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*Governor's First 100 Days Of Tumult, Trial*  
By Michael Gormley

Albany NY (AP/WBEN) — It was supposed to be a joke, but there was truth lurking beneath the schtick.

Gov. David Paterson was laying out his agenda with legislative leaders at a news conference this month when he was asked if there was any progress on a bill requiring insurance coverage for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Paterson, subtle as a Warner Brothers cartoon, covered his face with his hands and flopped his head onto the podium in surrender: “Yes. I have it.”

The gag went over well. The Democrat’s feigned frustration at the slow grind of the Albany process was an apt reaction to his first 100 long, frustrating and unpredictable days that started with the unfathomable self-destruction of Eliot Spitzer.

“It was a supreme test of my endurance and ability and obviously patience and self-confidence,” Paterson told The Associated Press. “After this, I figure I’m about ready for anything.”

The accidental governor, they call him.

Paterson, legally blind since infancy, grew up in Harlem and then on Long Island steeped in New York City politics. His father, Basil, is a former secretary of state. The son said he never thought about becoming governor, making him perhaps the only one in New York’s Capitol to feel that way.

Even as lieutenant governor, the former state Senate minority leader wasn’t included by pundits or in polls as a potential governor. There was no room among the Andrew Cuomos, Rudy Giulianis and Michael Bloomborgs to think of a Gov. Paterson.

Not even he thought so.

“I didn’t realize how much I didn’t take it seriously until the day it happened,” he said. “I was profoundly shocked.”

That day was March 17, shortly after Spitzer was named in a federal prostitution investigation and resigned.

“The first week I was governor, I remember we were getting ready to make a decision,” Paterson said. “I heard on the radio a decision was coming down and the governor would rule on it. It took me 10 seconds to realize they were talking about me.”

He knew, intellectually, that he was governor. Becoming governor came a couple weeks later.

“The moment came for me in the budget negotiations when I realized that we were going to have to make a lot of cuts and they were going to have to be across the board and I didn’t get that anyone else knew or appreciated it,” Paterson said. “That’s when I felt like the governor because I felt a personal obligation to the voters.

“I realized, ‘If I don’t do something, it’s not going to get done,’” Paterson said.

For a governor who didn’t take office until just two weeks before the budget was due and already halfway through the legislative session, he has a list of action to back up what his office calls a “historically productive” session that ended last week.

He says 26 of the bills he made a priority passed. They include: Reform of the “brownfields” law intended to clean up polluted sites for reuse but which was known mostly for waste and political scandal; a measure to better protect homeowners in default as part of the national subprime mortgage crisis; a deal to save New York City Off-Track Betting Corp. and preserve 1,500 jobs; and a law that ends a costly and time-consuming process to get rid of teachers convicted of having sex with students.

Few, however, say the bills are earthshaking for Albany, a place in need of a thorough shaking.

But Paterson can also take credit for less tangible success.

He used his sharp sense of humor and conciliatory approach to salve a fractured New York state government. In 2007, hard-edged Spitzer was quickly was mired in political conflict, then political scandal, then the prostitution investigation.

New York's first legally blind, black governor faced a bigger obstacle than most. Spitzer's fall came in the middle of negotiating a \$121 billion budget riddled with looming deficits.

He chose to begin his administration admitting to past marital affairs and drug use as a youth so the actions couldn't be used to compromise his agenda. He also had emergency eye surgeries brought on by the stress of reading reams of documents, nose to paper, required to do the job.

**“The institutional challenge that Gov. Paterson assumed was probably tougher than any governor in modern history,” said Robert B. Ward of the Rockefeller Institute of Government.**

“When I came in, I thought I could take advantage of the crisis in management because everybody basically wanted to help me,” Paterson said, comparing it to support for the president after Sept. 11.

“This was the problem other governors have had in that they would come in and throw down a bill,” Paterson said. “Either you win it or you don't ... the only problem is, government isn't set up that way. That's how you play football.”

“That's not how I see it and, I argue, that's not how the framers of the constitution saw it,” Paterson said.

Instead, he worked with lawmakers, making unheard of visits to their working sessions and, on the last day of session, going to legislators in the Senate and Assembly to thank them.

“Have they accomplished an awful lot? No,” said Maurice “Mickey” Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. “But is the tone just an awful lot better? Yes. That's really important. The idea of politics as scorched earth is nothing I really approved of.”

So far, Paterson's charisma and character got him through his first legislative session as governor admirably, noted Lee Miringoff of the Marist College poll.

“But he's got to set his direction,” he said. “The likeability is nice, but he's got to be governor, or else. Because the vacuum will fill and the other people sitting around that triangular table aren't shy.”