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COLUMNIST

Christie Tries Early to Stake out his 2024 Turf

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With his withering takedown of the Biden Administration over its criticism of a newly enacted voting rights law in Georgia, former Gov. Chris Christie baited the hook, cast his line into the 2024 presidential waters and awaited a nibble.

It was no coincidence that Christie used his Sunday morning television platform and its access to a national audience of millions to accuse the president and leading Democrats of “lying to cause racial divisions.”

He dissected the provisions in the Georgia law one by one, vigorously refuting Democratic claims that the law resurrected the Jim Crow era in the South when African-Americans were routinely denied the right to vote.

Christie knows, of course, that what is said on the Sunday morning talk shows is picked up by the mainstream print media as well as politically oriented websites and bloggers and disseminated across the country. The message is amplified and repeated through social media, often leading to invitations to appear on other news and public affairs shows.

Christie is not the only fisherman with lines in the water. He shares space with a half dozen sitting members of the Senate, a few governors and potentially figures who've achieved success in the private sector.

There is no mistaking, however, the most dominant figure whose presence looms larger than life over the Republican Party is the former president currently ensconced in a penthouse at the Mar-A-Lago resort in Florida.

From his vantage point, Donald Trump blasts out policy statements and personal criticisms of anyone he feels has offended him while raising prodigious sums of money, dangling endorsements in front of those who make the pilgrimage to his redoubt, maintaining his strong connection to his fiercely loyal base and plotting a comeback.

Christie has teased his future plans with the usual coy statements: "Never say never; I wouldn't rule it out; it's something I'd consider" etc.etc.

His relationship with Trump over the years has careened from one extreme to another. He was an early endorser in 2016, campaigned with him and, for a time, was considered for a top-level Cabinet or White House post.

He was, though, outspoken in urging acceptance of Trump's loss last year and ending the increasingly outlandish claims of massive fraud which Trump insisted denied him re-election. At one point, Christie characterized the ex-president's legal team as "a national embarrassment."

He understands — as do all the other potential candidates — that Trump's loyal base is vital to success in a potentially crowded Republican presidential primary.

Threading the needle — standing with the former president on issues which resonate with the base while creating an individual persona — will be difficult particularly when dealing with the mercurial ex-president.

In achieving that, Christie is positioned fairly well. He possesses the Trump bluster and forcefulness that a great many Republicans find so appealing, but without the Trump craziness that turned millions of moderates to Biden.

In his critique of the Administration's opposition to the Georgia voting law, Christie stuck to specific points of disagreement and policy differences rather than engage in sound bite whining about socialism and left wing takeovers of government.

For instance, he pointed out that the law provides 17 days of early voting — double that offered in New Jersey — as well as two Saturdays and two optional Sundays. Ballot drop boxes which didn't exist prior to the COVID-19 pandemic have been made a permanent part of the process.

Requiring identification — a provision supported by upwards of 70 percent of the American people — does not pose a hardship, he said, and can include documentation such as driver's license, four digits of a Social Security number, or a utility bill. Moreover, the state will provide an identification document free for anyone who wants one.

Personal identification has become an entrenched part of everyday life in America, necessary for everything from travel to banking to buying a pack of cigarettes to swinging by Costco on the way home from work to pick up a 24-pack of toilet paper. Extending the requirement to voting seems eminently logical to an overwhelming percentage of Americans.

He received an unexpected boost by an unforced error on the part of Biden who declared the law required polls to close in Georgia at 5 p.m. to suppress the turnout among working people and minorities.

Despite the wrongfulness of his assertion, Biden and his media team clung to it, giving critics a choice opportunity to accuse him and his fellow Democrats of deliberately misleading the American people.

Being so clearly wrong on one key element in the law was sufficient to raise doubts about the truthfulness of their claims on other provisions of it.

The Biden White House led the onslaught of Democratic criticism and pressure built steadily on the corporate sector headquartered in Georgia — notably Coca Cola and Delta airlines — to lend their voices to condemn the law.

Major League Baseball wilted quickly and in an ill-advised and short-sighted decision announced its All Star Game originally scheduled for Atlanta would be moved to Denver, draining an anticipated \$100 million from the local economy, further damaging small businesses already reeling from the pandemic shutdown and punishing thousands of working class individuals who were looking forward to the game to provide some measure of increased business activity.

When it became apparent the economic blow would fall most heavily on those who could least absorb it, Democrats put distance between themselves and the boycott movement, leaving MLB holding the bag and becoming a highly visible target for critics who accused the league of every sin from hypocrisy to politicizing the national pastime.

Versions of the Georgia law are under active consideration in a number of other states, guaranteeing that the issue of voting rights and election security will be a priority issue in the 2022 midterm Congressional contests and spill over into the 2024 presidential campaigns.

Christie has staked out his territory early and in a highly public and aggressive way. He may have worked his way back into the mix of potential candidates whose names are routinely mentioned in national media circles.

His candidacy in 2016 imploded quickly after two poor finishes in the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. Enmeshed in the Bridgegate scandal and criticized for ignoring New Jersey problems while he pursued his political ambitions drove his approval ratings to the 20 per cent range upon leaving office in 2018.

By 2024, the number of people to whom Bridgegate is familiar will be infinitesimal and Christie's second gubernatorial term a faded memory.

He's cast his line in the water and stands on the riverbank waiting for a strike. The first step's been taken and deeper water awaits.

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