

## OPINION: BRIDGEGATE — THE UGLY POLITICAL SCANDAL THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

CARL GOLDEN | APRIL 4, 2017

The lane-closure scheme that stalled and snarled traffic in Fort Lee cost Christie his political capital, as his recent appointment to chair Trump's opioid task force makes clear



*Carl Golden*

Should Bill Baroni and Bridget Anne Kelly fail in their appeals to overturn their convictions for their roles in the George Washington Bridge lane closure scandal, the Christie administration hopes it will turn the final page in a nearly four-year saga that drove the governor's public approval to historic lows; was a major factor in his dismal showing and eventual abandonment of his quest for the Republican presidential nomination; and — according to some — contributed to his being overlooked for a cabinet or executive office position in the

Trump administration.

Despite the governor's hopes, Bridgagate's place in New Jersey political lore is secure and it will forever be associated with him. He'll leave office in nine months, indelibly branded by the scandal and dogged by a distrustful public that overwhelmingly believes he was deeply involved in it.

Christie was not charged and has steadfastly insisted that he was unaware of the plot and only learned of it when it exploded onto the front pages.

Testimony during the seven-week trial contradicted the governor's assertions, as several aides or Christie confidants recounted informing him on different occasions that the access lanes would be closed and justified by a concocted cover story that it was a traffic study sanctioned by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

The trial also portrayed the governor's office as having embraced a culture that placed achieving political advantage above other considerations, one in which punishing enemies and recalcitrant public officials was both encouraged and celebrated.

Executive staff was depicted as obsessed with seeking endorsements for the governor, maintaining lists of local officials who could be counted on or courted successfully while freezing out those who refused.

In sentencing Baroni, former deputy executive director of the Port Authority, and Kelly, former deputy chief of staff in the governor's office, Judge Susan Wigenton referred to an "us versus them" culture pervasive in the governor's office that led to the scandal.

Rather than follow the judicious course and decline to react to the judge's comments, the administration unwisely criticized her, suggesting that she relied on false testimony and was duped by perjury committed by witnesses who falsely described the governor's office atmosphere.

The administration defended the office staff, describing them as “honest, honorable, bipartisan and effective” (Baroni and Kelly presumably not included), language that surely drew smirks from those familiar with the office and its relentless political mission.

The wiser public relations move would have been to allow the judge’s comments to pass unnoticed and fade quickly into the next news cycle, rather than pick a fight with her and broadly hint she’d been snookered by a band of lying witnesses.

The scandal exacted a heavy political toll on Christie, weakening him in his second term and undercutting his legislative agenda.

His public standing plunged into the mid-teens across all segments of the population and political affiliation. He was consistently on the wrong side of the “right track, wrong track” question, a reliable indicator of how people view their elected leaders.

Any desire he held for a post in the Trump administration cabinet or in the White House was crushed beneath the wheels of the cars, trucks, and buses idling for hours on the first day of school in September, 2013, in Fort Lee and neighboring communities.

He was consistently passed over by the president and his advisers until recently when he was named chairman of a presidential task force to combat opioid abuse.

As critical an issue as drug addiction is, Christie’s appointment to the unpaid, part-time post had the feel of a consolation prize, something just beneath a bronze medal.

It will give him visibility and media access, to be sure, but it is far from the epicenter of power in the White House.

Nor is he totally free from the Bridgegate scandal and the aftermath of the trial.

Kelly, after receiving an 18-month sentence, adopted a surprisingly defiant tone, vowing she would not sit still for being made a “scapegoat” and promising cryptically (warning, perhaps) that at some appropriate point in the future she’ll have more to say about the entire episode.

It may simply be an exercise in bravado on her part and raised a question that, if she had more to say, the appropriate time would have been during her trial testimony.

Since the outset, Kelly has attempted to portray herself as someone who followed orders because she – a single mother of four – desperately needed the high-salaried position she occupied.

It must be galling for her to be on the way to the big house while her boss at the time, deputy chief of staff Bill Stepien, is in the White House.

Many believe Stepien, whose name was mentioned dozens of times in the trial testimony, had knowledge of the lane-closing plot and that Kelly acted at his direction. He was not charged.

While Kelly came across as a somewhat sympathetic figure who was manipulated into the designated patsy, not to be overlooked is her infamous email “time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee,” which set the scheme in motion and whose discovery a few months later led to its collapse and the subsequent political upheaval.

Baroni received a 24-month sentence for conspiring with Kelly and with David Wildstein, former director of interstate capital projects at the authority, to realign the access lanes and create a four-day traffic jam of monumental proportions as part of a political retribution scheme to punish the Democratic Mayor of Fort Lee for his refusal to endorse Christie’s re-election. Wildstein copped a guilty plea and turned prosecution witness. He’s awaiting sentencing.

Whether the appeals process begun by Baroni and Kelly does, indeed, mark the beginning of the end or the onset of additional lengthy proceedings remains to be seen.

What is indisputable, though, is that the tarnish and stain of Bridgegate will live on as an example of abuse of governmental power and political egos run amok.

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