

Experts: Christie's moment is now

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February 16, 2011 09:03 PM EST

With just one impressive speech, Chris Christie put three full days of CPAC speakers to shame.

That's the bottom line from a bipartisan panel of experts, who watched the New Jersey governor's address on Wednesday at the American Enterprise Institute for POLITICO – and drew a sharp contrast between Christie and the cattle call of potential GOP hopefuls at the just-concluded conservative gathering.

“He has an electricity around him wholly absent around other candidates,” said Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. “Even when they put on their best possible speech at CPAC, they still put people to sleep. Like or dislike Chris Christie, you could not fall asleep during that speech.”

The three-day CPAC gathering in DC, which ended Saturday, featured speeches by many potential 2012 contenders, including Mitt Romney, Mitch Daniels, Tim Pawlenty, Haley Barbour, Rick Santorum, and Donald Trump, among others.

Just the mention of Christie's name at CPAC – which he didn't attend – drew wild cheers, and after seeing him in action on Wednesday the group political consultants and academics told POLITICO that it's easy to see why.

“He hit precisely the right notes people are looking for,” Democratic strategist Jamal Simmons said of the Republican, citing the governor's focus on getting the states and nation's fiscal house in order.

“It was a complete tour de force,” said GOP strategist Chris Henick. “We're not seeing too many reformers right now and he sure fits the bill as classic reformer.”

Christie stressed that he wouldn't run for president in 2012 and the experts said they take him at his word. But it didn't stop them from speculating that he still could be swept into a higher office, with Sabato noting that if picked as vice president on the 2012 ticket, Christie would only have to spend two months on the campaign trail.

“If he were just a governor without national aspirations, wouldn't it make sense to talk about state-specific policies that are common in many states and contextualize it with the United States budget?” said Brigid Harrison, a political science professor at Montclair State University in New Jersey. “What he was doing was drawing parallels between his leadership and the president's leadership.”

Ruth Mandel, director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, said this era of politics is perfect for a fighter like Christie.

“It's a moment that works with his leadership here in New Jersey and perhaps nationally,” Mandel said.

“We don't know what the world looks like in 2016 and 2024, if a tough-talking hard-driving guy from New Jersey will have national appeal. It is possible this is his moment and he'll let it go by.”

If anything his willingness to admit he wasn't ready was itself powerful, Henick said.

“Complete transparency comes across as really a strong leader,” he said. “I was very impressed.”

And all agreed he certainly appeared ready for the Oval Office, despite his protests to the contrary.

“He looked presidential in the kind of Hollywood sense,” Simmons said. “The ‘Bulworth,’ straight-talking politician. John Goodman on ‘The West Wing.’ Republican guy from the heartland. He looked that part but it’s a long way to go from there to the White House.”

Mandel noted that this was the first time she’d heard Christie dwell at length on the meaning of leadership.

“Again and again he said ‘that’s what a leader is,’” she said. “He hasn’t expounded on it before ... When he’s here in New Jersey he’s got to talk about the kitchen table issues every day.”

Mandel called his hour-long address “pure, authentic, genuine.”

Henick said he was impressed by Christie’s “willingness step out on the ice without worrying about falling through or not” – by taking on the powerful teachers’ unions and seeking to reform costly public employee pension programs.

“Today was about complete command, focus on the immediacy of our problems,” Henick said.

Harrison noticed the audience sat up and took notice of the “three boogey men” – Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid – that Christie said must be tackled in order to leave the country on better fiscal footing for future generations.

“The question is how does it wear over time?” Sabato said, adding that he didn’t hear enough specifics. “That will be question in New Jersey — they can take a lot more ‘pugnacious-ness’ than the country as a whole.”

Simmons echoed: “Maybe he comes out of this smelling like rose or maybe it’s a big debacle when New Jersey starts facing cuts he’s prescribing. We just don’t know yet.”