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ENLIGHTENMENT OR BUST

The United States rose out of the Enlightenment – that curious exploration of an elusive condition called human happiness – but our public square at some point became a closer approximation of medieval times, which is to say – and with a certain generosity – decidedly pre-Enlightenment, plague and all.

Those delicate social compacts comprising the provocations and procedures of an evolving civilization coarsened into a two-party system consisting of a battering ram on one side and a trebuchet on the other, crude and outmoded tools bearing little relationship to those keener processes and deeper demarcations in the dialogues of humanity.

We adjusted, it seems, to the abbreviated dynamics, in a way that on occasion made coded spoon-fed slogans easier to identify with than the depth of lifelong friends, as the noose of COVID obscenely tugged.

Too, the forms only rehearsed primitive dramas masking a darker aspect of our republic: namely, a failure of the system to consistently deliver results to actual people, or to even pretend familiarity

with the country's core Enlightenment ideals. Our politics came to convey poorly imagined substitutions for ideas by those intent merely on sustaining urgent commercial interests while maintaining false collisions to keep so-called pygmy minds preoccupied.

China and Russia continued to witness this, of course, and delighted in reasserting their respective tyrannies as more efficient options on the world stage, perhaps in tandem, as the latter mobilized on the border of Ukraine, and China bristled at President Joe Biden's efforts to coalesce western democracies.

Already routed from one another by our machines, we received the latest viral strain as the next downward strike of an ax to drive us farther apart. Everyone alienated in the same electronic envelope of ego lacked that most fundamental and reliable ability to physically grasp.

What then, in the context of all this, did the coming 2022 elections mean for New Jersey, supposedly that Northeast blue state bastion, shakier on the other side of the 2021 election cycle?

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LOCAL CONTEXT

It started at the local level and possibly in a way most counter intuitive to the times, in Newark, where Mayor Ras Baraka contemplated a third term in office. After two terms as the elected leader of New Jersey's most populous city, Baraka provoked no credible challenger to his reign, his power the consequence of communication skills, mindfulness of that corner of the city that could pose a threat (the north), a strong relationship with the governor's office, and finally, and most importantly, a wholly organic relationship to Newark. Baraka had initially, after all, won office as a grassroots usurper to the party machine.

As to two of these qualities: communication and connectedness or groundedness: If Baraka at his worst treaded at the edge – or even immersed himself fully – in Stokely Carmichaelism, at his

best he challenged the typical forms of language accepted and advanced by politicians to comfortably say nothing. Son of a poet, and himself a poet, Baraka dared to an American English not merely memorable, but conceived to blow up prefabricated politics-speak.

Take this:

"This country is filled with our blood-soaked footsteps and we are still here trying to save America from itself," he said in 2018, in Atlantic City. "We are in a very dangerous place. We're the Democratic Party. We're supposed to have a moral center. The problem is we focus too much on Donald Trump and we let everyone else off the hook... Those that enable, aid and abet him."



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Spoken to a roomful of insiders prepared only to excise the enemy on the other side of the duopoly, without any self-reflection or consideration of the dysfunctional whole, the speech teased a subversive idea: “a moral center.”

Or this, from 2020, at the height of the pandemic:

“Do some push-ups instead of pointing fingers. Get some zinc in your body. Healthy food options. Strengthen your immune system. We have to assume everyone has it. The scientists say you can get it by getting breathed on by someone. You can take that home in your pocket to your two-bedroom flat and knock your whole family out. You have to change your behavior. We’re coming to get you. Get in the house. Show character.”

Baraka’s special quality as a leader in a hazmat suit-slogan age made him flirt constantly with inspiration as a foundational expression of democracy.

Consider this:

“Making the dark stone the cornerstone...painted the color of the ocean floor... we held prophets in her bosom... strangled each other on social media... making them believe the back door they’re building for themselves is only for themselves...We made it here by faith...We made something from nothing and turned the bottom into the foundation so when we moved the whole place shook. We made it here by faith, yeah, we made it here by faith. Our ancestors’ hands held up the sky so we could stand tall, dance across time and be beautiful deliberately...”

Formed politically, artistically, and socially in a city



troubled over the course of his lifetime almost to the day, in fact, of the Newark insurrection, which catastrophically underscored the depth of America’s disconnect and neglect of its black urban poor, the mayor used the COVID era to illustrate the persistence of the problem, even as Newark made headway under Baraka’s leadership. Over the last two years the virus took a toll on a city already battling underlying conditions associated with poor air quality (Essex sustained the most deaths of any county in New Jersey [3,245]). But Newark at present stands at a 50-year low in overall crime, recording a 53 percent drop in homicides since 2013. In 2020 and 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, Newark created 3,569 units of housing and of those, set aside 1,512 or 42% for affordable housing. In ten years, it went from the 73rd most populous city in the country to the 62nd. The Biden Administration, moreover, has prioritized Newark as part of a \$60 billion lead pipe abatement program, to protect drinking water for the residents of Newark.

After two decades of an American footprint in the Middle East – “All that money’s in Iraq,” Ronald C. Rice told InsiderNJ in 2007 – Baraka as mayor

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had the advantage of a president committed to funding the domestic economy and revitalizing domestic infrastructure. “President's Biden's investment will assuredly protect and safeguard the lives of present and future generations of Americans, especially older communities like Newark, which suffer from a disproportionate amount of lead pipes, lead paint and the health issues they create,” Baraka said at the end of 2021.

Would the city truly undergo an infrastructural overhaul this year to lead the nation in transforming a corner of urban neglect into an actual functioning city and not simply a parochial NJ stepchild of New York? Of course, Biden's power appeared greatly diminished with his party's failure to pass the Build Back Better Bill ahead of the 2022 midterm election. But the infrastructure bill passed, its truest test perhaps in and immediately

around Baraka's hometown, and ultimately on Baraka's shoulders.

His reelection signified a chance for him to consolidate more local power and conceivably project his parochial-worldly rhetoric into a larger framework, perhaps a 2025 run for governor. At the very least, even locally, or maybe even especially, he insisted on a language uncluttered by the usual bifurcated cliches, which in New Jersey – where the system thrived on a perpetual un-inspiration of the general public to ensure the functioning of machines in cynical weather – contained subversive tendencies.

Beset with the city's ongoing challenges, Baraka flourished, it must be said, far from the climes of CD-7, a microcosm of the country's reductionist politics and New Jersey's most obvious intense 2022 battleground.

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CONGRESSIONAL CONTEXT

In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller considered tragedy as an American theme, with a slight but vital adjustment. Unlike the fall of the kings of England and Greece, Willie Loman's denouement deserves "attention," to borrow Miller's word – because Loman – a simple mortal man – lives and dies. Literary critic Harold Bloom credits Shakespeare for inventing the human in his tragic plays, because of *the attention paid* to minor characters, and even somewhat poked fun at the so-called title tragic figure in *Julius Caesar*, by making him a kind of transcendent cipher; which brings us to the reelection effort of U.S. Rep. Tom Malinowski against Republican challenger Tom Kean, Jr.

The scion of a political family with roots going back to the colonial founding of the comic opera otherwise known as New Jersey, whose father as governor represented arguably the distinguished

high point, Kean presents himself as the closest the state gets to an Old-World tragic figure, in the classic sense. The supposed elegant nobleman with a pedigree to set him apart from the mob, Kean occupies the unenviable and absurd position as the polished totem pole of the same Trump mob that desecrated the U.S. Capitol. He'll deny it, of course, as he finds himself forced into a rundown (watered down by the presence of others on the right, Phil Rizzo among them) with a vaccine-scorning challenger (Assemblyman Erik Peterson) in full-blown Mishima mode. We can already hear Kean furnishing a reminder of his tepid bipartisan rebuke of the events of Jan. 6th, 2021.

"What we are witnessing in Washington is not how our democracy is supposed to function. The protestors who have breached the United States Capitol building illegally should go home immediately or face the full force of the law."



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Kean has to play footsy with the lurid boss by quietly making regular runs to the golf course (and with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy invited as his special guest to his campaign kickoff) in order to remain afloat politically, which ultimately requires a bubble-wrapped run, even by the notoriously timid Kean's standards (he's run three times for federal office and failed). What it means – and here it now strikes a grimly if only dimly tragic European chord – is Kean, as that supposed link to the cultivated spirit of the country, can only succeed by suppressing himself. If we can use his 2020 challenge of Malinowski as a basis for understanding his next race, we can anticipate a blizzard of well-financed anti-incumbent negativity upchucked from Camp Kean and its soft side monstrosities as the candidate remains cocooned in the family name. Already in a political death spiral (partly of his own making and partly the consequence of redistricting that resulted from his bad judgment), Malinowski will have no recourse himself but to go hard negative, resulting in the most primitive collision of the 2022 cycle – and an example of everything wrong with our current state of affairs. It's not the negativity itself, but the dismal, bedeviling absence of substance.

No wonder Malinowski felt obligated to quote Shakespeare's Henry Vth at the outset, in an instinctive last acknowledgement of the language before he inevitably succumbs to a blitzkrieg of grotesquery.



A state department diplomat, Malinowski might actually have something substantive to say on pressing subjects like China, Russia, Ukraine, global warming, SALT, and the Gateway Tunnel, but the Kean Campaign, in detonation mode, will consign him to all the eloquence of a Tusken Raider in a sandstorm. A constant barrage of toxic primitivism will also enable Kean to say nothing – obviously the campaign's preferred strategy. If one chooses to interpret the CD-7 catastrophe in tragic terms, as utter bedlam, which as T.S. Eliot observed, is how the world (of New Jersey) ends, “not with a bang but a whimper.”

Unlike Malinowski, cherry picked as collateral damage and all but redistricted out of political existence, U.S. Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-11) received a favorable ten-year district map that gives her a better chance of reducing a challenger to rubble, while assuring her own footing for a 2025 gubernatorial run. C11 and CD7 share some history. In 2020, Republican challenger Rosemarie Becchi originally wanted to



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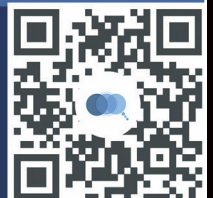
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dethrone Malinowski, but re-entrenched as a Sherrill challenger to give Junior a free crack at the CD-7 incumbent Democrat. A credible Sherrill opponent (just as Jay Webber was before her in 2018) Becchi opted out of running this year, leaving a tangled field in her wake less advantageous to the GOP, as bipartisan insiders serviced Kean and Sherrill at the expense of Malinowski. Having vanquished back-to-back somewhat formidable opponents, Sherrill – if she steamrolls another Republican in rougher weather but with a better map – stands to expand her credibility as a statewide player.



But if former Senate President Steve Sweeney of South Jersey intends to make the 2025 statewide path rockier for fellow non-northern establishment creation Democrat Craig

Coughlin of Middlesex, Sherrill will likely have to fight Baraka (or even Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver; or Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop, who may expect state backing from Senator Bob Menendez in exchange for his having backed Rob Menendez Jr. for Congress in CD8) for the primary advantage of northern supremacy in the aftermath of sitting Governor Phil Murphy. At a time when experts anticipate a mudslide of Biden opposition, Sherrill will have to prove her congressional staying power. If nothing else, the redistricting process proved she has powerful allies already working on her behalf. If CD-7 and CD-11 contain the most obvious natural points of political intrigue, the shifts of one district impacting the other – CD5 and CD3 occupy distinct regional worlds.



The biggest winner of the 2021 redistricting process, U.S. Rep. Andy Kim shook himself free of Republican behemoth Ocean to absorb greater segments of Mercer and Monmouth where presumably he can better position himself to withstand a version of the red wave that toppled Sweeney. U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer also armed up, with his ready access to a massive campaign war chest (\$11 million cash-on-hand). That said, he could find himself up against strong general election opposition and progressives sitting on their hands as punishment for his having spearheaded the separation of Biden's agenda into pieces (one of which passed; the other, the more progressive bill, didn't).

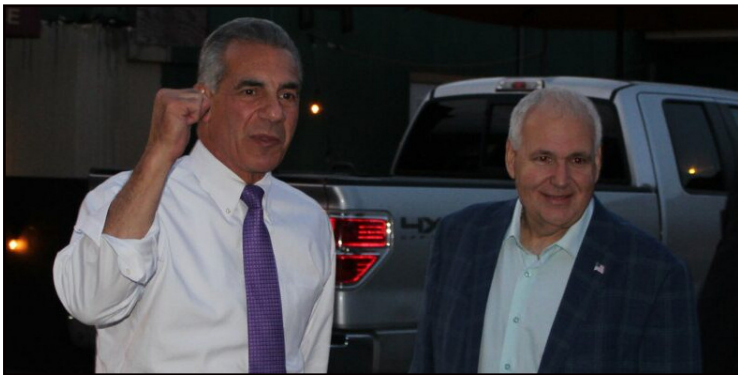




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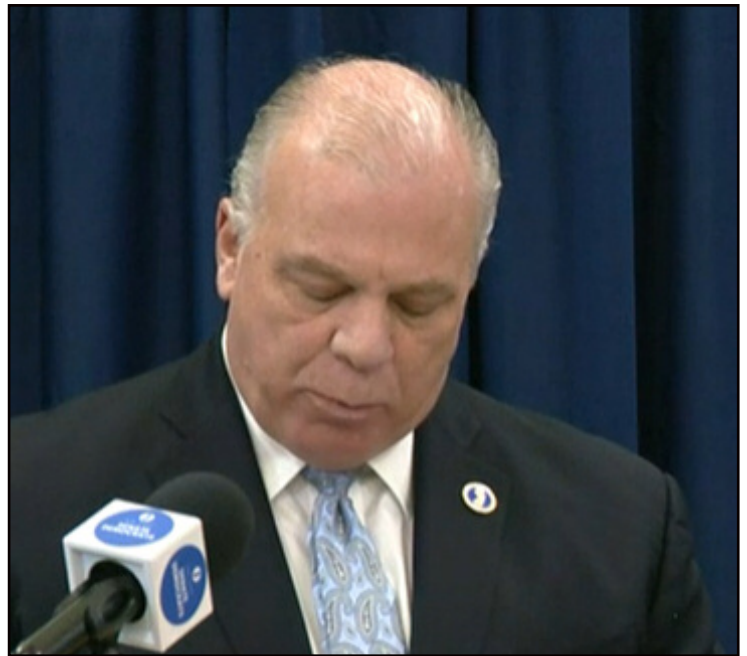
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Finally, the tremendous uphill test for Malinowski and those Democratic Party allies who likewise occupy (to a lesser extent) competitive districts, will be to convince – with the pendulum swinging back against them hard – a skeptical public about the efficacies of Biden’s Agenda, mostly expressed in his \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law, which includes a Gateway Tunnel allocation to the region’s core, axed a decade ago by then Republican Governor Chris Christie. Perhaps anticipating the upswell of unrest, Biden made his closing pitch for the infrastructure bill not in battleground Ohio, but here, in New Jersey, just prior to Republican Jack Ciattarelli coming within three points of upsetting Democrat Murphy.



Even in fortified districts, incumbent Democratic congresspeople had to feel the shifting tides, epitomized perhaps in the southern part of the state that turned redder with Murphy and Trump and finally turned-out Senate President Sweeney (D-3) in 2021, and percolated in threatening fashion up north too, in Bergen and Passaic, where Republicans gained a commissioner on Ciattarelli’s coattails. Everything reverberated, and Democratic lawmakers knew the Republican nearly ousted Murphy last year not merely on the accelerating flubs of the Biden Administration, but because New Jerseyans chafed beneath their COVID masks, or defiantly without them.

Already in campaign mode as he headed for the senate exits, Kean said he would vote against legislation (S-4313) that would extend Governor Murphy’s emergency powers for another 45 days. “Although the bill has reduced the 90-day extension to a 45-day extension, every extra day the Governor’s emergency powers are in place is one day too long for New Jersey,” griped the Republican congressional candidate.



Vanquished South Jersey Democrat Sweeney, his bags also packed but repeatedly asserting his continuing interest in politics, refused to move the resolution. “We’ll see,” teased Sweeney’s successor, incoming senate President Nick Scutari (D-22), on the ever-ugly subject of a student mask mandate.

We will, as the Governor announced he would extend mask mandates regardless of what the Legislature decides on the executive order extension bill, incurring instantaneous GOP ire, and an intensification of an Election Year staple – at least these last two years, further trembling the landscape, or so hopes Kean and his insurgent allies.

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Jones?

Never jammed up like Torres and Mendez, he nonetheless had hobbled to the end of a single term in office and now sought his own form of redemption.

For his part, Sayegh could perhaps take a certain measure of mischievous delight in watching his rivals and ex-rivals segmenting the field and augmenting his own reelection chances. Still, Paterson's unpredictability and May election date failed to give the staunch Phil Murphy Democrat the advantage of a line. Sayegh would have to rely not just on those foes eliminating one another but on his own alliance building. COVID had hit Paterson hard, and the election would decide if the mayor's Murphy-infused economic incubator of medical marijuana as a jobs and revenue generator would provide the always engaged Sayegh with sufficient argument to regain the mayoralty.


Speaking of Murphy, his narrow 2021 reelection and the recent double implosions of Cory Booker and Chris Christie notwithstanding, allies still maintained the belief that he should be president. Detonating ground beneath the sitting President Biden and self-destruction of New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (once chatted about as Biden's most likely successor) motivated Murphy acolytes to see a presidential pathway for their man.

They envisioned "Harris-Murphy" or "Michelle Obama-Murphy."

They would task themselves with making him look substantive and grounded while chasing the Booker-Christie-Bill Bradley national dream amid the particularly swamp-like atmospherics of New Jersey.

Murphy's ambition perhaps made it easier for operatives to keep him out of Bayonne, scene of the reelection efforts of Mayor Jimmy Davis, who faces a credible challenger in Councilwoman Sharon Ashe-Nadrowski. The Governor inserting himself into a brutal Bayonne family spat while attempting to sprout legitimate national sized wings could entangle him with damnable results.



A man with a beard and a woman are smiling and looking towards the camera. They are outdoors, with a body of water and trees in the background. The man is wearing a maroon polo shirt, and the woman is wearing a light blue button-down shirt.

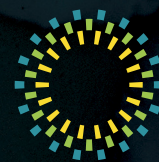
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CONFESSSIONAL CONTEXT

Paterson as a laboratory for second chances reanimated the personalities of Jose “Joey” Torres, Alex Mendez and Jeff Jones, if not their actual political fortunes. If the Middle Ages presented confession as a method of rehabilitation, modern times at its most corroded offers campaigns and elections as a secular conveyance of spiritual renewal. All three men nursed a grievance with the sitting mayor, Andre Sayegh. Torres and Mendez in particular blamed Sayegh for their own lapses, the former having done time on corruption charges and the latter awaiting a trial date for election fraud, both of them apparently intent on at least seeing Sayegh meet his own

Judgment Day. An attorney general’s ruling that the disgraced Torres couldn’t legally occupy the mayoralty even if he deposed Sayegh apparently failed to dissuade the former mayor from nursing a Count of Monte Cristo-like commitment to vengeance. Sayegh supposedly called the news station that exposed Torres’ deployment of state workers for personal purposes, and so somehow Sayegh would be made to squirm. Having forced his way back into City Hall by beating incumbent Bill McKoy, 3rd Ward Councilman Mendez also had convinced himself that the fraud charges against him had their origin in Sayegh Machiavellianism, not justified law enforcement.

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In the ultimate sword and sandal gladiatorial contest for nothing more than the bragging rights of Bayonne, the mayoral election promised its own purity of local purpose devoid of external implications, with the possible exception of Senator Menendez, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, whose fancy, in between the rigors of keeping up China and Russia, included the politics of old home county Hudson.

But the upwardly mobile Democratic Governor would not be able to escape the decisions tied to COVID, as new variants, like Omicron sprouted, hospital emergency rooms overcrowded, and ambulance squads everywhere nursed untold cases of burnout. At risk of creating new variants of political doom for Democrats given what happened

last year, the front office, mask mandate notwithstanding, early in the year looked ready to mostly put its head down and bulldoze through the winter with as little disruption as possible. It helped, of course, that Omicron didn't seem to be killing as many people as the first 2020 waves of COVID.

If they could just isolate the deepening red to southward, they could triage the rest, maybe lose Malinowski but not sacrifice the Governor's national shot, and keep around the rest of the delegation for future intrigues, or so said the January front office-legislative leadership body language. Murphy maintained close political ties to Middlesex, and Middlesex helped make Scutari, and if they could keep crouched together out of the line of fire in a federal election year and Biden



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"My story begins with me being a 19 year old woman dating my first and only boyfriend. My older sister knew we would be sexually active. So she recommended Planned Parenthood considering we didn't have insurance. Me and my boyfriend do plan on getting married and starting a family eventually. We want to enjoy married life without kids for a while and **Planned Parenthood gives me that choice by providing birth control for an affordable price.** I wouldn't go anywhere else. They have excellent staff who are always there if I have any questions or concerns." - Eryn

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"I rely on Planned Parenthood for regular STD testing. **It's important for me to be responsible about my sexual health and know that I'm keeping myself and my partners safe.**" - Erin



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didn't totally tank – or maybe he already had – they could crawl through the year relatively untainted. Republicans would try to tether Democrats to Murphy's executive decisions. "Many states have left school mask mandates behind with no apparent, consistent, negative health impact," said state Senator Declan O'Scanlon (R-13). "Paired with the science surrounding the lower transmission risk to children, this should be all we need to see to justify leaving mask mandates in the hands of local school boards and parents.

"Finally, it seems Democrats in the legislature have let the Governor know they aren't going to be pushed around. Especially considering his statements today. Hopefully, this will be a sign of more backbone to come," he added.

The debate – crosscut again by the persistence of the plague – hardly carried even the suggestion of those heroic gestures of that age the ideas we watered down derived from, and yet somehow – amid bellicose rants in the statehouse stairwells about freedom and an agenda disconnected from democracy – masked or mask-less we collectively lumbered.

We come from the Enlightenment, aye, or so our history instructs, in a place so far removed from the curiosity and dynamism of Ben Franklin and ingenuity of Alexander Hamilton, the electricity and genius of those minds supplanted by the corrosion of title and station, the substitution of cults of personality for education, the replacement of an intellectual revolution with anarchy. In the coming year we will likely fail to find evidence of our American heritage on a level as engaged as those Enlightenment interpreters who more than just nibbled at the edges of New Jersey, Franklin and Hamilton, but the impacts of the vaccine showed an enduring species' will to think itself out of a crisis,

even amid Rand Paul rantings. The system itself still contains embedded ideas of a rigor realized by a generation, and will perish unless we continually hearken, in this case perhaps best framed – even at its worst – by – even now – a sacred ritual called a coming election season.



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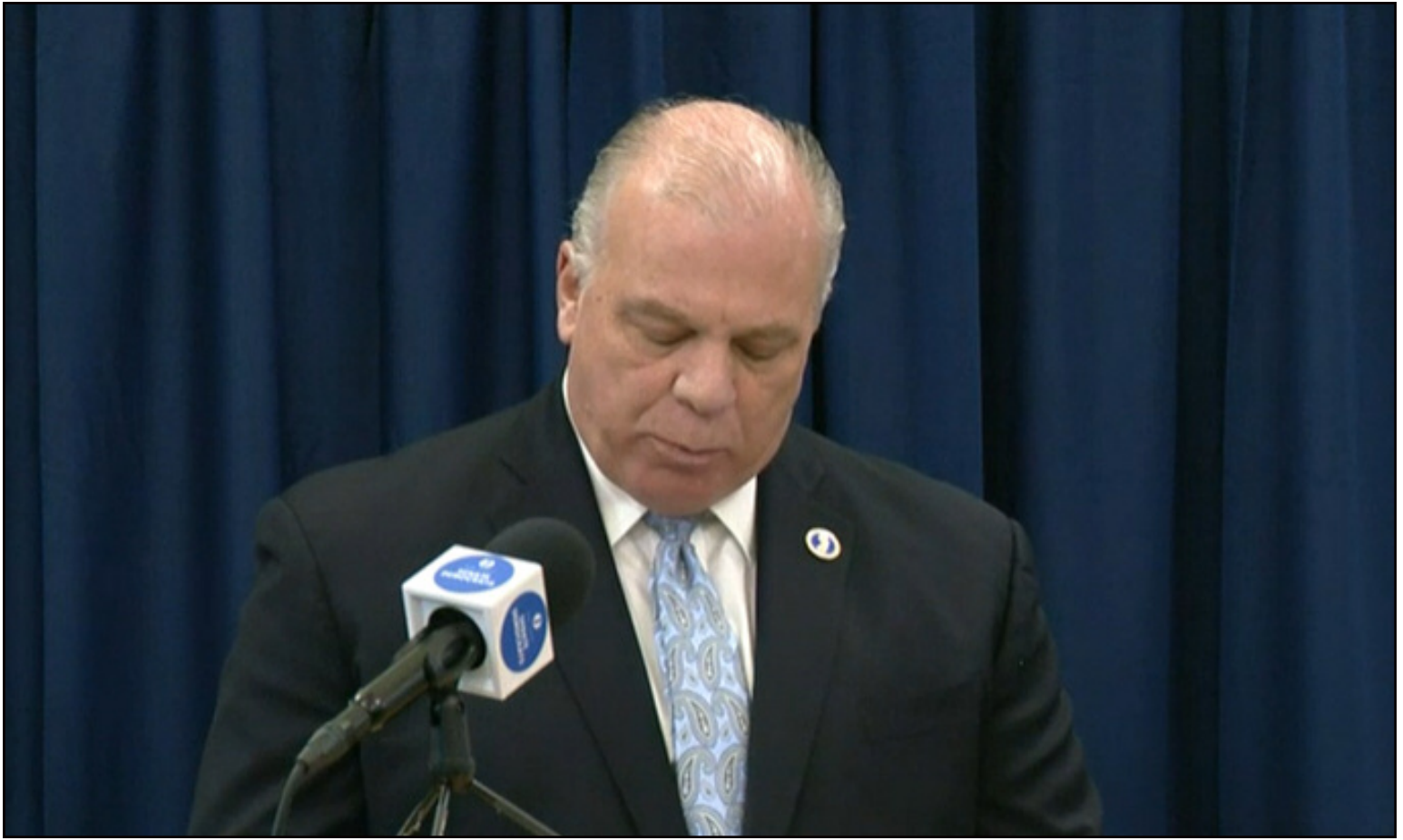
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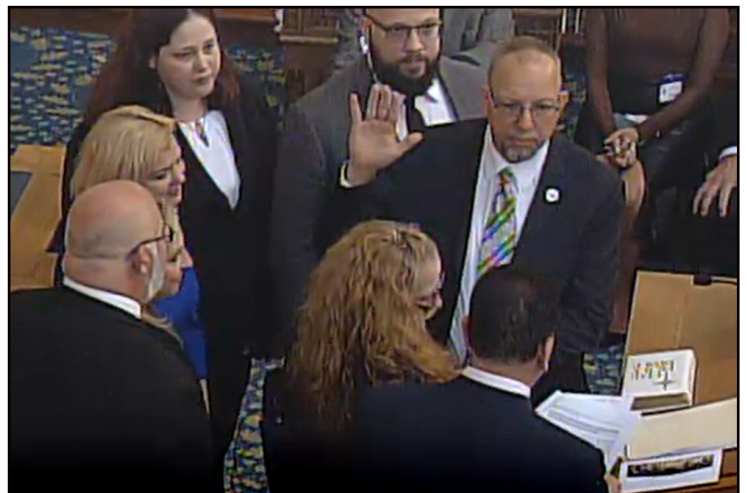
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ORGANIZATION REORGANIZATION

The absence of Steve Sweeney – the long-serving state senate president – provided the most obvious change when the senate reorganized this month. He never liked Governor Phil Murphy, and his staff and allies took no end of institutional delight running circles around the front office, or so they said. Goldman Sachs-world-oriented Murphy survived politically in Trenton by deepening his ties to Middlesex County, home of the Woodbridge-based Speaker Craig Coughlin (D-19), which ultimately paid off for him as Sweeney – swelled with the vigor of Trenton political machinery – failed to find himself in the red meat waters of South Jersey in time to prevent a general

election devouring by a nonunion Trump-fan truck driver named Ed Durr.



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His successor, Senator Nick Scutari (D-22) of Linden, shared Sweeney's enthusiasm for cloakroom mechanics and, by all appearances, possessed a voracious work ethic. But while Sweeney presented himself on the throne of the senate presidency as the apotheosis of southern regional power, Scutari came to the dance by way of Middlesex (and, critically, state senator Nick Sacco, long a Scutari fan) and the South – trying desperately to get to the front of the parade and failing – making Scutari less the portent of a single political fortress and more an adjustment by a machine undergoing some less than seismic changes.

Most immediately, the Building Trades (an organization of labor groups numbering 150,000 members statewide) lacked a brother tradesman (Sweeney was a lifelong ironworker) in the senate presidency, just as South Jersey, for ten years concentrating power in its corner of the state, could no longer claim supremacy.



How Middlesex and Murphy (or George Helmy, Murphy's COS) would go about handling that shift would prove one of the more interesting developments of 2022, for if Murphy still transmitted a hunger for the presidency (or in any event a visibly rushed appearance on his home turf of New Jersey), Coughlin – or at least

his Middlesex-musclebound backers – threw off a gubernatorial vibe. Chosen perhaps because of a lack of political power behind him, to keep him nullified in the service of other people's ambitions, Scutari the high school working class wrestler made good, hardly looked like someone ready to lie down and let other people rise around him.

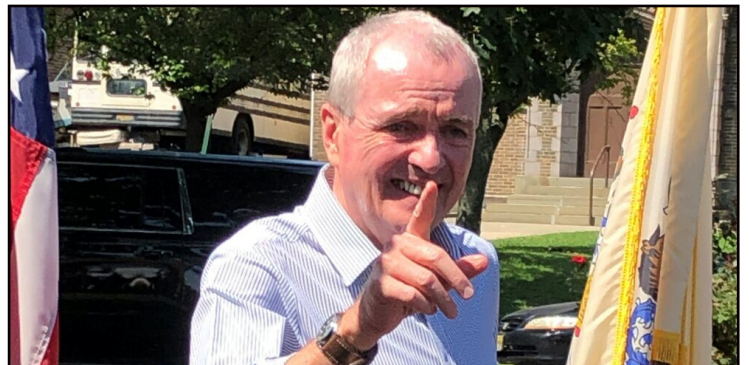
The South was still there – four senators strong – and the north still sufficiently cut up to pose alternatives for Scutari to zigzag away from Middlesex if the Coughlin-Murphy cohesion found itself tested by the fracturing of the principals' respective ambitions.

Even as he left, Sweeney threw a contemptuous loose elbow at Murphy's front office, refusing to post a resolution extending the Governor's pandemic-related emergency powers. "Disrespectful," he grumbled.

Murphy took it in stride.

The Governor's lack of curiosity about the swamplier aspects of New Jersey politics insulated him from the furies that infected his score-keeping rivals, who couldn't let go of the emotions the fueled their awareness of political detail.

In any case, he had a crisis to manage.



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Amid deepening signs of Omicron disaster and delivering remarks from an empty, COVID-19-proof theater, Murphy, with Sweeney steaming for the exits, reinstated a Public Health Emergency, “effective immediately,” in order to ensure that the state is able to respond to the continued threat of COVID-19 and the rapidly spreading variant. If Sweeney’s constituents in deep red CD-3 had chafed under their masks and made Democrats pay by toppling the senate president, Murphy would doggedly move ahead anyway with a 21st Century response, the critics be damned. Or so it appeared. Executive Order No. 280 declares a Public Health Emergency and restates the existing State of Emergency across all 21 counties in New Jersey, allowing state agencies and departments to utilize state resources to assist the State’s healthcare system and affected communities responding to and recovering from COVID-19 cases. Executive Order No. 281 continues Executive Orders Nos. 111, 112, and 207, allows Executive Orders Nos. 251, 252, 253, 264, and 271 to remain in effect, and extends various regulatory actions taken by the departments in response to COVID-19.

“COVID-19 remains a significant threat to our state and we must commit every resource available to beating back the wave caused by the Omicron variant,” said Governor Murphy. “While we hope to return to a state of normalcy as soon as possible, the step I am taking today is a commonsense measure that will protect the safety and well-being of all New Jersey residents while allowing state government to respond to the continuing threat that COVID-19 poses to our daily lives.”

The “war-footing” described by the Governor, however, lacks the teeth of government mandating at the virus’ 2020 height, namely a lockdown,

cleverly (or so his allies believed) allowing Murphy essentially to have it both ways: arms wrapped around a health emergency – but draped loosely – with no requirements that would impede the economy, create a GOP stampede, and put a resentful Coughlin in a political pickle.

Republicans, of course, grabbed hold of Sweeney’s 11th hour diss of the Governor to reanimate a favorite theme. “Even New Jersey Democrats are starting to read the writing on the wall: Lame duck Phil Murphy and his extreme agenda are toxic. His reach for more power was struck down just like Democrats’ failed agenda will be this fall at the ballot box,” crowed RNC Spokesperson Rachel Lee.



In a play at unity in the aftermath of Sweeney, Scutari globed on to a tepid statement with Coughlin meant to serve as a temporary, time-buying fire blanket. “As the pandemic continues to result in record-high cases and hospitalization levels, we hope to work together to do all we can to fight the spread of COVID-19. We will consider every option available to protect our communities and support our first responders, frontline workers, and public services.”



Meanwhile, GOP flamethrowers kicked into gear with a vengeance.

“While Governor Murphy always talks about moving New Jersey ‘forward,’ he’s taking a giant leap backward by reinstating a new public health emergency,” complained senator Tony Bucco (R-25). “Despite what the governor has said, his action was not taken ‘in consultation with the Legislature.’ His own party said they weren’t consulted, and neither were Republicans. In fact,

the Legislature chose to not extend his emergency powers when given the opportunity yesterday. Governor Murphy’s decision both circumvents legislative oversight and breaks his deal with his own party’s leadership. We need to give people hope that life is returning to normal, not returning to one man’s rule by executive order.”

“Governor Murphy’s declaration of a new ‘Public Health Emergency’ in defiance of the Legislature demonstrates exactly why we must assert ourselves



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as a co-equal branch of government and limit his emergency powers,” said state Senator Mike Doherty (R-23). “We’re supposed to have a governor with limited authority under our New Jersey Constitution, but Murphy has been empowered by the Legislature’s inaction to rule like a king.”



Senator Steve Oroho (R-24) kept it intentionally vague and “public interest” – focused.

“First and foremost, Senate Republicans will focus on affordability and making the Garden State a place where young adults, families, and seniors can afford to live. After four years of inaction, we’re going to hold Governor Murphy’s feet to the fire now that he says he’s finally ready to listen to New Jerseyans and work on cost-of-living concerns.

“We also must focus on returning New Jersey back to normal now that it’s clear that COVID-19 isn’t going away. We cannot allow the Executive Branch to continue ignoring the New Jersey Constitution and circumventing the Legislature’s role as a co-equal branch of government. With a disease that is becoming endemic, we must return to the regular legislative process for managing any necessary policy changes. We will work with our colleagues on the other side of the aisle to put an end to government by executive order.”

Even if Murphy refrained from deeper, lockdown-era orders, state Senator Declan O’Scanlon (R-13) and his colleagues signaled their willingness to oppose any mandates, including those favored by government to protect children in schools by requiring students to wear masks. They would keep the pressure on, no doubt, and while Scutari’s and Coughlin’s non-statement statements showed their early unwillingness to die on a Murphy hill, as they showed an awareness of the potential for the public to go over to the Republicans in time for another election, as they almost did statewide in 2021, they all – Murphy, Coughlin and Scutari – seemed content for the moment not to do anything too drastic.

Still, the virus threatened to sink the healthcare system, which made the state teeter at the edge of having to do much more, for just as nursing home staffing levels reached critical lows amid the pandemic, “the Assembly leadership failed to post a bill for a floor vote on the last day of the legislative session that would have prevented healthcare employers from cutting staff and slashing wages and benefits during acquisitions,” according to 1199SEIU. S-4048/A-6015, passed in the Senate but died in the Assembly.

“It is inexcusable for our Assembly leadership to kill a bill on the last day of the legislative session that is urgently needed to protect our state’s healthcare workforce in a time of great need,” said Leilani Montes, a Vice President at 1199SEIU. “The turmoil that Complete Care Management and other private equity actors are causing within the nursing home industry is making a dire staffing situation even worse. We are grateful for the leadership of Sen. Joe Vitale, Asm. Wayne DeAngelo, and others who have championed this legislation,

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and we urge passage of the bill in this new session without delay.”

A fight brewed, and as usual, it had implications on all sides, as Murphy tried to strike a balancing act with priorities tilted toward Middlesex and Scutari – newly arrived with a speech heavy on working class roots – for the moment kept himself stuck to Coughlin, while – surrounded by a cast of machine-honed allies of different ethnic backgrounds to distract from the presence of another white male in power for supposedly background-sensitive Democrats, who defeated state Senator Nia Gill (D-34) for the throne – the new senate president pragmatically hailed diversity.



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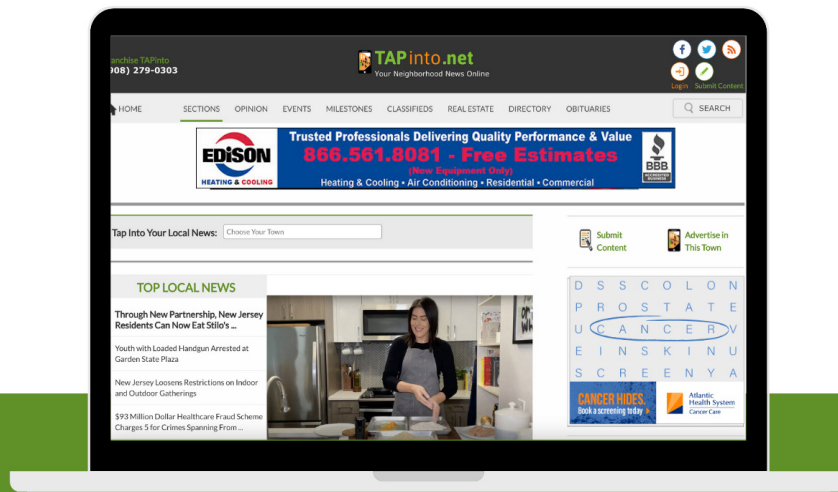


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'ALL WE DO IS BUILD' BUT HOW WILL THEY REBUILD?

The stunning 2021 fall of Steve Sweeney represented more than a regional shift of political power, as the former senate president's allies tried to project a "What, us worried?" vibe while their enemies used the perennially suspended prez's loss as an excuse to drag the effigy of South Jersey power broker George Norcross around the fortress walls.

In addition to fulfilling the role of Gloucester County prince amid the looming shadows of a boss bigger even than his own throne, Sweeney carried the banner of Building Trades labor with him in the halls of labor, always a proud – and politically potent – association for the ironworker by trade.

Perhaps sensing the collapse of his empire and trying to reassert a core message in the coming conflagration, or just constantly alert to the fracturing faux pas of his own party, Sweeney at the annual Building Trades Conference staged just prior to his fateful election, echoed a convention theme expressed by President William Mullen.

"All we do is build," said Sweeney.

It was an interesting assertion, chosen carefully as the event's theme and more than dutifully gonged by the senate president, made even more fascinating by the powerful politician's coming denouement.

“However beautiful the strategy, you should
occasionally look at the results.”
-Winston Churchill

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Mullen at the conference had taken specific pains to caution members about aligning themselves with various causes, and former Chris Christie Labor Commissioner Hal Wirths – in a pretty well-received speech – had bemoaned diversity for its own sake, remarks that suggested trepidation around a contemporary progressive Democrat like incumbent Democratic Governor Phil Murphy.



Theatrical design, of course, governed the bifurcation of Sweeney and Murphy into two days of the conference, a wholly premeditated move, meant to construct a show of disunity even though nearly everyone at the podium hailed the virtue of unity.

Sweeney's ticket-mate Assemblyman John Burzichelli (D-3) got the memo.

But it was lived behavior and belief more than message rehearsal.

They were conservative Democrats, after all.

Burzichelli, in fact, made sure to declare himself “a Kennedy Democrat”. In a pointed speech, the assemblyman from Paulsboro made his case for Democrats in state government, on the strength

of their having secured higher wages for workers in New Jersey.

But as non-college whites went in droves to Republicans in the Trump era, too much distance still occupied the space between Sweeney and his mates and someone like Murphy, a self-styled Democrat who in the closing days of his own too-tight reelection campaign could call on Bernie Sanders to stand with him onstage.

They would occupy a ticket together, Sweeney and Murphy - not stand in the same room – not this room, not there, in Atlantic City.

The depth of disaffection had a specific context going back to the 2017 election, when the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) waged an historic, multi-million-dollar campaign to get rid of Sweeney, as punishment for his having partnered with Christie to overhaul public sector labor. If labor itself suffered from deep division at its core between public sector and private sector interests, Murphy conveniently occupied the role of chief NJEA enabler, who had tacitly given the nod for the public sector outfit to politically behead Sweeney.

The fact that Murphy wanted to win reelection amid public outrage over his COVID mandates impacted the Building Trades' rank and file with a particular vengeance.

Sweeney knew that, and it compounded his dual sense of agony and contempt.

Accepting a resolution by his fellow Building Trades members backing his reelection and his reinstitution to the senate presidency of the

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New Jersey Legislature, the senate president went to the dais in the Hard Rock under a hail of brass from an accompanying band.

He assumed the command position in the ballroom at the 116th annual Building Trades Council Convention, which represents 150,000 strong across the state. He took the occasion to remind his audience to never forget their origins as labor organization people.

He also made a pointed entreaty. “Don’t take for granted that I’m always going to be the senate president and Democrats are always going to be in charge,” Sweeney said. “Your job is to advance the ball farther.”

No one at the time muttered very fervently about

any kind of significant challenge to Sweeney’s occupancy of the senate throne, which went back to 2010, when then-Governor Chris Christie also assumed the oath of office.

No one could have seen a nonunion truck driver idling in the wings.

If the room in the Hard Rock represented the bedrock of his organizational power, the South Jersey Democratic Party lawmaker also spent years cementing his caucus strength with a personal touch, the effectiveness of someone with an uncanny knack for herding cats, and labor-centered accomplishments. Sweeney was so adept at the inside game that he had even more than made peace with the NJEA by engineering their most coveted legislative measure: Chapter 78 reform.



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Still, for him, it started there, in that private sector labor comfort zone, among those brother union men and women.

“In 1991, it was just Joe Egan and myself, I think [from the Building Trades in the Legislature],” Sweeney recalled. “We were thrilled when we got prevailing wage for hospital construction. *For hospital construction!* We’ve got prevailing wage for everything now.

“I’m the senate president,” he added. “Great. I’m an union ironworker first.”

He challenged anyone to find a stronger Building Trades council in the country.

“Thank you,” Sweeney said. “Do not forget who we are and what we do and all we do is build.”

With a particular bitter pride, the Building Trades members roared in unison when someone mentioned the “scattering of public employee labor organizations [opposed to Sweeney] and the outrageous [2017] campaign waged unsuccessfully against him,” as Sweeney stormed to an 18% margin of victory, before reestablishing working relations – and even doing work for – the same New Jersey Education Association that four years ago spent millions trying to run him out of town.

It came down in spectacularly catastrophic fashion when Edward Durr defeated Sweeney less than a month later, an election outcome that demonstrated a loss of South Jersey’s influence within the Democratic Party, but also deprived a brother Building Trades’ laborer of the throne of power, giving public sector labor, in fact, led by the NJEA, an upper-hand in the war under the war, arguably

making Republican Senate Minority Leader Steve Oroho (R-24) the most obvious Building Trades-priority-friendly among legislative leaders. He wasn’t of the trades, and he wasn’t a Democrat, but he was sympathetic, and with public sector labor leaning on new Senate President Nick Scutari (D-22), how Building Trades would cope without Sweeney, especially given the always hovering threat of total bifurcation of public and private sector unions - became one of the most salient political questions of the coming year.



Could they drive a message of building New Jersey to a party base tired of the so-called sacrifices of white males who hadn’t been sufficiently perceptive to see South Jersey sneaking up behind their senate president, to progressives skeptical of the real results of Sweeney’s and Building Trades’ leadership to the lives of the people of Camden, for example, their rank-and-file members even willing to empower a nonunion guy ahead of their own hard-fought ironworker king?

Could they rebuild, and if so, what adjustments or alterations would they make to re-empower the cause, or was Sweeney – ten years the senate president – the political apex of their movement and his fall a sign of other painful and even tragic losses to come?



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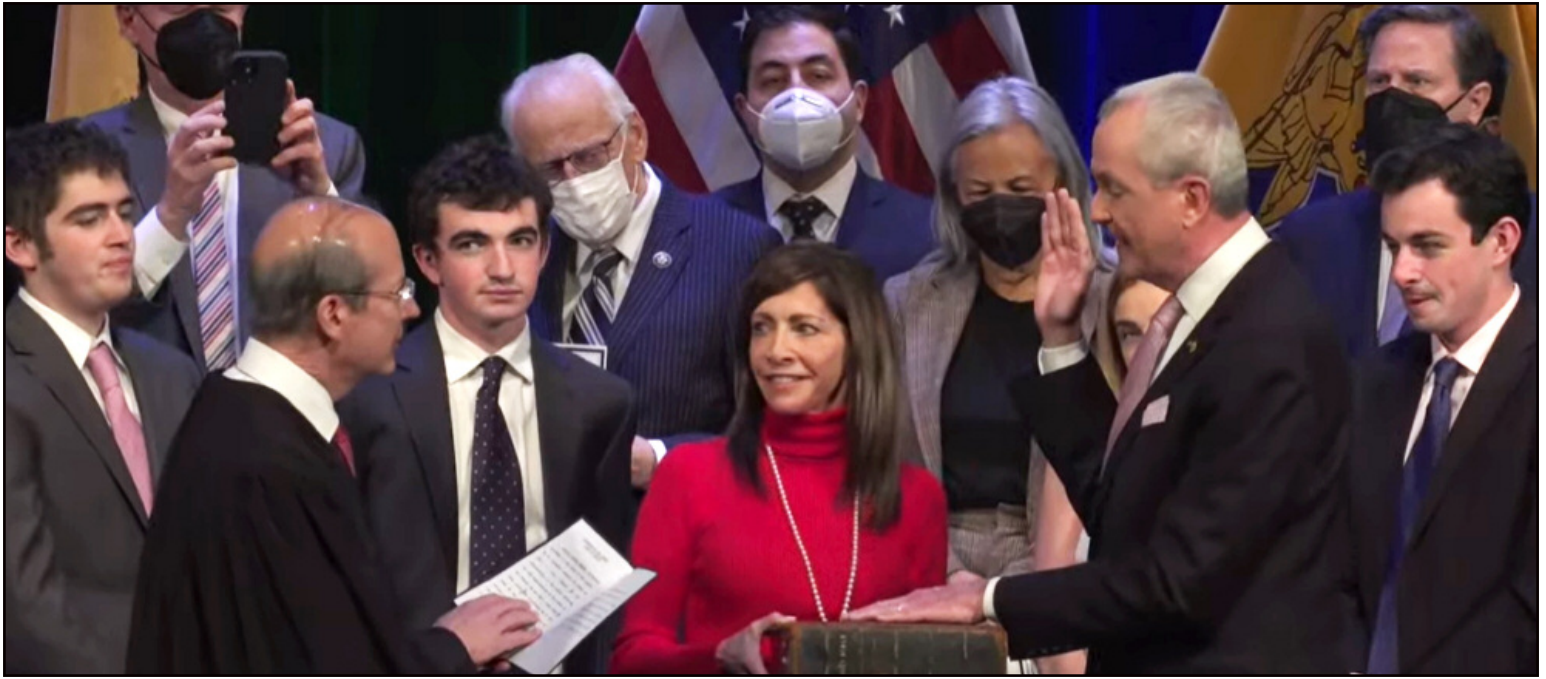
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MURPHY, CHRISTIE, THE COUNTRY, AND NEW JERSEY

Nothing quite screams national power like the second banana atmospherics of New Jersey, which convinces nearly every officeholder of the state's highest office that the condition of being squeezed into the position of tortured stepchild between New York and Pennsylvania makes the presidency all but inevitable.

Maybe that's why former Governor Chris Christie showed up at Governor Phil Murphy's second inaugural, to remind the crowd that he too has not given up on the White House, even as the sitting governor and his family revved visions of their own ascendancy.

What the country needs, Murphy said, is more New Jersey; the "Opportunity State," he called it in his speech. It seemed as good an opportunity

as any to bury the state's official moniker, the "Garden State," considering the two parties' actual successful ambitions to pave the place over.

Or at least plant the seed for future change.

"So, yes, we are still proudly the Garden State," Murphy intoned in the War Memorial. "But our task is building a New Jersey that is also the Opportunity State. An opportunity state that works from the middle out and the bottom up. And an opportunity state that doesn't just let current generations – us and our children – prosper, but ensures that those who will follow – our children's children – can prosper even more."

He dove headlong into self-mythology, his own Lincoln in a log cabin storyline updated for a



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COVID-embattled audience. “My brother, my two sisters, and I were raised, as many have heard me say, ‘middle class on a good day.’ In reality, we were working poor.”

As long as he was changing the state’s nickname for political purposes, he might as well revisit and rework his own past, the one about the kid who worked in a lunch counter pearl diving to pay his way through college. From the nether reaches of the stage, Christie must have been trying to figure out if he needed to tweak his own presidential narrative: the one about the tough working-class kid from Newark driven.

“Only one of our parents held a high-school diploma,” Murphy said. “What they earned – my mother from her secretarial job, my father from the many jobs he held – they put right back into our household. But what they gave us – an abiding faith, a love of country, a strong set of values – was worth far more.”

A love of country.

The fact that he grew up in Massachusetts, not Newark, made it easier here in second term inaugural circumstances to pivot to presidential politics without actually saying as much.

He stayed on course.

“Our national political discourse is in shambles. I can fully understand why some fear the American Dream is dying, and out of reach. But, I will not be among them. As I said when I proudly, yet humbly, accepted my re-election, if you want to know what the future looks like, if you want to understand what America can be, come to New Jersey. If you want to see what is right with America, look to New Jersey. As my Congressional colleagues who stand on the right side of history would agree, where Washington has bogged down, we have moved forward. ... Where Washington has too often done too little, we have worked together to



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achieve so much. ...Where some in Washington pander to the powerful and the wealthiest, we are lifting up working families and strengthening the middle class while ensuring those at the top do and pay their fair share. ...Where some in Washington brag about holding back progress, we put our heads down and are doing the hard work. Where some in Washington cling to the Big Lie, we believe in a bigger truth and we reach for big dreams.”

He and Christie both, each in his own way.

After having enabled Trump in the 2016 Republican Primary in the aftermath of his own trainwreck of a presidential candidacy and come down with COVID after a debate prep session with the Republican President, Christie rebore himself as a fierce truth teller, blaming his “friend’s – because they are still friends – rhetoric about stolen elections for the January 6th 2021 coup.

Murphy packaged himself as that New Jersey alternative for the presidency who didn’t have to worry about the encumbrance of past chumminess with Trump.

“Shouting about how much you love your country is no substitute for showing how you love our country,” Murphy said. “Voting is a patriotic act. Opening doors of opportunity for those who have been kept out is a patriotic act. Standing for fairness is a patriotic act. Ensuring good government is a patriotic act. Let’s make New Jersey the proof that the ongoing American Experiment is not about to come to an end. After all, to be an American is a privilege – to be a New Jerseyan is an honor. In December 1776, it was in New Jersey where the American Revolution turned, and where the

American Spirit was renewed. Now, in January 2022, let us make New Jersey the place where the direction of our nation is righted, where the spirit of our nation is restored, and where our common destiny as Americans – regardless of our political party or persuasion – is reaffirmed.”

At the very least, we knew the place would serve as the favorite cash cow for Democrats actually positioned to ensnare the presidency, and former Christie and Trump staffers safe in the assumption that their past bridge and election transgressions would not be held against them in an perpetually incorrigible swamp of dreams.

