Everything Jersey

Is Gov. Chris Christie a Jimmy Carter or a Ronald Reagan?

By Paul Mulshine / The Star Ledger
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N.J. Gov. Chris Christie defends the move to declare a state of fiscal emergency as Democrats ramped up opposition to funding cuts for NJ Transit and schools.

For a moment there, our new governor sounded like a strong conservative leader in the mold of **Ronald Reagan**.

But last week **Chris Christie** seemed to be taking an un-Reaganesque turn on the question of confronting public employee unions. He announced that a Corzine-era agreement with unions hampers his ability to lay off workers in the budget he will unveil Tuesday.

According to the agreement Corzine signed with the workers last June, if any layoffs are made at the beginning of fiscal 2011, which starts July 1, the remaining workers in the bargaining unit would immediately get a 3.5 percent raise that would otherwise kick in on Jan. 1.

When Christie said that because of that deal "I cannot lay off one state worker" until January, I got calls from several conservatives who all said the same thing: Ronnie never would have made that concession.

Reagan famously set the tone for his presidency by announcing in 1981 that the air-traffic controllers would be fired if they went on strike. The union leaders called a walkout anyway. They never walked back in.

Christie could set a similar tone by simply firing enough workers to more than make up for any raises, the conservatives said. Instead, he ended up looking indecisive, like Reagan's predecessor.

In fact, Christie spent much of his campaign last year echoing **Jimmy Carter**. Christie's stock answer to budget-based questions was to state that he would free up revenue by implementing "zero-based budgeting."

Americans first heard of zero-based budgeting back in 1976, when that peanut farmer from Plains was running for president. The concept is that every budget begins from zero. Every employee is laid off at the end of the budget year and rehired the next day — assuming the job is justified.

This can work in private industry. But it's unworkable in government and it didn't work for Carter. "By autumn 1977, Las Vegas comics were getting laughs by just saying the words 'zero-based budgeting,'" columnist **George F. Will** wrote at the time.

So why was a Republican candidate for governor of New Jersey in 2009 invoking a failed budget concept advanced by a Democrat who lost to Reagan in 1980?

It's safe to assume our new governor is not a student of history. If he were, he would know that as governor of Georgia, Carter tried to fix that state's property tax problem with zero-based budgeting. But Georgians got zero tax relief.

We face a far worse property tax problem in Jersey. In two days we will get the first hint on how Christie will address

it. From the talk in the Statehouse last week, it seems likely he will be breaking his primary campaign promise to keep the rebates that his opponents derided as "a gimmick." But once the gimmick is gone, what will replace it?

Well, Christie could send a Reagan-like shot across the bow of the state Supreme Court, which long ago took over distribution of state school aid, the main source of property tax relief. The new governor could announce a school aid formula that begins to restore the balance between urban and suburban districts.

Christie has said that school aid might have to be cut by 15 percent in the new budget. Those cuts might not be necessary if Christie had kept his campaign promise about layoffs. But assuming aid must be cut, he could, at the very least, protect the districts that get the least amounts, such as those in his own Morris County. The schools in Morris receive a mere $167 million in this year's budget.

Instead of cutting suburban schools, Christie could make the cuts in those Democratic-run counties such as Essex, which gets a staggering $1.3 billion in state aid, or Hudson, which receives $943 million.

But his education commissioner, **Bret Schundler**, is an old Hudson hand. And when Schundler was mayor of Jersey City he did a brilliant job of arranging tax abatements so that the city remains poor on paper — even though it has lots of million-dollar homes. As a result, the Jersey City school district receives three times as much aid as all 40 districts in Morris County combined.

The administration has been tight-lipped on just how any school aid cuts will be implemented. So we'll see when the formula comes out whether Christie is channeling his inner cowboy or his inner peanut farmer.

There are other signs that show Christie may be more of a Carter clone than a rebirth of Reagan. Many of his cabinet appointees lean to the left. On Friday, his environmental commissioner, **Bob Martin**, put out a press release filled with **Al Gore**-like gushing about greenhouse gases.

Will the Guv soon be asking us to turn down our thermostats and put on cardigan sweaters? We'll know soon enough. Stay tuned.

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