

OPINION: CHRISTIE'S STATE OF THE STATE, A TOUR DE FORCE ON ALL FRONTS

CARL GOLDEN | JANUARY 12, 2017

In just 75 minutes the governor reaffirmed his political dominance, took the high moral ground, and issued a clarion call to fight off a deadly health crisis



Carl Golden

Without any question, the State of the State address delivered by Gov. Chris Christie this past Tuesday was a sharp break from tradition. With its singular focus on one issue – the rapidly spreading scourge of drug addiction and the urgent call to combat it and treat its victims – the speech stood apart as unlike any of those of his predecessors.

It was compelling; it was bold; it was emotional; it was moving. It was the stuff of which legacies are made.

In the span of 75 minutes before a joint session of the Legislature, Christie reasserted himself as the state's dominant public figure, firmly in control of the public policy agenda and prepared to take his case aggressively to the people.

In the process, he took on the insurance industry, the medical profession, and the pharmaceutical industry – three entities with considerable lobbying clout in the Legislature.

It was as if Christie cared not for his historically low public approval standing or the political beating he's absorbed from the Bridgegate scandal or the drumbeat of embarrassing news accounts of being dissed by President-elect Donald Trump.

He stood at the podium as a man on a mission who refused to be deterred by some three years of steady decline in public support or by the storm of criticism that rained down on him as a result of the Legislature's recent refusal to consider a package of bills he supported.

His demeanor signaled lame-duck status be damned as he challenged the Legislature to move with dispatch to approve his comprehensive, wide-ranging proposals to halt the rising tide of addiction and turn it back through expanded treatment and rehabilitation programs.

He delivered a resounding smackdown to insurance companies for denying coverage for drug treatment to individuals with health insurance and demanded they be ordered to provide six months coverage. He sharply criticized physicians for dishing out 30-day supplies of opioids to patients, a practice he said led inevitably to addiction, and demanded supplies be limited to five days. He issued a finger-wagging warning to the pharmaceutical industry that it would come under scrutiny for its profit-making relationships with medical professionals in prescribing their painkiller products.

Even when reciting dry statistical data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as other studies, to illustrate the dramatic uptick in drug abuse and addiction, Christie's passion placed a human face on the numbers.

He spoke somberly of the pain and suffering of addicts and their friends and families. He decried the tendency to treat addiction as a moral weakness when, in truth, it is a disease which deserves treatment rather than scorn for its sufferers.

He warned against accepting the theory that drug abuse was confined to a specific socio-economic class, an acceptance that blinds people to the truth and actually hampers efforts to deal with it.

There were moments in his speech when he held his audience in thrall as he recounted tales of those he knew personally who fell into addiction, fought their way back or died.

There could be no questioning his sincerity or the depth of his commitment to deal vigorously and effectively with a plague that threatens to overwhelm the state and the nation.

The speech was a political triumph as well, placing Democrats who may be reluctant to grant the governor legislative victories in what promises to be a highly charged election year, in a delicate and potentially risky position.

There can be no denying the extent of the drug crisis and the necessity of addressing it can no longer be ignored.

The Democratic leadership must exercise great care to avoid appearing as obstructionists by either refusing to consider the governor's program or delaying it deep into the year. If they do so, they risk accusations of embracing political opportunism in the face of a public health crisis.

Christie has made it clear he intends to keep the pressure on and ratchet it up if he feels the need, directing the heat of public support toward the Democrats for any failure to act.

With his speech and recommendations, the governor firmly positioned himself on the high moral ground.

Critics accused him of using the issue to change the subject and achieve some level of redemption from the unseemly image and scandal-scarred reputation of his administration.

Moreover, they said, his speech ignored the serious and seemingly intractable problems of achieving property tax relief and restoring the public pension system to more stable footing.

They suggested his settling on the drug addiction crisis to the exclusion of other significant issues was little more than a head fake to distract attention from his administration's failures to confront the state's lackluster economic growth and shaky fiscal condition.

The fact of the matter, however, is that Christie – seeking redemption or not, with an eye toward a legacy or not – has laid before the Legislature a call to deal with an issue it cannot fail to heed.

The speech was a tour de force by Christie, showing him at his best – a politician with an uncanny and rare ability to utilize his communication skills and persuasive rhetoric to achieve his goals.

Whether he'll turn out to be a political Lazarus, rising from the dead, remains to be seen. But no one should rush out to bet against it.

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