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## EDWARD EDWARDS

# Christie Fails to Ignite

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When former governor Chris Christie responded “sure” to a member of the audience at a television talk show who asked if he was considering another presidential run in 2024, it was a “if a tree falls in the forest...” moment. His reply produced silence from the political chattering class and no follow up from the media.

Christie has spent the better part of this year criticizing his former comrade in arms Donald Trump while teasing his own ambition to repeat his quest for the presidential nomination after his 2016 campaign crashed and burned following two successive single digit showings in Iowa and New Hampshire.

That his affirmative response failed to cause even a tiny ripple illustrates the impossibility of remaining relevant nearly five years after leaving office, losing broad-based name identification and a platform from which to attract media attention.

He's occupied a perch on a national network Sunday morning talk show, studiously made the rounds of similar bookings and delivered speeches to political, academic and private interest audiences.

Yet, in poll after poll of potential Republican candidates in 2024, his name has failed to emerge among the top ten.

He's staked out his territory as one of Trump's harshest critics, deriding the former president's claims of a rigged 2020 election and intimating that a Trump-led ticket in 2024 would cost Republicans the White House.

His desire to remain relevant is certainly understandable, even though the end game is not a candidacy but as an influential voice in the party, a player with a seat at the table where crucial decisions are reached and — if successful — a major role in a Republican Administration.

With Trump continuing as the party favorite for the nomination, Christie — by suggesting that a Trump candidacy would be disastrous — runs the risk of alienating the ex-president's fervent and committed followers.

He may be gambling that Trump's support is a mile wide and an inch deep and that the Republican establishment — sensing an opportunity against a seriously vulnerable incumbent who at the midway point of his first term doesn't enjoy majority support of his own party — will put aside whatever loyalty some may continue to feel toward Trump and coalesce behind a baggage free candidate, one who doesn't face a massive civil lawsuit and potential criminal liability.

Should Republicans sweep the midterm Congressional election in four weeks — including control of the Senate — Trump will be the first to take a victory lap and exercise his customary immodesty by claiming complete credit. He'll ratchet up his rhetoric about his strength as a presidential candidate and continue to dominate media coverage no matter the absurdity of his claims or the crudeness of his verbal assaults on his critics.

Christie — the first 2016 Republican candidate to endorse Trump after his own campaign ended — has chosen his lane heading into 2024 to convince the Republican Party that there is no second act in politics and Trump is no exception to that history.

He'll likely continue to tease his own future, if for nothing else there's no reason not to, even though the odds are exceedingly long, indeed.

When presidential politics moves into the center of the universe next year, Christie will have been out of public office six years, further dimming his record in two terms as governor. There's precious little interest in reforming the state's public pension system or

strengthening the Transportation Trust Fund, for instance. Moreover, he's just as likely to be remembered for the Bridgegate scandal which tanked his public approval ratings and arguably contributed significantly to his poor showing nationally in 2016.

While President Biden continues to insist he'll seek a second term, there remains great concern within the Democratic Party over whether an 82-year-old, seemingly beset by apparent cognitive issues, can withstand the rigors of a national campaign.

Even should he be persuaded to stand down, the possibility of Vice President Kamala Harris moving up is cold comfort. Nor, for that matter, is it in the party's interest to sink into a chaotic and potentially self-defeating multi-candidate free for all primary season.

In the early stages, Republican candidates — quite likely including Christie — will line up to seize what the party clearly sees as a beckoning opportunity to establish unified government — control of Congress and occupying the White House.

Achieving their goal will elude them if Trump remains the party's face and dominant voice. Moving away from him is the task they confront and it is here that Christie may be able to play a decisive role.

Odds are that he will not be the presidential candidate. He enjoys no national base, no organizational infrastructure, no significant fund-raising capability.

He does, though, possess valuable political insights and instincts and is unafraid of confrontation.

His "sure" response to whether he is considering a candidacy cost him nothing and keeps him in the conversation, albeit on the fringes.

What most certainly is "sure" is that he's positioned himself well and assured a voice in the process of deciding who will lead the party. If there's a reward at the end of the rainbow, Christie will be close to the head of the line.

*Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.*