

GOLDEN: Christie Social Security plan further dims his prospects

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Remember that old warning: “When you’re up to your backside in alligators, it’s hard to remember your original intention was to drain the swamp.”

It was taped to countless office walls and thumb-tacked to bulletin boards as a reminder that no matter how noble or well-motivated the purpose, it’s wise to always keep in mind the potential risk to life and limb.

With his proposal to overhaul the Social Security and Medicare systems, Gov. Chris Christie waded into the bog and the gators are circling.

Calling for dramatic changes in the eligibility criteria for Social Security benefits has historically been a political loser, arousing the ire of current recipients as well as those nearing retirement age. As individuals and as members of organizations whose clout at the polling booth is well-documented, they’ve thrown the fear of political retribution into members of Congress over any proposal affecting their benefits.

Christie certainly understood the history involved, but his strategy represented a trade-off: He would accept the outcry over suggesting raising the retirement age and imposing a means test for beneficiaries in return for the attention and praise which would come his way for the courage to take on entitlement reform.

The strategy was also designed to separate Christie from the rest of the pack of potential contenders for the Republican presidential nomination, to draw a contrast between the “tell it like it is governor” and others in the field who, by inference, lack the will to face up to difficult issues.

The reaction to Christie’s proposals was both swift and critical. He was accused of breaking a solemn compact between government and working men and women who contributed to Social Security throughout their entire careers.

If enacted, critics said, his ideas would punish those who saved diligently and invested wisely for their retirement and who looked forward to guaranteed Social Security income.

Christie defended increasing the full retirement age to 69, arguing that life expectancy had risen significantly since Social Security was enacted in 1933 and people were remaining in the workforce longer.

Means testing — basing eligibility on other income or assets — has always been the flashpoint in discussions of entitlement pr

There has been considerable speculation that Christie damaged himself by raising entitlement reform, that it is an issue that has always dragged down those who become involved in it. He has opened himself to pushback from senior citizens — a potent voting bloc — and invited criticism that he is looking out for the wealthy at the expense of the middle class.

Others contend that Christie has fallen out of the top tier of possible presidential candidates in any event and focusing on radical changes in Social Security will not re-energize his as yet undeclared candidacy.

Christie, however, has made his point rather emphatically; he's entered the swamp with the goal of draining it. He'd better keep at least one eye on the gators, though.

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