daily Show," Jon Stewart said it had become "increasingly clear that Mr. Paul has stolen his haircut from '80s icon Patrick Duffy."

Christie may sit back and watch Cruz and Paul take each other out, or hope that the one who remains standing is Paul. Unlike Cruz, he doesn't know how to take a punch or throw one.

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