

THE TRENTON RULEBOOK

A Machiavellian Guide for the 21st Century

II. Playing Both Sides: How Just About Anyone Can Survive the Upcoming Election Turmoil

Three years ago – long before Governor McGreevey was taped by federal investigators uttering the alleged code word “Machiavelli” at a meeting arranged by fund-raiser David D’Amiano, who later pleaded guilty to corruption charges – our own “Machiavelli” offered 10 rules of advice to members of the incoming McGreevey Administration on how to survive Trenton’s tumultuous politics and back-biting bureaucracy. Published in New Jersey Reporter in January 2002, “The Trenton Rulebook” was one of our most popular, and often-quoted, works of political analysis – even if the writer did leave out the 11th Commandment: “Do not take Machiavelli’s name in vain if you think Chris Christie is listening.”

“Machiavelli,” a survivor of almost three decades in state government and politics, weathered the McGreevey years quite nicely, thank you, and plans to stick around for another four years, whether the new governor is Democrat or Republican, free-spending liberal or fiscal conservative, Norcross friend or Norcross foe. You can survive too -- if you follow the Machiavellian rules that follow.

Just as the moon influences the seas, New Jersey’s political calendar determines the ebb and flow of productive activity in Trenton.

Make no mistake about it, fortunes can rise or be swept away based on the outcome of election.

The worlds of lobbyists, legislators, political hacks, businesses, unions, and even career bureaucrats can be rocked by a nasty surprise in a gubernatorial election year

And this has already been a year of surprises: Embattled Governor McGreevey is resigning over a sex scandal – but not until mid-November. Incoming Governor/ Senate President Codey is trying to decide whether he wants to start running immediately for a full term. And every Republican gubernatorial hopeful is trying to figure

out just how hopeful he or she really is if New Jersey’s \$65 million U.S. Senator decides he wants to be a \$65 million Governor.

When a gubernatorial election looks the least bit tight, no one wants to take any chances. So this is a very uncertain time for anyone who plies a trade in Trenton. When it’s just too darn hard to know what will happen, it’s comforting to have some tried and tested rules to follow.

Being with the winner in November can make you a winner, too. And the beauty of it is that, with skill and flair, you can be with the winner no matter who it is.

The rules for survival in this critical time depend upon who you are and how your interests can be served by having a friend in the Governor’s



Machiavelli’s *The Prince* offered advice for the Borgias, who would have thrived in modern Trenton politics.

office. Pay to play is penny ante stuff compared to the stakes for people whose entire livelihood is derived from doing business the old-fashioned way – through connections.

So here are a few tips for creating the perception that you were with the winner all the way – unfalteringly, never a doubt in your mind, win or lose, you were there.

1 Avoid campaign events. If you somehow end up at one, never get stuck with a sticker. A fresh-faced campaign volunteer is usually at the door to slap a slogan on your lapel. Take it off immediately and pretend you are using the sticky back to remove stubborn lint. Then discreetly

put it in your pocket and pretend you never got one. As a mover and shaker, you might have a reason for being there, but you will never explain away the sticker.

2 Edit the framed photos in your office. Take down the political ones and put up some of your family. This can be explained to anyone who notices as a desire to spend more time with your kids. When politicians whose careers are in the crapper try to affect a graceful exit, they always say: “After 50 years of late night dinners, junkets without my wife, and thinking only of myself, I have decided I want to be with my family.” Right. There’s no reason the same silly story can’t work for you on a smaller scale.

3 If you left a previous administration, couldn’t find a job, and therefore started your own lobbying firm, get a similar loser from the other party to be your partner. This is about as bipartisan as it gets in Trenton, and then you’re covered no matter who wins. It doesn’t matter if your partner is a no-talent, as long as the political affiliation is correct. Or you may want to offer yourself as the no-talent to someone else

4 Speaking of lobbyists, the ones who survive from administration to administration are generally affable and liked by everyone. There are exceptions, of course, and many a lobbyist has seen the dark side of payback for getting too cozy with a particular governor. To avoid any such perception, get your clients to write checks to both candidates, and whisper to each side that you have arranged contributions to their guy. This way you avoid having to write a check yourself and having your name appear on any campaign finance reports. But

you’re there to take credit for the win.

5 If you’re a legislator, adopt the motto: “No bill shall leave committee before its time.” There are many reasons for a bill to stay in committee until after the election, the most important of which is that, if the incumbent governor loses, the controversial issues on his legislative agenda can die a quiet death. If the governor is re-elected, the bill can fly out of committee that very week as if it had finally been perfected enough for a vote.

6 The state bureaucracy offers by far the most opportunity to launch into a holding pattern. Many observers think the bureaucrats are always in a holding pattern, in that progress in government can be invisible to the naked eye. But there are subtle shades of difference. The skilled career bureaucrat knows thousands of ways to stall an undesirable project until the votes are in. Stalling is a piece of cake in an election year, for the political appointees are busier than ever overreacting to crises erupting daily from unfavorable press coverage. Any bureaucrat worth his salt can wait out a political hack.

7 This brings us to the poor political appointee who has worked so visibly for a guy who might lose the election that he, too, will have to wait four to eight years for a comeback. What to do? Begin by becoming disgruntled. Start mumbling to certain discreet acquaintances in the other party that you are becoming disillusioned. Things aren’t going right any more. The governor has become an idiot. No one around here knows what they’re doing. It’s time to reassess long-held political beliefs. Maybe taxes are a good idea, after all, and you might actually support so and so. This

maneuver works on the principle that, if the incumbent wins after all, deniability kicks in. Of course you never said that.

8 Don’t get quoted in the media. No matter what you say, it’s wrong in somebody’s eyes. And your carefully selected words are never remembered as you said them, even if the reporter gets it right. “It’s going to be close,” will be recalled as “He told the *Star-Ledger* we would lose.” Understanding the process by which one person’s selective memory can screw up your life is beyond most abilities of comprehension. Don’t try. Welcome to Trenton.

9 If you were too dumb to apply these principles before the election and are widely perceived as being with the loser, don’t make idle threats. One former legislator tried to keep his state job by threatening to run for mayor of his township. The Governor’s office said, “Go ahead, you’ll lose,” and fired him on the spot.

10 The final fall-back position is to go find something else to do. Teaching political science would be good, except you don’t really understand it. It’s best to cut the cord altogether and go back to whatever it was you were doing before you became over-paid. Eventually your mind will embellish the experiences you had in political life, and you’ll have some good stories. The shelf life of good political stories is short, however, because the new people keep getting younger and pretty soon no one knows who the hell you are talking about.

It would have been better to follow the rules that rule Trenton.