With proposed overhauls to Social Se company of political losers | Opinion

curity, Christie putting himself in

Star-Ledger Guest Columnist

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By Carl Golden

Remember the warning: "When you're up to your backside in allig ators, it's hard to remember your original intention was to drain the swamp."

It was taped to office walls and thumb-tack ed to bulletin boards as a reminder that no matter how well-motivated the purpose, it's wise to keep in mind th e potential risk to life and limb.

With his proposal to overhaul the So cial Security system and Medicare , Gov. Chris Christie waded into the bog and the gators are circling.

Calling for changes in the eligibility criteria for Social Security benefits has histor ically been a politic all loser, arousing the ire of current recipients and the ose nearing retirement age. As individuals and me mbers of organizations who ose clout at the polling booth is well-documented, the y've thrown the fear of retribut ion into members of Congress over any proposal affecting their benefits.

Gov. Christie's strategy represented a trade-off: he would accept the criticism over su ggesting a raise of the retirement age a nd imposing a means test for beneficiaries in return for praise for the courage to take on the thor ny issue of entitlement reform.

The strategy was also designed to separate Gov. Christie fr
nomination, to draw a contrast between the "tell it like it is go
to difficult issues.

om other potential contenders for the Republican presidential
e up

Not surprisingly, the reaction to Gov. Christie's proposals was swift and critical.

He was accused of breaking the compact between government an d working men and women who cont ributed to Social Security throughout their careers.

Critics said his ideas would puni sh those who saved diligently and invested wisely , looking forward to guaranteed Social Securi ty income.

Gov. Christie defended increasing the full retirement age to 69 , arguing that life expectancy had risen significantly since Social Security was enacted in 1933.

Means testing has always been the flashpoint in discussions of entitlement programs and Gov. Christie drew criticism for recommending benefits be eliminated for in dividuals with incomes above \$200,000 a year.

The proposal taps into the seeming incongruity of Social Security payments to those in above average economic circumstances.

Is it fair to provide Social Security be nefits to multi-millionaires? Should a line be drawn between succes sful businesspersons, athletes or entertainers, for instan ce, and middle-class wage earners?

stem and are entitled to benefits, does it not reek of unequal treatment for a government While all have paid into the sy program to view th em as identical? Absent from the governor's program, however, was a suggestion that gains supporters whenever reforms are mentioned – entirely the cap on income above which Social raising or eliminating Security payments cease to be deducted. Taxing income which exceeds the current lim it of \$118,000 has the potential, its suppor ters argue, to solve the funding dilemma in short order. They point out that the majority of working Americans never reach the limit and, conseq uently, pay into the system year in and year out while contributions fr om wealthier individuals can end after a few months. Gov. Christie rejected this argument, saying increasing or abo lishing the limit is tantamount to a tax increase, a contention h is critics claim fits with his consistent ant i-tax posture and protecting the rich, endearing him to the conservative wing of the national Republican Party. There has been consider able speculation that Gov. Christie damaged himself by raising entitlement refo rm, that it is an issue that has always dragged down those who become involved in it. He has opened himself to pushback from senior citizens - a potent voting bloc - and invited criticism that he is looking out fo

Others contend that Gov. Christie has fallen out of the top tier of possible presidential candidates in any event and focusing or radical changes in Social Security will not re-energize his as yet undeclared candidacy.

Gov. Christie, however, has made his point rather emphatically; he's entered the swamp with the goal of draining it. He'd bette keep at least one eye on the gators, though.

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the wealthy at the expense of the middle class.