



Opinion: Frontrunner status means Gov. Chris Christie must run the media gauntlet

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By Carl Golden

In the midst of a media frenzy over whether he intended to challenge President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination in 1980, the late Sen. Ted Kennedy caustically observed: "The press always creates a frontrunner; who else are they going to turn on and savage?"

Kennedy, of course, by his often reckless personal behavior, provided plenty of material to reporters who wished to savage him, but his assessment of the media went to a larger point, one that has bedeviled and frustrated candidates and public officials alike; namely, why does the media seem so obsessed with personality flaws and foibles while largely ignoring those qualities that matter: experience, depth of intellect, ability to persuade and strength of ideas?

While Kennedy's sarcasm may have been over the top, its underlying message surfaces from time to time in campaigns and in the offices of elected government, usually in response to revelations elected officials consider marginal rather than meaningful and not connected to their ability to carry out their public responsibilities.

The media respond that unearthing personal indiscretions is a crucial element in fully defining candidates or elected officials who are, after all, seeking the voting support of the public. A drunk driving arrest or possession of marijuana — youthful offenses though they may be — are relevant in the overall context of individual behavior, they say. The same applies to an extramarital affair, a contested divorce, financial

Gov. Chris Christie, fresh off his decisive re-election victory, may want to keep Kennedy's warning in mind as he navigates the coming year and remains coy about his future.

He's been the subject of speculation nearly since the day he took office, fueled by his blunt style and public scraps with anyone who stood in the path of his policy agenda.

His town hall meetings, in which he alternately charmed and confronted his audiences, and the administration's aggressive use of social media — YouTube, Twitter, Facebook — as promotional tools, attracted media attention beyond New Jersey and placed him in the top tier of potential presidential contenders.

He's appeared on behalf of congressional or gubernatorial candidates around the country, raising money and establishing a network of contacts that will come in handy should he decide to move onto the national stage.

His elevation to chairman of the Republican Governor's Association next year will give him the opportunity to raise his profile even higher.

Since his 22-point re-election victory, he's been a ubiquitous presence on the Sunday morning news show circuit, a rite of passage for anyone with national ambitions.

He has not yet been designated the frontrunner, despite a number of national polls showing him leading other potential Republican candidates and holding his own against Hillary Clinton, deemed the strongest Democratic candidate.

If he doesn't yet fully appreciate the relentless focus that awaits him, he'll quickly discover it's similar to walking point on a jungle reconnaissance patrol: When the bullets start flying, you're the most visible and vulnerable target.

Remember 2012, when Republicans were introduced — in no particular order — to wanna-be presidents Perry, Gingrich, Cain, Bachmann and Santorum?

All enjoyed their moments as frontrunners and all crumbled under the burden of proving they fully earned the right and legitimately deserved to be there.

Christie has carefully crafted an image as someone unafraid to compromise, reach accommodations and embrace a bipartisan approach to resolve differences. He's used it to draw a contrast with the atmosphere in Washington, D.C. — a toxic blend of gridlock and partisan bitterness that is producing historically low approval ratings for Congress.

Even though he has engaged in similar slashing partisanship, he's tried to balance it by asserting that his re-election is a lesson and a model for Congress to use to make progress and compile a record of achievement Americans expect from their elected officials.

In the meantime, Christie must still manage a state government facing serious problems — slow economic recovery and job creation, an unemployment rate higher than 8 percent and a budget that appears at this early stage to be in deficit.

He's given no indication that he intends to cease flirting with national ambitions or take steps to dampen media speculation.

He received an inkling of what he faces in the chapter devoted to him in "Double Down," the best-selling book about the 2012 presidential election, in which the authors write that Christie was eliminated as Mitt Romney's running mate because of "political land mines" in his history.

Should the national media descend in force on New Jersey for a closer examination of a front-running Christie, it's certain they'll be poking at those land mines, hoping for a detonation.

New Jersey may turn out to be the proving ground for the Kennedy theory of media relations.

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