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COLUMNIST

The GOP's Stone Cold Losing Argument Against Murphy

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If Republicans intend to target Gov. Phil Murphy's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant part of their 2021 campaign strategy, it will require a more compelling rationale than the governor acted as a power mad authoritarian despot.

Engaging in childish taunts — King Phil, exalted ruler, etc. — is a weak disguise for the absence of any substantive argument on the part of his critics.

Attacking the governor's mandate for New Jerseyans to wear a mask or face covering at all times as part of a pursuit of power was embarrassing.

Indeed, it ignored the self-contradictory nature of the criticism by noting the steady decline in COVID-19 infections while ignoring the clear evidence that wearing of masks was a significant factor in the decline. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The mask mandate was a rapid response by the governor to a modest uptick in positive test results, a move to prevent “modest” from becoming serious.

As justification for Murphy’s order, one need look no further than states like California, Florida (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/news/2020/07/16/vacationers-party-florida-even-covid-19-cases-surge/5449754002/>) and Texas where relaxing restrictions led to dramatic spikes in infections and deaths and forced the governors in those states to hastily reinstate lockdown conditions.

Alleging that mandating masks — shown conclusively by research to be an effective counter measure to the spread of the virus — constituted a power grab was an absurd notion.

Exactly what Murphy gained in his supposed mad pursuit of power was never explained by his critics.

There is undeniably resistance to wearing a mask while going about daily life, but it is rooted more in a natural contrariness, a stubborn belief that government should not dictate private behavior even when such behavior is risky.

It is not totally unlike the decades’ old debates over requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets or automobile drivers and passengers to wear seatbelts. Both of what appeared to be common sense recommendations were bitterly opposed as intrusions on personal privacy, more examples of government sticking its bureaucratic nose where it didn’t belong.

Granted, unlike the mask wearing mandate, the helmet and seatbelt proposals became law through the legislative process after prolonged, vigorous and often contentious debate.

The crucial difference, though, is that neither was considered in the midst of an existential threat to the health of tens of thousands of people like that posed by COVID-19.

Reacting to a rapidly changing environment and effectively confronting a virus which sickens and kills indiscriminately and for which there is no cure or vaccine does not lend itself to the all too leisurely pace of the legislative process.

The governor’s emergency powers and authority are enshrined in the Constitution for that very reason — to allow the chief executive to act with dispatch and urgency to combat an imminent threat to the public at large. It is an acknowledgement that there will be instances in which the forces of government must be mobilized quickly, understanding that the delay inherent in the legislative process will only exacerbate and intensify seriously adverse consequences.

Murphy’s handling of the pandemic has not been perfect, not so much due to flawed decisions or by an attempt to seize and expand personal power but because in a fluid and constantly shifting environment it is necessary to reach decisions for which there is no precedent.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck quickly and initially overwhelmed the state, creating a fearsome situation for which there was no historical experience to fall back on or to guide a response.

Murphy was faced with navigating a public health terrain without a compass, responsible for leading government’s response to the most serious health threat in a century, one that has already sickened more than 176,000 people, killed nearly 16,000 in five months, closed schools and businesses, devastated an already fragile economy and left the state budget in tatters.

He has successfully avoided the disasters which have befallen many other states that have experienced a resurgence of the pandemic while at the same time moving cautiously toward restoring normal life.

He continues to enjoy public approval of his leadership (the latest poll places his rating at nearly 70 per cent) and while people may grumble and mutter over the inconveniences they're enduring, they are grudgingly willing to suffer them in the knowledge that they are protected from an invisible but lethal enemy.

A Republican campaign strategy built around differences of opinion over the Administration response can produce the kind of serious and insightful debate which will benefit voters.

But, to be taken seriously, it is necessary to act seriously.

However, accusations that the governor was driven by a lust for power rather than a desire to protect the citizenry is a stone cold loser.

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