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Murphy Versus Norcross: Duel for the New Jersey Democratic Party

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Two hundred fifteen years ago this July on the heights of Weehawken, Vice President of the United States Aaron Burr faced off against former U. S. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton.

It did not end well for Hamilton.

Two centuries and change later, Gov. Phil Murphy is poised to march off 20 paces from South Jersey powerbroker George Norcross on the mud flats of the Cooper River in Camden — without dueling pistols, of course.

At stake is control of the Democratic Party and whose voice will rise above others in matters such as Congressional and legislative re-districting, public pension and benefits reform, taxes, education aid and the myriad issues on the legislative agenda.

While the confrontation between the two has been simmering for nearly two years, it burst into the open with revelations that Norcross and his allies had benefitted rather handsomely from tax credits approved by the State Economic Development Authority to lure companies to re-locate in Camden.

Hearings conducted by a task force created by Murphy to examine the EDA operations heard testimony that regulations were either skirted or ignored altogether in granting the credits and there was little oversight to determine whether the job creation requirements were fulfilled.

Most damaging, though, was the allegation by the task force's special counsel that an attorney in the law firm in which Philip Norcross, George's brother, is the chief executive officer, had been involved in writing revisions and amendments into the economic development program legislation to favor the firm's clients and applicants tied to the powerbroker Norcross.

It was an explosive allegation, not only because the attorney involved may have been engaged in lobbying while not registered as such, but because it dragged Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) into the middle of the controversy by raising questions about whether the Senator was aware of the attorney's involvement or objected to it.

Sen. Kip Bateman (R-Somerset) has already called for a legislative inquiry into the bill drafting process while Sen. Declan O'Scanlon (R-Monmouth) said had he known of the background he would have opposed the legislation.

The task force hearings portrayed an agency beset by slipshod management with no accountability or follow-up capability and whose decisions were subject to — if not responsive to — political interference.

The controversy is the most direct challenge yet to Norcross. His influence in South Jersey is close to absolute and he wielded it so effectively for many years that he was routinely referred to as the most powerful unelected political figure in New Jersey.

The findings of the audit of the EDA and the disclosures of questionable decisions reached by the agency in dispensing billions of dollars in tax breaks has brought a budding scandal to his doorstep.

In a classic deflect and distract strategy, Norcross and Camden City and County officials attacked the task force findings as an assault on the city and its people and contended the tax breaks granted by the EDA produced an economic resurgence in what is arguably the most fiscally-distressed community in the state.

Leaving no doubt as to the stakes involved, the local officials tore into Murphy, accusing him of unfounded and politically-driven attacks on the city and comparing him to President Trump.

The record developed thus far by the task force, however, is a graphic portrayal of a state agency engaging in political favoritism, giving in to private interest pressures and bending its own rules and regulations to justify its decisions. It has already made a referral of possible criminal activity to the Attorney General.

The involvement of an attorney in drafting the legislation is particularly troublesome, a case of placing the public interest aside while advancing the financial interest of private clients.

Murphy has dealt skillfully with the issue, allowing the task force and the audit to drive the debate while he expresses his concern and his intention to seek to reform the agency and bring it under much more intense supervision and scrutiny.

He has positioned himself on the side of open and honest government while implying his critics favor the status quo which has benefitted them so well. It's a deft move by a governor not usually known for being politically adroit.

Make no mistake, though, at its most basic, while the controversy is ostensibly about the operational failures of the EDA, it is a well-executed power play aimed at establishing the governor as the Democratic establishment's sole leader and diminishing the outsized role played by Norcross.

Murphy benefits as well from the criticism from former Gov. Chris Christie who was exceptionally and, in the minds of some, uncomfortably close to Norcross. Christie made a point of praising Norcross publicly and boasting of his Administration's record of assisting Camden.

Criticism from an ex-governor who departed the office with a public approval rating below 20 per cent will have little impact in the face of allegations of questionable behavior during his Administration.

The bad blood between the governor and the Norcross faction of the party has its roots in the 2017 gubernatorial primary when Murphy, joined by state chairman John Currie, forced Sweeney to abandon a potential candidacy by building a money-driven coalition of county chairs who pledged to award Murphy favored ballot position as the party's choice.

The relationship deteriorated further when Murphy remained silent while the New Jersey Education Association — a strong supporter — dumped \$5 million into the ultimately unsuccessful Republican effort to oust Sweeney from the Senate.

Since the outset of the Administration, Murphy and Sweeney have been at odds over the **budget**, spending, taxes, public pension and health benefits reforms and education aid, often in blunt language questioning each other's motives.

They differ as well on the future of the EDA, with Murphy proposing a total overhaul and re-structuring while Sweeney believes it can be tweaked into enhanced oversight and management.

They've both occasionally sought to minimize their differences while pledging to work cooperatively, but the relationship has been an icy one, certainly not the level one would normally expect in a unified partisan government.

Democrats worried out loud that the heightened personal animosity between the two resulting from the EDA disclosures has imperiled efforts to win legislative approval of **legalization** of marijuana possession for personal use, one of Murphy's signature issues. Removing criminal sanctions for small amount possession has proven extremely difficult and this latest fight may well end its chances entirely.

The high stakes struggle for power has been joined and there appears at the moment to be no turning back. Far too great a volume of damaging information has spilled into the public debate, raising disturbing questions over behind the scenes manipulation of governmental activities to the detriment of public good.

Murphy has seized the higher ground and seems intent on holding it, tightening his grasp on his party and charting its future. In short, he's decided to do what governors do.

Burr may have walked away the victor in 1804, but it's Hamilton who had a smash Broadway show named after him. "Murphy: The Musical" doesn't have quite the same ring, but he'll settle for "Murphy: The Governor."

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