



Gene Healy

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# Healy: New Jersey governor takes on debt-ridden state's 'situation'

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Examiner Columnist  
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My native New Jersey has long been a national punch line, a status recently reinforced by MTV's hit show "Jersey Shore," featuring Mike Sorrentino, the guide extraordinaire nicknamed for his impressive abs (they're "a Situation," apparently).

Recently, though, I've been holding my head high, thanks to Jersey's new governor, Republican Chris Christie, a man who hasn't seen his abs since the "Born to Run" tour — if ever. In the 2009 race, our last governor, Jon Corzine, ridiculed Christie's weight, then left him with the gruesome political challenge of closing an \$11 billion deficit, the largest gap per taxpayer in the U.S.

As Sorrentino put it in another context, "This situation is indescribable. You can't even describe the situation that you're about to get in."

But Christie seems up for it, facing down Jersey's political bosses with a budget that would force them to spend \$3 billion less than in 2009.

In their 2008 book "Soprano State," reporters Bob Ingle and Sandy McClure paint a darkly hilarious picture of a Garden State kleptocracy in which no-show jobs and no-bid contracts abound for the politically connected, and where "at least 4,755 of the more civic-minded corpses voted in the November 2003 election."

Christie, U.S. attorney for New Jersey from 2002-08, is the closest thing the book has to a hero — "a man determined to change the way Jersey pols do business." By 2007, he had " nabbed more than a hundred people in public corruption cases," and more than a quarter of the state Senate announced they wouldn't seek re-election that year.

Shortly after his inauguration, Christie used the office's broad powers to slash \$560 million in education spending. In a February speech to New Jersey mayors, he scorned that "old, tired song" about fixing things with imaginary cuts in "waste and abuse." Referencing the classic scene in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," Christie asked them to hold hands with him and "jump off the cliff."

I can think of more-diplomatic metaphors. But Christie's right that the state's in deep trouble, with unsustainable pension growth and a property tax burden that averages more than \$7,000 a family.

That's why he's now calling for laying off 1,300 state workers and cutting an additional \$820 million in aid to public schools.

Consider the clever move Christie made last week, offering to free up aid for school districts whose teachers agree to wage freezes. It's all about the children, right? So far, only a handful of districts have gone along.

A recent memo from teachers union reps in Bergen County ends with a cutesy "prayer" for the governor's death.

Early polls showed a surprisingly favorable reaction to Christie's cuts. But the Newark Star-Ledger reported last week that Christie's rating has sunk 12 points since February, with voters opposed to his budget by a seven-point margin.

Christie's running a bold experiment: treating voters like adults, telling them what's needed to get out of their predicament.

As Christie put it: "It should've been dealt with years ago. It wasn't. If people don't like it after four years, they can send me home."

More like this, please.

*Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."*

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