



THE DINER BOOTH

Going through Hell with Murphy: A Retrospective

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While Gov. Phil Murphy continues to enjoy majority support for his Administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, public patience is wearing thin.

From public grumbling to petition drives to pockets of open defiance, resentment is growing over the slow pace of lifting restrictions on business activity and over what many feel is the unequal application of prohibitions or limits on public gatherings.

Murphy's been largely unmoved, though, and last week embraced a "Don't Tread On Me" moment when he sought and won a court injunction against the City of Asbury Park (<https://www.insidernj.com/judge-grants-murphys-request-asbury-park-case/>), striking down a local decision to permit inside dining at restaurants.

It was the most dramatic indication yet that Murphy is not to be trifled with, that when it comes to enforcing his executive orders, he'll not hesitate to put his muscle where his mouth is.

Push came to shove in the Asbury Park confrontation and it was the governor who did the shoving. It sent an unmistakable message to others around the state — individuals or businesses — who were contemplating violating restrictions that they should think twice lest they, too, find themselves caught up in litigation which they'd likely lose.

The swift reaction to the Asbury Park government effort to override the state-ordered directives overshadowed Murphy's earlier political misjudgment that invited a storm of criticism when he and his wife — both wearing masks — joined anti-police brutality protest marches striding shoulder to shoulder with dozens of others while such activities as backyard birthday parties and graduation ceremonies were permitted only if a limited number of attendees stayed six feet apart.

No matter the sincerity of the protest marchers' motives, Murphy should have foreseen the reaction violating his own executive orders would attract.

His rationale that lending his support to the protest marches was a moral and deeply held imperative that outweighed the public health protections required of others was a thin attempt at damage control.

That the incident infuriated an already frustrated citizenry chafing under government ordered home confinement, anxious over their employment situation and eager to resume daily routines should have surprised no one.

It was a political gift to Republicans who stepped up their criticisms of the governor as an autocrat who exempted himself from the executive order demands he imposed on the rest of the state's people.

Murphy's actions, they said, were hypocrisy writ large, an egregious example of disdain for directives he demanded everyone else obey.

He attempted a day later to recoup the higher ground by exempting similar demonstrations from the ban on large gatherings while urging all involved in them to undergo testing for the infections as soon as possible and to act accordingly in response to the results.

The damage had already been done, though. It was another self-inflicted public relations wound for an Administration which has experienced its share of them and which could have and should have been avoided with a bit more thought.

Since the onset of the pandemic — the most serious and dangerous public health crisis in a century — Murphy has, on balance, responded well.

His stay at home orders, designation of essential businesses while directing the closure of others and ban on social gatherings were dramatic actions which clearly contributed to blunting the spread of the virus.

His daily briefings and updates served him well, keeping New Jerseyans informed and up to date while offering clear and concise rationales for his actions.

Even as he gradually ordered the relaxation of a number of restrictions, he's remained adamant that the time has not yet arrived to lift them all and return life to what it had been five months ago.

Using an occasionally bewildering slide show of charts and graphs, Murphy has hailed the state's progress and, by implication, the value of his policies in dealing with the pandemic.

He's emphasized steady declines in positive test results, hospitalizations, patients in critical care, ventilator use and fatalities as solid evidence that his flurry of executive orders has been effective.

He's sympathized with those frustrated and angry over the economic and personal disruptions they've been forced to endure while pledging to move carefully and cautiously toward easing toward normal routines.

He's continued to insist that his actions and the pace at which they are taken are guided solely by public health considerations, a commitment to protecting New Jerseyans from an infection for which there is no known cure.

He's gone out of his way at each of his briefings to bestow credit on the people for their role in combatting the virus by wearing masks, maintaining social distancing and avoiding large public gatherings.

As a result, he's kept broad support —grudging thought some of it may be — for his response. There is no doubt that impatience is rising and, with the onset of summer vacation season and serious questions regarding the conditions under which public schools can resume in September, restiveness and frustrations will broaden.

With news accounts of a sudden spike in virus infections in states which have gone further than New Jersey in lifting restrictions and quarantines, Murphy can justify his more measured approach to avoid a fall/winter resurgence of the pandemic.

"We've gone through hell," he said recently, and it is clear he has no intention of serving as the grand marshal leading a march into Hades again.

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