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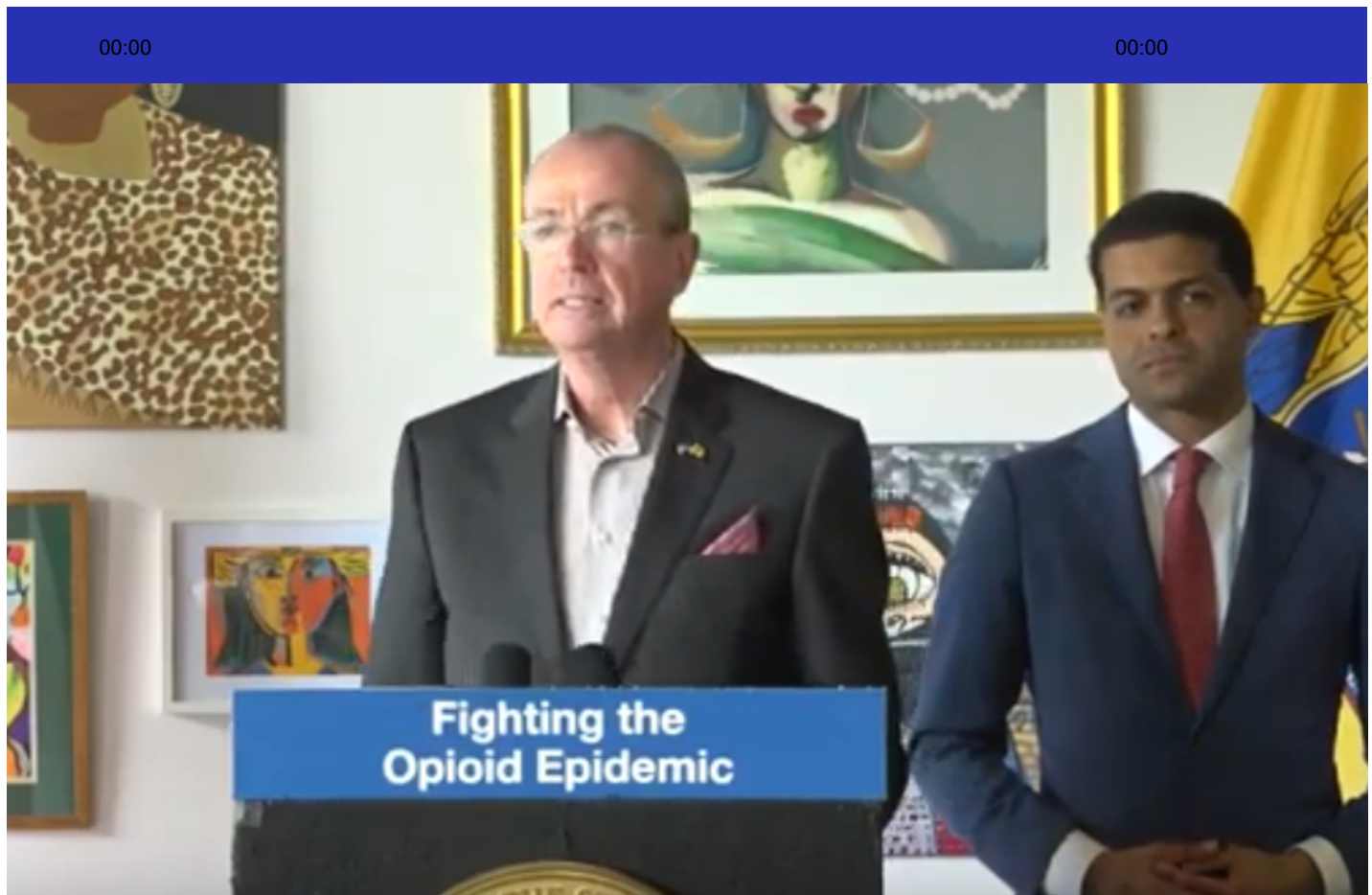


COLUMNIST

New Jersey: The Priority of a Public Brawl for Power

By Carl Golden | June 25, 2019, 2:44 pm | in **Columnist**
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“Elections have consequences.”

Thus spake President Obama in 2009 justifying his refusal to negotiate with Congressional Republicans on a stimulus package to address the country's financial crisis.

With the bitter conflict between Gov. Phil Murphy and Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) showing no signs of letting up, the presidential quip may be the only solution to the **unprecedented internal strife** which has gripped the Democratic Party, shattered unity and impacted virtually every issue of significance to come before the Legislature.

Rather than a cooling of tempers with the passage of time, the confrontation has intensified and the divisions grown deeper, with both sides so locked into position that a truce appears out of the question.

It has become a struggle for supremacy, a contest for the right to control both the party and state government.

It will be resolved only by the 2021 election when voters will choose a governor, the 120-member Legislature and confer on them the Constitutional and political authority to lead.

Elections have consequences.

The results — while some two years off — will offer the winners an opportunity to proclaim that the people have spoken, reached a conclusion, acted upon it and placed their trust and confidence in them.

In the meantime, however, the hostility is unlikely to abate and antagonism between the Administration and the legislative leadership will remain and likely intensify.

Sweeney, aided by Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-Middlesex), has stymied the governor for two years over the budget, twice driving the state to the brink of a government shutdown while forcing Murphy to accept a spending plan he considered flawed and unfair.

There is every reason to believe that the two budget proposals Murphy has yet to deliver (2020 and 2021) will be treated with similar resistance, particularly if the governor insists on a tax increase on incomes in excess of \$1 million.

The policy differences have become inextricably entangled with the political conflict, pitting the governor against Sweeney and South Jersey leader George Norcross.

The awarding by the Economic Development Authority of long-term tax incentives to several entities with personal or professional ties to Norcross exploded in a fury of accusations of improper influence and private interest favoritism.

A task force appointed by Murphy has uncovered instances in which it alleges corners were cut and regulations ignored to approve applications submitted by Norcross' associates.

Norcross unleashed a major offensive, disputing the task force's existence and legitimacy in court (ultimately losing the lawsuit), while maintaining a steady steam of criticism of the governor and threatening to support a primary election challenger.

The legislative controversies and the political upheavals have dominated the environment, edging perilously close to governmental dysfunction and raising the specter of deadlock and inaction on issues which can ill afford to drift aimlessly without resolution.

The working relationship between the Administration and the leadership is in tatters; the two sides are barely on speaking terms; each suspects the other of either incompetence or self-serving motives.

There appears no possibility of finding common ground, of swallowing hard and placing personal ill will aside in the larger interest of policy accomplishments.

Democrats occupy the governor's office and hold significant majorities in the Legislature — the kind of unified government which voters are told holds promise of professional conduct and sound policy decisions.

The current, non-stop uproar has demolished those claims. Personal animosities and an unseemly, public brawl for power has replaced any semblance of governmental cooperation and achieving mutual goals.

It is more indicative of partisan division rather than a unified government, a shared ideology and philosophy, and a common interest in moving programs of broad benefit to the taxpayers.

Both sides are so entrenched in their positions that neither appears ready to moderate or make the first move toward détente for fear of appearing weak or being perceived as having lost the contest.

Should that belief persist — and it appears likely it will — the state faces two more years of turmoil, infighting and overheated rhetoric.

It appears increasingly likely that it will all end only when one side can stand and shout "I won."

Obama was right: Elections have consequences.

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