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THE DINER BOOTH

'I Got Him Right Where I Want Him'

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In former Gov. Chris Christie's repeated dismissal of suggestions he abandon his presidential campaign — "Why should I?" he responded to media inquiries — there is a faint echo of a scene from a very old film portraying an aging prize fighter seeking to regain his former glory.

After absorbing a fearful beating — blackened eyes, nose bloodied and lips swollen — he flopped on his corner stool and croaked to his handlers: "Don't worry guys. I got him right where I want him."

The scene's parallel with Christie's standing in the pursuit of the nomination is striking. Consider the ringside judges' scorecards as tabulated by Real Clean Politics polling averages: National: Trump 62 percent. Christie three percent.

Iowa caucuses: Trump 51 percent. Christie three percent.

New Hampshire: Trump 46 percent. Christie 10 percent.

South Carolina: Trump 49 percent. Christie two percent.

In other words, after seven months of non-stop Trump bashing, Christie is no closer to the former president than 36 points in New Hampshire — his best showing — and 59 percent nationally.

It is quintessential "Don't worry, guys. I got him right where I want him," an expression of unrealistic confidence and an out of touch belief that all is developing according to plan and success will be his in the end.

Christie's second attempt to secure the nomination was always a long shot. He'd been out of elective office for nearly six years and lacked any natural constituency or national stature. His final year as governor was unimpressive and he departed office with an approval rating under 20 percent.

He separated himself from the others in the field by becoming Trump's fiercest critic, booking himself on television news and talk shows, and sitting for endless rounds of print media interviews to shred the former president's character, intellect, honesty, and integrity.

The strategy produced hours of tape for his video library and stuffed his scrapbooks with press clippings.

If, as campaign consultants preach, the goal of strategic planning is to "move the numbers," Christie has traveled a dead end street.

His scorched earth approach to Trump — while entertaining — drew outsized media attention but never really gained significant traction in the Republican Party base.

In various polls, he was by far the least popular Republican in the field.

His arguments, criticisms and dark warnings of the ramifications of another Trump presidency differed little from those voiced by Democrats and those openly partisan media outlets. They produced little resonance in Republican circles.

He turned his rancor on his primary competitors as well, accusing them of muting their genuine feelings about Trump out of fear of offending his hard core supporters.

He was, he boasted, the only Republican candidate willing to take on Trump and expose his failures as president and castigate him for his allegedly illegal actions.

None of it mattered. Even as indictments against the former president grew and legal challenges to prevent his name from appearing on the ballot in Colorado and Maine succeeded – at least temporarily – Trump drew strength from it all.

Christie's strategy was jarringly out of touch with the views of a majority of the party base.

His 10 percent support in New Hampshire – if it holds – will mark his highest point, locking him in a struggle for third place with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis whose campaign has been floundering for months.

Overtaking either Trump or former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley is out of the question for Christie and finishing third or fourth 36 points behind Trump and 15 behind Haley won't provide any momentum as the campaign turns to South Carolina where Trump is dominant, Haley a close second and Christie at less than four percent.

In the aftermath of the New Hampshire outcome, the pressure on Christie as well as on Vivek Ramaswamy and even DeSantis to stand down will certainly increase.

The arguments for reducing the remainder of the primary season to a two person contest between Trump and Haley will grow louder and more widespread, framed as the last stand to deny Trump the nomination.

Christie and DeSantis could be persuaded to give way and endorse Haley while the eccentric Ramaswamy would become irrelevant.

The lion's share of support currently enjoyed by Christie would undoubtedly fall to Haley while DeSantis' voters would likely be divided.

His candidacy will continue through the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary – he's made that clear – and he will continue to reject calls for abandoning his quest.

But, reality is a stubborn thing; it won't go away and won't be wished away.

At some point "I got him right where I want him" will fall from a hope to the impossible and – like the boxer in the movie – it will be time to throw in the towel.

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