

## 2016 hero? Christie delights and disturbs GOP

By David Lightman

JOE BURBANK — Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel/MCT

BOCA RATON, Fla — . Suddenly, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie is a Republican miracle worker.

For the moment, the Republican establishment is looking past his temper, the George Washington Bridge scandal, his state's budget woes and the uneasy feeling that he's not conservative enough to be the nominee.

Instead, they hailed Christie at this week's Republican Governors Association meeting as a veritable savior, the association chairman who raised millions to help colleagues and took risks that helped spur victories in tough states.

Yet all this good cheer probably won't mean much should Christie make a bid for the 2016 presidential nomination. The controversies are still percolating in the Republican heartland, especially among the party's influential hard-core conservative wing.

"He's a loudmouth and he's not conservative," said Jerry DeLemus, a founder of the New Hampshire tea party movement.

The best way to handicap a Christie White House run at this point: "One of his strengths is that he's interesting," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Like or hate him, Christie draws a crowd and is forever intriguing.

"He has the skills and charisma to connect with an audience. It's an ability nearly unmatched among the rest of the field," said Kevin Hall, columnist for [TheIowaRepublican.com](http://TheIowaRepublican.com), an online political newsletter in the nation's first caucus state.

This week, Christie's audiences were congressional Republicans, whom he addressed Monday on Capitol Hill, and then his fellow governors. He was funny and he was careful. He wouldn't answer broad questions about immigration, saying he isn't a candidate for president, so there's no need.

"If I run, I'm sure I will," he said at the governors' meeting.

He's made no decision about a 2016 bid and won't this year. "It's a family decision," he said.

Christie would start with an important support group: the nation's 31 Republican governors as of next year. Political strategists argue that their IOUs are valuable since governors tend to control their states' political machinery. Christie was a frequent presence during the midterm campaigns this fall in the nation's two early, nominee-making states, New Hampshire and Iowa.

Gov. Terry Branstad won easily in Iowa, which probably would have happened anyway. In New Hampshire, Republican Walt Havenstein lost by 5 percentage points to incumbent Democrat Maggie Hassan.

Christie's stock rose higher because he went out on some limbs elsewhere. He visited Kansas frequently, helping to rescue the underdog candidacy of incumbent Gov. Sam Brownback.

"He played well in our state," Brownback said. "We always took him to places to eat."

Christie also paid frequent visits to Maryland on behalf of Republican Larry Hogan. That seemed a risky venture since Hogan was bidding to become only the state's second Republican governor in 46 years.

Hogan joked that Maryland was on the Republicans' "no way in hell list." Yet he won handily, and while the reason was likely a weak opponent and voter anger with Democrats, Christie could take credit. That further boosted his image as a Republican with appeal in states where the party has been sagging.

Outside the friendly confines of the Boca Raton resort, though, Christie still has a lot of image-polishing to do. The "Jersey comeback" he once touted is waning. The state budget has been ailing, and the Garden State has had trouble with its pension payments.

The bridge scandal remains under federal investigation. Christie has maintained that his aides closed the bridge last fall, causing massive traffic tie-ups, but that he was unaware of the closure at the time. The action may have been prompted by a local Democrat's refusal to endorse the governor's re-election.

Few people in New Hampshire, Iowa or anywhere else are familiar with the bridge, though, and the Republican establishment appears to have dismissed the controversy.

"If it was a problem, it's been absorbed. People are grateful for how much he did during the last campaign," said Tom Rath, a veteran New Hampshire Republican activist and former state attorney general.

The bigger liability is Christie's temper. The governor's aides have been trying to present a kinder, gentler Christie with forums such as a high-level state meeting to discuss strategies for fighting drug addiction. But that's been undermined by a series of very public outbursts.

Christie fought publicly with Kaci Hickox, a nurse he ordered quarantined upon her return from West Africa because she may have been exposed to the Ebola virus. She tested negative, and protested her confinement. When Hickox threatened a lawsuit, Christie said, "Get in line. I'm happy to take it on."

What rankles Republicans most is an incident Oct. 29 in Belmar, N.J. James Keady, a Democratic former Asbury Park council member, confronted Christie, protesting that funds to help victims of 2012's Hurricane Sandy weren't being dispersed quickly enough.

An angry Christie shouted him down, telling Keady, "So listen, you want to have the conversation later I'm happy to have it, buddy. But until that time, sit down and shut up."

Privately, governors and strategists say that kind of behavior is troublesome. "I raise my voice as a last resort," said DeLemus. "With him it's not a last resort. It gets nasty with him."

Voters, though, are angry, and Haley Barbour, a former Republican Party chairman and former governor of Mississippi, thought the style might play well.

"What you describe as temper, I describe as candor and openness," he said. "A lot of people like that."

Such views illustrate the paradox of Christie and what makes him so uniquely interesting, said Weingart of the Eagleton Institute. "It seems like he's very present in the moment, thinking and responding," he said, which many find refreshing in an era when so many politicians seem so tightly scripted and robotic.

Or puzzling.

"It's one thing to look at how someone has helped another candidate for governor," said Rath. "It's another thing when you're considering policies and demeanor."

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