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12:15 AM, May 14, 2014 |

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The line separating public, taxpayer-funded responsibilities from political activity has always been a moving target. In a governor's office, the boundaries of acceptable behavior are established and enforced by top-level staff.

Some rules and regulations governing are self-evident, but each administration differs in approach, leaving room to maneuver, to edge up to the line of separation — even step over it — while deferring to the judgment of those whose daily work responsibilities involve dealing with political issues.

The legislative committee hearings into the governor's office's involvement in last September's four-day access lane closures at the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee has pulled back the curtain on the operational style of the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, the arm of the administration tasked with dealing with local officials and constituent groups.

In testimony before the committee, former IGA director Christina Genovese Renna provided insight into how the office functioned, as well as into the personalities of her superiors — former Deputy Chief of Staff Bridget Anne Kelly and former IGA director Bill Stepien.

Renna defended the office as a place local officials could turn to for help and establish a mutually beneficial working relationship with the administration. She described it as “amazingly nonpartisan.”

Renna's devotion to the office and rising to her colleagues' defense is admirable, but the reality is the office was up to its eyeballs in political activities.

These activities — categorizing mayors as friendly or unfriendly, tracking Democratic officials who might endorse the governor's re-election, directing there be no rush to return telephone calls from certain mayors, paying personal visits to secure an endorsement — exposed part of the IGA as an arm of the governor's campaign. The phrase “check with Bridgewater,” the governor's campaign headquarters, was common usage.

Renna offered the usual explanation for the political activity — the staffers involved spent evenings, weekends or days off engaged in campaign work and it was separate from government duties.

It isn't and never has been that neat.

A governor's office staff is bound together by the understanding there's no “off duty” flag on their lives, that all day, every day, is devoted to their roles.

They can step out of the office, but not out of their official existences. They represent the administration — nights, weekend, vacations, etc. Their salaries buy 24 hours of their lives each day they occupy their offices. An “off the clock” respite is not available.

It's impossible and impractical to avoid political matters. Telephone calls and visits from a county chairman, a legislator or a local official seeking help or a solution to a political problem are routine occurrences. Only the most naïve believe that responding to these pleas is delayed until after 6 p.m. or the weekend or the next holiday or day off.

Governors occupy a dual role: leader of the state and leader of their political party. Their responsibilities frequently overlap, but able and sensitive leaders must assure political pressures do not prevail over public duties.

Renna's testimony and documents obtained by the committee, however, portray an office steeped in politics, consumed by achieving partisan advantage. There were people who gleefully stomped in mud puddles, convinced the slop would splash on others.

In light of such a mindset, it was inevitable a line would be crossed and power misused to punish or exact revenge — like closing lanes to the busiest bridge in the world, creating a traffic jam and public safety hazard of Olympian proportions, all to send a message to a small-town mayor that his refusal to reach a more favorable political decision did not go unnoticed.

Renna denied any role in the lane closure scheme, although she learned of it and Kelly's role after the fact and conceded she followed Kelly's order to delete an email that could have incriminated her, but not until after copying the message to another account, a move designed to protect herself.

Kelly, according to Renna, was not an “architect” of the scheme, but was “instrumental” in implementing it. She asserted Kelly was emotionally unstable, unable to deal with professional and personal stresses, and, rather than make decisions, carried out orders from others.

The emerging portrayal is of a small group of operatives in the office who lost sight of its mission, nudged the line between public and political actions, and eventually obliterated it. The inexperienced and politically immature were captivated by a belief in their own invincibility. Discretion and sound judgment were crushed under the weight of that belief.

They were convinced they had grown bigger than the system.

They've discovered, though, that, sooner or later, the system strikes back.