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COLUMNIST

An Unforced Error by Ciattarelli as Murphy Shows Leadership

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With no definitive forecast for when New Jersey's political environment will return to normal, candidates at all levels, along with consultants, advisers and the like, are left struggling to attract attention and break through the near total media and government preoccupation with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this atmosphere, candidates desperate for coverage often fall into an overreach trap, using overheated rhetoric or borderline reckless allegations to capture voter recognition at a time when they are distracted and their daily lives upended by arguably the most severe public health crisis to hit the nation in more than a century.

Jack Ciattarelli, the only announced Republican candidate for governor in 2021, fell victim to the temptation to forge ahead and directed blunt criticism at Gov. Phil Murphy for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Specifically, Ciattarelli chastised Murphy for his response to media inquiries concerning the state's preparedness for the potential of a severe shortage of medical equipment, forcing physicians to choose which patients will receive life-saving treatment and which would not.

Murphy and Health Commissioner Judy Persichilli noted the formation of a bio-ethics panel to develop guidelines and protocols in the event of a shortage of ventilators in particular forces the extraordinary and immensely difficult decision concerning a patients' life viability.

Ciattarelli would have none of it, criticizing Murphy for, in effect, even considering such a move, implying that the governor's position was tantamount to deciding "who lives and who dies."

It was an unforced error by Ciattarelli, a criticism of Murphy for preparing for any eventuality while at the same time directing his energies toward heading it off.

It was not a hypothetical inquiry — ventilators are in short supply everywhere as the virus spreads to thousands of victims and claims hundreds of lives.

Murphy suggested he would be derelict in his obligation if he failed to authorize development of a plan to deal with the potential for rationing medical care rather than waiting for the crisis to erupt and scrambling frantically at the last minute to pull together a response while under enormous time pressure. Errors are bound to occur.

He's right.

Ciattarelli, it seemed, chose to criticize for the sake of criticizing. He offered no alternatives, no suggestions for acting differently. Murphy, he said, was wrong in his position but was silent concerning his own. It was an instance of permitting a zealotry to become involved in a major news event to overcome better judgment.

He ran the risk of a backlash for engaging in partisan politics, for attempting to score cheap points at a time of deep public anxiety and concern over a life threat most had never before been exposed to.

Truth be told, Murphy has dealt with the pandemic in extraordinary fashion. He's been forthcoming and candid, keeping nervous New Jerseyans fully informed of the steps his Administration is taking to protect them.

Even the bio-ethics panel criticized by Ciattarelli was accepted as a wise decision despite the emotional intensity involved in its decisions.

Murphy's demeanor has been calm yet forceful when required. His warnings to those who violate the ban on public gatherings or to businesses deemed non-essential but which have remained open have grown increasingly stern. He's made clear he is determined to impose punishment.

The governor's performance stands in stark contrast to that of New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio, who's been a model of ineptitude as the leader of a city that has become the epicenter of the pandemic.

DeBlasio was well behind the curve in acting to close schools and ban public gatherings. Early on, in fact, he urged New Yorkers to go out for an evening on the town, attend theaters and fill the sidewalks for parades and events.

Too late did he realize he'd bungled, that his city was under siege. His solution was to blame the Trump Administration.

DeBlasio was eclipsed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo while the mayor tumbled into irrelevancy.

Murphy has become the face of New Jersey, leading a government which has concentrated solely on overcoming and eventually conquering the threat to health. He recognized that the kind of partisan political sniping embraced by DeBlasio was counter-productive and pointless in dealing with the emergency.

He's been complimentary toward Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, quick to point out their responsiveness to his requests for help while at the same time emphasizing the need for greater assistance.

Ciattarelli's frustration is understandable — he's seeking his party's gubernatorial nomination and, to succeed in his quest, it is crucial he stand out from potential competitors and convince voters his vision for the state's future is superior to Murphy's.

He has, however, overlooked the long history of the public pulling together in times of great crises, coalescing behind their established leadership to meet the challenge. And, at the moment, Murphy is that established leadership.

Should Ciattarelli become the Republican candidate in 2021, there will be ample time and opportunity for him to emphasize his differences with the incumbent, to pick apart the record of the last four years, identify shortcomings in it and pledge to do better.

It may be that by the time the gubernatorial campaign hits full pitch next year, Ciattarelli's attack will have been forgotten and, in the long run, won't damage him.

Picking his spots, though, is critical. The COVID-19 pandemic is not one of them.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

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