

OPINION: CHRISTIE LIKELY TO SURVIVE 'BRIDGEGATE' -- THOUGH NOT UNSCATHED

CARL GOLDEN | JANUARY 14, 2014

Governor has taken a major hit to his credibility, reputation, and second-term effectiveness



As the fallout from what's come to be called "Bridgagate" widens and reaches deeper into Gov. Chris Christie's high-level staff, the emerging consensus is that, absent definitive evidence directly implicating the governor, he'll succeed in moving past it and get his administration and his political future back on track.

No one, however, is ready to concede that the issue is closed. Investigations by the Assembly Transportation Committee and the United States Attorney will continue well into 2014,

guaranteeing the story will dominate the political environment and each new revelation will land on the front pages and lead nightly television newscasts.

And one thing the investigations are almost certain to reveal is just how autonomous the governor's senior staff actually is -- a critical concern given Christie's continue assertion that his staffers operated without his knowledge.

What began last September as an amateurish and ill-conceived political power play has exploded into a scandal, drawing comparisons to Watergate as it makes its way inexorably up the chain of command to Christie.

After months of insisting that closing access lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee was part of an officially sanctioned traffic study by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the cover story collapsed when it was revealed that Bridget Anne Kelly, a deputy chief of staff in the governor's office, set the events in motion with the now infamous e-mail to David Wildstein, a Christie appointee to the Authority staff: "It's time for some traffic troubles in Fort Lee."

The lane closings were seen as inflicting punishment on the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee for rebuffing overtures for his endorsement of Christie's reelection by creating traffic chaos, inconveniencing thousands of commuters, and engineering a scheme or of any staff involvement; eviscerating a deceiving, betraying liar; and fired her.

All governor's offices have their own staff structure, reflecting the desires and style of the chief executive. One trait in common, though, is those at the structure's top -- chief of staff, chief counsel, policy chief, and press secretary -- are normally a fairly tight-knit group, often sharing history with one another as well as with the governor they serve, either through political endeavors or professional affiliation.

They share information and seek each others' advice. Conflicts are a normal part of their workday and it is not at all unusual for a suggestion floated by one to be disputed by a colleague.

All have direct access to the governor and frequently call on subordinates in their respective offices to engage in debate and discussions of policy or political concerns.

What worries one worries the group and it is logical to assume that, in the case of the access lane closures, information was circulated to guard against being caught unaware by public disclosure of an issue or an incident in which the office may be involved.

The top staffers are free to operate with a great deal of autonomy and discretion, having earned the trust and confidence to do so. It is their decision whether to bring an issue to the attention of the governor or deal with it at their level. There is no one single criteria for such decisions; each is different because circumstances are different.

(Full disclosure: I served as press secretary for Gov. Tom Kean for eight years and as communications director for Gov. Christie Whitman for three years.)

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