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Analysis

His speech sounded like the start of a campaign

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Though balloons and confetti didn't rain from the brightly lit Assembly chamber ceiling, Gov. Corzine's State of the State address there this week was the beginning of his reelection race.

Ben Dworkin, a Rider University political scientist, called the speech "the opening salvo in what is to be an exciting 2009 gubernatorial campaign."

Calmly and methodically, Corzine blended politics and policy, aiming to use the Tuesday speech to show he can be a confident leader capable of hard decisions in difficult times.

"I think he did an appropriate campaign speech," said Sharon Schulman, director of the William J. Hughes Center at Stockton State College. "He couldn't stand up there and be up-beat in today's world. He'd be laughed off the stage."

The governor also apparently listened to advisers who bemoan his failure to tout his accomplishments.

He talked about his ad-
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ministration's efforts to prevent foreclosures, fight hunger, and provide heat and health care to the working poor. He praised the enactment of paid family leave and a reduction in gang violence, and noted several times that he had already begun to shore up the state budget.

On the larger economic front, Corzine said his administration established a \$3,000 bonus to small and mid-sized companies for each new job created this year, increased the availability of credit by putting state deposits in community banks, and moved to increase jobs through planned \$4.7 billion in infrastructure improvements and another \$3.9 billion in school construction. In addition, he touted business-friendly changes in the state tax code.

He promised to make further improvements in education while lowering expectations, saying that the state and the nation were in deep financial trouble and painful choices would have to be made.

And he tied it all up with his best applause line: "I've never run from a challenge and I'm not running from this one, and I don't think you are either."

State Sen. Raymond Lesniak (D., Union) said Corzine showed "confidence in his ability to lead us out of this horrible recession."

He struck a purely political note of confidence when he noted that when voters overwhelmingly supported President-elect Barack Obama, they were certifying a political agenda he shares.

"Our voters embraced a new vision for America — a progressive vision we share in New Jersey. In fact it's a vision we've been working to achieve for three years," he said.

The political aspect of Corzine's words was not missed by the Republican Party.

In a brief statement, Christopher J. Christie, the GOP establishment's favored candidate, said, "With the strong leadership our state deserves, I will finally make the tough decisions needed to return New Jersey to its rightful place — a state with a vibrant economy, a lower tax burden and great place to educate our kids and

The implication is that the two men will battle over who is the better leader for the times.

Christie, a former U.S. attorney, had nothing to say about how or why he would be better than others running for governor. His staff promised he would outline his economic package when his campaign formally kicks off next month.

Conservative Republican gubernatorial candidates Assemblyman Richard Merkt (R., Morris) and former Bogota Mayor Steve Lonegan were critical of Corzine's approach to cutting the budget, saying that they would thin the ranks of state employees, lower state pension payments, reduce programs and departments, and try to overturn court-ordered school spending.

"We have to cut the size of this monolithic leviathan by 20 percent," Lonegan said.

"We have to make New Jersey a more attractive place for business," Merkt said, adding that he would push to consolidate municipal services as well as reintroduce the idea of cutting state worker pensions and layoffs.

Two hours before Corzine spoke, another group was opening its own campaign to insert issues into the campaign agenda.

Led by Virginia Littell, former state GOP chair, and Richard LaRossa, a former Republican state senator, the newly formed Committee for New Jersey's Future called for slashing the state budget and taxes as well as making sure the next governor puts a leash on the state Supreme Court.

Corzine's next major appearance will be when he gives his budget address in March. By then, the brewing Republican primary will be more engaged and campaigns better able to pick apart his decisions.

Although Corzine's campaign plans to wait until after the June primary to respond to the surviving Republican, it put the GOP on notice yesterday that Corzine will use his millions to finance his reelection.

"I think he started to make the argument" for reelection, Senate President Richard Codey (D., Essex) said of his Tuesday speech. "When the budget address comes up he's got to finish the argument in detail."

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