Leadership and Luck
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Inauguration Day brings to state government a new governor, a new administration, and, of course, new leadership. The new governor we already know something about, the new administration we are going to get to know—but what about the new leadership. What do we know about that?

Celebrated American historian Steven Ambrose spent much of his life studying contemporary American leaders, including Nixon and Eisenhower. And so you would expect him to know something about leadership. Ambrose himself, however, was reluctant to claim such knowledge.

"Because I write about these great men, I very often get asked, 'What's the secret of leadership.' And my only answer to that is 'I'm damned if I know, because they all have different ways.' But there's one great quality that all great men share, and that's luck. Napoleon was asked what qualities he was looking for in his generals, and he said, 'Just one—that they be lucky.'"

So, as we move into the early days of the Rendell administration, a crucial question may well be: how lucky is Ed Rendell?

Certainly if leadership does depend on luck, he's going to need a lot of it. More, for example than Tom Ridge, who was himself the luckiest of modern governors—with huge surpluses to spend each year, a compliant legislature dominated by his own party, and a healthy state economy.

As Rendell begins his tenure, Pennsylvania faces a wider spectrum of serious problems than at any other time since the 1970's.

Moreover, he is the first governor in modern times to face a legislature with both chambers firmly controlled by the opposition party.

Appropriately enough, perhaps, Rendell has the most activist agenda of any new governor since Milton Shapp in 1970. No newly elected governor in recent years has had more ideas, made more promises, or raised higher expectations.

One thing likely to help Rendell early on is a generally sophisticated public understanding about how fast things will change. In fact, not fast at all. Modern government has but three speeds—slow, slower and slowest. Anyone who deals with government knows that—and others learn it fast.

In particular, the Infamous First Hundred Days Myth—the notion that the first one hundred days accomplishments of a new administration are a valid measure of success—is all but buried. And well it should be.

Actually, the 100-days concept itself originates not from government accomplishments but from a military context: the 100 days Napoleon Bonaparte spent after his escape from Elba trying to regain control over his
empire. The American version of the 100 days myth comes from the earliest days of the New Deal period in the depths of the Great Depression. Then, there was a flurry of legislation passed by the Congress during the first one hundred days of the new Roosevelt administration.

But these were unprecedented and unique conditions. Since then, one is hard pressed to find instances where the 100-days concept has been a usable indicator of either leadership or legislative success.

Other than tamping down some expectations, there are a few other well-tested leadership principles Governor Rendell might use:

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL. When every thing is important to a political leader, in effect, nothing is really important. An overly ambitious agenda or an unfocused agenda is the classic mistake new governors make. And it's deadly. Gubernatorial power must be used for specific limited goals, and not dissipated. And it must clearly be the governor's own agenda that matters. When that agenda dovetails with that of individual legislators and or special interest groups--all well and good--but no governor can survive going to the legislative well repeatedly for goals not clearly identified as his priorities.

SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE. This is especially important in a new Democratic administration. The state has only one elected governor at a time. No successful administration can have 30 spokespersons--all-purporting to speak for the governor. Discipline is an essential component for control of the agenda, and a high price will be paid if not heeded--not least of all with the capitol press corp.

BE READY TO COMPROMISE. Rendell is a Democratic governor swimming in a sea of powerful Republicans--powerful Republicans with their own agenda. By necessity he will have to compromise with them, most especially those key leaders in the Pennsylvania General Assembly who will control the process. They will decide what committees get what bills, when bills get voted out of committees, and if and when bills get sent to the floor for final passage. The governor gets 100% of the blame when things go wrong--but he is going to have to share some of the glory when things go well.

KEEP YOUR PROMISES. The goals of the new administration must be related to promises made by the candidate. And a substantial number of those promises must be fulfilled. The electorate will remember them and those that they thought were important. It is no coincidence that successful governors are judged by those policy victories that redeem their campaign promises. Rendell--because he has made so many promises--may be held to an even higher standard than some other governors have been.

NEVER LET THEM SEE YOU SWEAT. Successful leaders always encounter obstacles and setbacks. But they also always leave no doubt about ultimate victory, and they never wallow in defeat or failure. Great leaders emanate optimism and good will. They leave no doubt that they have the ideas, the energy, and the creativity to solve problems--and they rally the citizenry to their cause. Good leaders know how and when to use public support effectively.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO MAKE SOME NEW FRIENDS OR TO LOSE SOME OLD ONES. Legislative success begins with coalitions formed around a policy agenda. Sometimes the various interest groups that support items on the agenda are not going to be old friends--and sometimes--old friends are not going to
support the new agenda. Churchill got it just about right with his famous formulation that: in politics there are
no permanent enemies, nor permanent friends. Only permanent interests. C'EST la guerre.

REMEMBER WHO BROUGHT YOU TO THE DANCE. Elected as a Democrat, Rendell is probably more
popular among Republicans than any Democratic governor in the state's history. And he will need GOP
support--lots of it--to move his agenda along. But in the end, his own Democratic party will provide the
legislative margins that determine success or failure. For Rendell, that means maintaining a reservoir of
support in the legislature, particularly among Democrats. Republicans will come and go in the coalition, but
Rendell will need the support of core Democrats.

If Governor Rendell faithfully follows all of these leadership principles is he guaranteed success’ Well,
maybe. But he's going to need some luck, too. So, good luck Ed. And good luck to all of us.

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Politically Uncorrected™ is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs
at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at
Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in
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