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## August 4, 2010 - In Case You Missed It: "This philosophy is not Republican, but republican: He sees himself as a representative of the people..."

Wednesday, August 4, 2010

Chris Christie: The Scourge of Trenton  
Daniel Foster  
National Review  
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Christopher James Christie is fond of saying that he's been underestimated his whole professional life. The Newark-born son of an Irish father and a Sicilian mother, Christie is the product of respectable but middling schools - the University of Delaware and Seton Hall Law - and enjoyed a successful, if not spectacular, career as a partner in a small New Jersey firm. He served a single term as a Morris County freeholder, but was primaried, and soundly defeated, in his bid for reelection. When, despite a lack of criminal prosecutorial experience, he was appointed U.S. attorney in 2002, some detractors thought it a bit of cronyism - the Bush administration rewarding Christie for the fundraising work he'd done during the 2000 election.

They were wrong. By the time Christie left the job six years later, he had put over a hundred crooked pols - "from the school board to the state house and of both political parties" - behind bars, without losing a single case. And he had tried and convicted terrorists, Mafiosi, and child pornographers; arms dealers, gang members, and corporate hacks.

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It started in December of 2009. Governor-elect Christie was in the middle of a transition meeting with senior staff when he was presented with a startling document.

It was a chart, prepared by independent Wall Street analysts, showing the state's cash balances over the previous four years and forecasting future balances. It wasn't good.

"It was like a picture of a failing company," says Richard Bagger, Christie's chief of staff and a veteran of Trenton politics. "It just went down and down. In December it touched zero. Then in March 2010, it plunged into the red."

That didn't match the picture painted by the political appointees in the outgoing Corzine administration, who were telling Christie's transition staff that the state's operating budget would get it through the rest of the fiscal year. In fact, the state was down to only a few days of cash on hand, and was meeting payroll with expensive short-term borrowing.

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The New Jersey that Chris Christie inherited was one that the Mercatus Center at George Mason University had ranked 46th in the Union on its economic-freedom index, and one whose business-tax climate the Tax Foundation had called the worst in the nation. Its narrow tax base had been in a death spiral for years: High-tech, high-paying jobs were fleeing - one Boston College study estimated \$70 billion in wealth had left between 2004 and 2008 alone - and being replaced by low-wage, low-tech ones. For decades Trenton had jacked up taxes on the wealth that remained - inspiring new rounds of capital flight - and relied on weak budgetary rules and accounting tricks to kick growing shortfalls down the road.

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Five weeks later, on February 11, Christie addressed a special joint session of the state legislature, replacing the vague promises of the campaign trail with first principles, and elaborating the constraints under which he was determined to govern:

Our constitution requires a balanced budget. Our commitment requires us to begin the next fiscal year with a prudent opening balance. Our conscience and common sense require us to fix the problem in a way that does not raise taxes on the most overtaxed citizens in America. Our love for our children requires that we do not shove today's problems under the rug only to be discovered again tomorrow. Our sense of decency must require that we stop using tricks that will make next year's budget problem even worse.

And in an extraordinary move, he then declared a fiscal state of emergency, announcing that by executive order he would impound \$2.2 billion in appropriations from a fiscal year that was already seven months gone. That figure represented virtually every dollar the state was not legally obligated to pay out for the remainder of the year. In Bagger's words, it was "everything that wasn't nailed down."

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"By doing that so quickly and so dramatically, and by executive action, it really set the stage," Bagger says. "It was just a very clear declaration that there's a new reality."

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[W]hat caused the first and most strident wave of opposition to Christie's agenda was his decision to slash funding for public education, by some \$820 million.

That scary number obscured the fact that, when one subtracted the federal-stimulus goodie bag that Corzine had used to plug the leaky dam of the state's school-funding formula the previous year, Christie's budget was actually increasing aid to schools. And it obscured the fact that the cuts topped out at 5 percent per district, and that Christie had offered to restore them in districts where teachers accepted a one-year pay freeze and agreed to increase their contributions to their benefits packages from zero - zero - to 1.5 percent of their salaries.

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Not even those closest to Christie know whether he plans to run for a second term, but one of his great strengths is that he governs as if he won't. He has claimed, with the ring of truth, that he pays no attention to his roller-coaster public approval ratings - that to him, the only poll that mattered was the one that installed him as Jon Corzine's successor in November of 2009. This philosophy is not Republican, but republican: He sees himself as a representative of the people who nevertheless refuses to pander to them, to recalibrate his stances at their every perturbation.

Senator Kean, who hopes to move from minority to majority leader, has confidence that Christie will continue to stick to his guns.

"The governor has an internally strong constitution - that's who Chris is - and he has an externally strong constitution in the constitution of the State of New Jersey," Kean says.

"I think he is absolutely the genuine article. That's why we won't ever go back to the status quo, at least not under Chris Christie's governorship."

It is said that on a long enough timeline the impossible becomes the inevitable. After decades of unchecked bloat in Trenton, a drastic scaling back of the excesses - and the ambitions - of big government seems, each day, less an impossibility and more an inevitability.

Chris Christie has made it so.

- Daniel Foster is news editor of National Review Online.

You can read the rest of the article online [here](#).

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