

'A Godsend to the GOP'

Puerto Rico's Luis Fortuno heads a new breed of Republican governors — charismatic thought leaders who know how to get the job done.

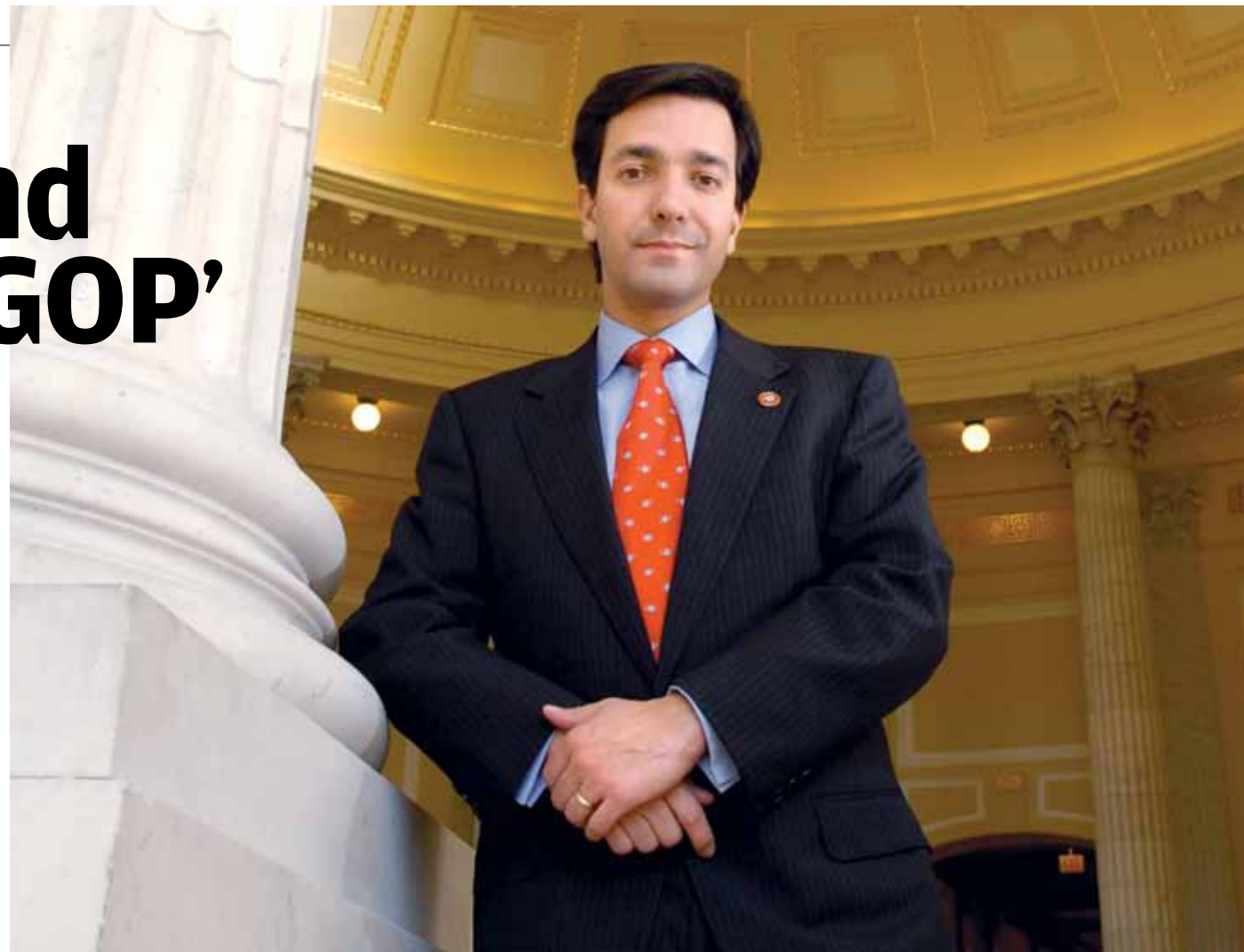
By Tom Squitieri

GOVERNORS ARE HOT PROPERTIES in the Republican Party these days, and none more so than Luis Fortuno.

The governor of Puerto Rico exemplifies Republican philosophy. And he gradually has become the toast of pundits and political scientists, who say Fortuno is precisely what the GOP needs to grow.

Just one year into his term as governor of the U.S. territory, Fortuno has attacked an enormous budget deficit without raising taxes. He has come down unequivocally for party unity, even while turning down the volume on party rhetoric. And he offers the GOP an opportunity to score an unprecedented political triumph in the eyes of minority voters across America with a vote on Puerto Rico's future as a U.S. state.

"Fortuno is a godsend to the GOP, and they ought to be showcasing him whenever possible," says noted



political analyst Larry Sabato. "The GOP needs senior, non-white political figures. In an increasingly diverse nation, where 26 percent of the vote was cast by minorities in 2008, the Republicans can look overwhelmingly white and male."

Even former Republican National Committee Chairman Mike Duncan told The Associated Press: "Luis is the person we should be emulating."

Indeed, as the debate over the future of the Republican Party continues, sentiment is increasing in some camps that the party's governors are most likely to provide the ideas and leadership for a GOP return to dominance.

More governors, or individuals who have served as governors, were elected president in the 20th century than any other political group. Governors have a record of accom-

plishment, management, and executive experience that voters seem to like. They often have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership and develop a signature issue.

"It is increasingly clear that the future of the GOP rests in the hands of the Republican governors," says *Washington Post* political columnist Dan Balz. The party's "intellectual ballast" almost always has come from the governors "who already had proved to be the policy innovators."

The two newest, Chris Christie in New Jersey and Bob McDonnell in Virginia, gave the GOP great political news to cap 2009. Wily veterans such as Haley Barbour in Mississippi and thought leaders such as Mitch Daniels in Indiana offer foundation.

Fortuno, 49, is one of those new lights in the Republican Party, offering competency, charisma, and con-

sensus building, as well as an aggressive style that should help the GOP develop a broader base, experts say.

He beat incumbent Aníbal Acevedo Vilá by 11 points to become the first Republican governor of Puerto Rico since 1969.

"Sometimes the party seemed like a bunch of angry men, and that is not what we are," Fortuno tells *Newsmax*. "We are a party of principle, one with a positive outlook that believes that our best days are not yet here, that by working hard and bringing in as many talented people as we can, we will achieve that."

Fortuno is leading by example, using basic GOP principles to tackle a record \$3.2 billion deficit. He cut expenses across the board, instituted a pay cut for himself and all agency heads, and reduced political appointments by 30 percent.

That's not surprising for a politician who became smitten with Ronald Reagan when he was an undergraduate at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., subscribing to the *National Review* and seeing the Reagan philosophy as shaping his political future.

Fortuno cites what happened in 1980 and 1984 when the Republicans expanded the party base, capturing voters soon named Reagan Democrats and making inroads into the Hispanic community.

"President Reagan was clear in what he envisioned, a party that is open to ideas, the free flow of ideas and goods and services," Fortuno says. "I believe we have to go back to those principles. I did a little bit of that when I was in Congress and I intend to do more of that."

As a result, he campaigns tirelessly for other GOP candidates, refuses to support third-party candidates, and hammers away at other Republicans to stop fighting with each other and improve the party.

"We want to replicate what happened in Virginia [where McDonnell beat Democrat Creigh Deeds by 20 points] all over the country, but we have to recognize that states vote differently," Fortuno says. "Nothing wrong with that. We need to try to recruit candidates that follow basic principles. I don't believe in and I don't want any litmus test at all. I just want to win."

Fortuno is less forceful when asked whether he would back a candidate perceived as wavering on certain principles — a significant issue in the Florida Republican Senate primary pitting Gov. Charlie Crist against state House Speaker Mark Rubio.

Although Fortuno promises to stay out of GOP internal political

fight, he makes an exception in Florida's race. "I don't know Mark Rubio. I do know Charlie Crist. Charlie Crist endorsed me when I was running in the primary and then endorsed me and helped me when I was running in the general election. I am indebted to Charlie Crist, and I support Charlie Crist," Fortuno says. But Fortuno will support whoever wins that Senate primary, as should all Republicans, he says.

"I would rather see [Crist] win, but I am convinced that either of them will be a better candidate than whoever runs for the Democrats and I intend to campaign for that person."

On his home turf, with the deficit problem behind him, Fortuno is ready to implement more of his campaign platform, such as cutting taxes and creating new private-sector jobs along the lines that the late Jack Kemp envisioned when he was in President Reagan's Cabinet, creating job opportunities in the place of government handouts.

"I want us to see us compete better in the world economy," he says.

He also wants the GOP to get behind new legislation that gives Puerto Ricans a strong role in determining the island's future.

The newest effort is H.R. 2499, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2009, which Fortuno champions.

It would give congressional sanction to the results of an island plebiscite on Puerto Rico's status — meaning that Congress would agree to abide by whatever the island residents decide. That would be the first time Congress would agree to endorse the outcome of such a vote.

"It is an opportunity for the Republican Party to demonstrate to all groups that we are inclusive," Fortuno says. □



FACE OFF GOP Senate candidates Rubio, left, and Crist could use help from Fortuno.

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