
Another dubious distinction in Nevada's grasp?

Contributed by Hugh Jackson

Is it too early to dub Jim Gibbons the worst governor in the United States?

By Hugh Jackson

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Here are some accounts appearing in newspapers in recent days, items that to greater or lesser degree reflect the hope and optimism of a new governor taking office:

"On Wednesday, [the new governor] met with university professors to seek ideas on ... insurance and signed his first executive order, creating the Office of Open Government to ensure that state agencies comply with public-records laws. He also imposed a staff ethics policy and banned bureaucratic jargon in state communications.

And...

On the campaign trail and in his inaugural address, [the new governor] outlined an ambitious agenda that promised to focus on expanding educational opportunities, reducing the property tax burden on residents and putting more police officers on the streets, among other things.

And...

What [residents] saw in his first week in office was a governor in full trumpet about how to overhaul their state government. While some veterans of state politics saw [the new governor's] State of the State speech on Wednesday as too ambitious, [one former governor] got it just right. "It's a very big agenda," he said, "but it's not too big for [the state]."

Unfortunately, none of those hope-filled passages, laced as they are with the promise and optimism for a new administration, emanated from Nevada newspapers. Rather, the items were referring to new governors in Florida, Massachusetts and New York, respectively.

In Nevada, Jim Gibbons' first week in office met with a different reaction altogether.

In perhaps an unprecedented show of collective judgment and near-unanimity, no less than eight different reporters, columnists or editors from Nevada media declared Gibbons' first week simply awful -- and that's not counting the progressive blogs.

Gibbons was never a media darling, to be sure, and the many scandals that marked his campaign only antagonized both sides in the relationship between Gibbons and the press. So when "beat" political writers like Jon Ralston, Erin Neff or Pat Coolican unload on the governor's performance, perhaps it's not unexpected.

But the strangeness of Gibbons' first week was highlighted -- or lowlighted, as the case may be -- by a provocative (and as of this writing, unresolved) unappointment and appointment controversy that cast severe doubt on the veracity of Gibbons' very first statement as governor, i.e., that he needed to be sworn in at midnight for security reasons. And that in turn brought severe admonitions from some surprising corners of Nevada's media landscape.

For instance, an editorial in the (Carson City) Nevada Appeal declared that the new governor's inauguration was "based on a lie." In the headline. Granted, the Appeal's editorial positions tend to be a tad more progressive than the governor's. But "lie" is a mighty stout word to be throwing at a governor who hadn't even been on the job for a week, especially for a daily paper in the capital city.

Because the famously, or infamously, disputed appointment is to the Gaming Control Board, Gibbons also managed to invoke the wrath of writers who generally have very little or nothing at all to say about politics -- but who, in this instance, said plenty.

Las Vegas Business Press writer David McKee departed from the latest machinations within the corporate gambling subculture -- his native habitat -- to muse on Gibbons' "bizarre midnight swearing-in. At the time, fears of imminent terrorism were the reason given," McKee wrote, "a laughable premise now given the lie by" Gibbons' appointment maneuvers.

In the course of suggesting a way to avoid such appointment flaps in the future, Sun business editor Jeff Simpson reflected on Gibbons' midnight inaugural:

Instead of openly challenging Guinn's decision to make the picks and asserting his own right to fill the positions, Gibbons said the reason for taking the oath of office at midnight on New Year's Day was to make sure the state was ready to deal with any emergency.

In other words, he took the oath as soon as possible to fight terrorism.

What a crock.

Instead of the high ground, Gibbons and his staff chose the low, and treated Nevadans as fools.

And even columnists who seemed to want to wish Gibbons well, for the state's sake if nothing else, such as Geoff Schumacher and Jane Ann Morrison, ended up penning missives burdened with a sense of gloom and disappointment.

So having limped into the governor's office without an agenda, under the cloud of scandal and amid speculation that he lacks the skill, temperament and political base to govern effectively, and then starting his first week not only by impressing absolutely no one, but by prompting item after item in the media about "lies" and "conniving" and "a crock," is it too early to ask, Is Jim Gibbons the worst governor in the United States?

After all, the position might be there for the having. While Gibbons was entering his job, some of the leading candidates for the dubious distinction of "worst governor" were leaving theirs. Alaska's Frank Murkowski, who left a long career in the U.S Senate only to alienate almost all of his state's voters by appointing his daughter to represent Alaska in Washington, got soundly trounced in his re-election bid. The most notable bad governor to leave office this year is Ohio Republican Bob Taft, who TIME magazine described as "widely considered an inept, ineffective leader even before he ran afoul of the law" (TIME rendered that description, by the way, in the same issue that it named Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn one of "America's 5 Best Governors," an accolade that at this point seems well out of reach of Guinn's successor).

But two other governors named the "worst" in TIME's rating are still around -- Louisiana Democrat Kathleen Blanco (TIME: "Failures aren't born. They're made.") and South Carolina Republican Mark Sanford ("G.O.P. bosses charge that he is worse at economic development than at grandstanding...").

A few other governors nationwide have left their constituents less -- much less -- than impressed. Matt Blunt in Missouri and Rick Perry in Texas both labor with approval ratings at or under 40 percent -- unusually low for governors. In Kentucky, Republican Ernie Fletcher's enthusiasm for cronyism may be exceeded only by his willingness to pardon his cronies, and news reports suggest that legislators of neither party want much to do with him.

Besides, even if Gibbons doesn't get any better, there's always the chance that some other governor could get dramatically worse, say, in an indicted and/or incarcerated way. So with just barely a week under his belt, it is clearly premature to declare Jim Gibbons the worst governor in the U.S.

But agenda-free, scandal-plagued and now, decidedly off on the wrong foot, it's not too early to label him a contender.