ON DEADLINE: '08 a no-experience race?

By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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She's too weak to lead in a crisis.

That was the knock on Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano a year into her first term, when two inmates took two guards hostage and held police and state officials at bay for 15 days.

One of the guards, a woman, was sexually assaulted. An inmate threatened to cut off her finger unless he received food and cigarettes. Fellow prison guards and their wives demanded that SWAT teams be allowed to storm the prison.

But Napolitano urged patience.

"This is not a television series. It's not a movie," she said at the time. "This is the real deal."

Three years later, Napolitano is a newly re-elected Democratic governor who likes to tell that story to illustrate the difference between two types of politicians: Those who lead as state executives, and those who merely legislate.

Her point is salient to the 2008 presidential race because the next chief executive may well be somebody who has no experience running a state, a business or major institution.

Napolitano brought that uncomfortable truth to Washington last week, telling a Brookings Institute audience that Republicans criticized her administration for negotiating the guards' release in the 2004 standoff. Shortly after her release, the female officer thanked the governor for not authorizing a raid that could have resulted in her death.

"That's what a governor deals with," Napolitano said.

Governors like Napolitano also must deal with natural disasters, balanced budget laws, capital punishment and other matters of life and death that rarely touch the comfy lives in Congress. They must work across party lines to get anything done, and are held accountable when things go wrong.

It's a tough job. And it's traditionally a sound steppingstone to the presidency; four of the last five presidents had served as governor.

But the top three Democratic presidential candidates are creatures of Congress with little executive experience — Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina.

Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico is the only Democrat with a reasonable chance of winning who has run anything larger than a Senate staff.

The Republican bench is a bit deeper on that measure. As Napolitano points out, former Mayor Rudy Guiliani ran New York City and, before that, held leadership roles at the Justice Department.

Mitt Romney is the former governor of Massachusetts and a successful businessman. Mike Huckabee is the ex-governor of Arkansas who was a leader in the state Baptist community.

Beyond that, Republicans have actor-lobbyist-senator Fred Thompson and five members of Congress.

During an interview last month in her Phoenix office, Napolitano said governors tend to be can-do people.

"You have to get something done as governor," Napolitano said. "As a legislator, it's easier to hide. You put in a bill and say I'm for or against such-and-such. As governor, you've got to do more than talk."

As a presidential candidate, the best thing about being governor is the ability to run against Washington. "People realize it's not the place to effect change," Napolitano said.

She has brought change to her fast-changing state. The former prosecutor approved tax cuts opposed by fellow Democrats and gained GOP support of her plans for all-day kindergarten. She was the first governor of either party to demand that the federal government secure borders with Mexico while refusing GOP demands to eliminate social services for illegal immigrants.

Her ambitious second-term agenda includes promise to get Arizona's schools more focused on math, science and technology, with partnerships between the state's colleges and public schools.

She's unlikely to endorse a presidential candidate before the nomination is sealed. Still, as a law-and-order woman from a swing state, Napolitano will be on any candidate's list for vice presidential prospects.

If the party's nominee hails from the Senate, Napolitano could give the Democratic ticket some gubernatorial heft.

She says Clinton doesn't suffer an experience gap, because voters give the former first lady credit for being at former President Clinton's side.

"I think that she's had a partnership with her husband," Napolitano said, "and they've been through the (Arkansas) governorship and all that that they've been through (with) the presidency."

But Sen. Clinton has never led on her own — let alone made decisions, like the one Napolitano made at that prison in 2004, that could cost or save lives.

Voters need to decide how much that matters as they size up the entire presidential field next year.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — Ron Fournier has covered politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years. On Deadline is a weekly column.