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## OPINION: CAN THE DEMOCRATS CASH IN ON GEORGE WASHINGTON 'BRIDGEGATE'?

CARL GOLDEN | DECEMBER 12, 2013

Gov. Christie's far too savvy to let a bungled traffic-flow study slow down his political machine



By any measure, the last four years of Democratic control of the Legislature yielded the party little political benefit.

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What has given Democrats the traction they've lacked up to this point was a quietly issuin September to conduct a traffic-flow study by closing three access lanes to the George Washington Bridge, an iconic structure administered by the Port Authority of New York Jersey, that carries tens of thousands of car commuters, buses, and trucks across the H from New Jersey to New York City.

The initial legislative reaction was in response to the howls of protest from drivers studing massive traffic jams for hours on the bridge approaches and streets in Fort Lee. Attention however, quickly shifted from examining what seemed to be a poorly thought-out decision allegations that it was a calculated and vindictive abuse of power to punish Fort Lee's Emayor for refusing to endorse the governor's reelection.

If true, it would rank as one of the monumentally stupid ideas of the decade.

Christie's reelection was never in doubt. He was riding at more than 60 percent in virtually every poll, and the media was consumed by guessing his eventual plurality and divining what it meant to his prospects for the presidential nomination.

He'd already been endorsed by heavy-hitting Democrats like Essex County Executive Joe DiVincenzo and Hudson County State Sen. Brian Stack, along with some 60 assorted Democratic mayors and council members.

What could the mayor of Fort Lee have possibly brought to the Christie campaign and victory?

A traffic jam on the bridge would normally be of no concern to the 99 percent of New Jerseyans who aren't affected by it. It's merely the price one pays for choosing to work in New York and deal with the daily commuting hassles.

Interest widened, though, when the debate turned to questions of a misuse of authority in pursuit of political retribution. While people can and do sympathize with those suffering in long lines of standing traffic, their compassion is tempered by the knowledge that it is their conscious decision that contributed to their plight.

Sympathy and compassion, however, can quickly turn to anger if there is evidence that it was a deliberate act by those in charge to create chaos and jeopardize safety by delaying emergency responders.

Assemblyman John Wisnewski, chairman of the Transportation Committee, quickly concluded that public revulsion against abuse of government power was a far more compelling story line than three or four days of coverage about blaming the governor for a traffic jam. The issue would carry well beyond Bergen County and capture the attention of a considerably broader cross-section of people if it were framed as the actions of a bunch of arrogant, highly-paid political appointees who believed themselves above the rules.

The public disclosures of the circumstances surrounding the lane closures quickly led to the resignation of the person who ordered them -- David Wildstein, a longtime friend of the governor who appointed him to the authority staff.

Wildstein's explanation for his departure -- that he'd always intended to leave in any event --- was widely discredited, replaced by the belief that he was sacrificed to put an end to the controversy.

Wisnewski subpoenaed a number of Port Authority executives who testified that the traffic study proposal was a sham. It went, they said, far outside authority protocol, was not supported by any evidence it was necessary, was carried out in secrecy, and they were instructed to remain silent about it.

The executive director of the authority offered the most damning testimony, saying that, had he the power to do so, he would have fired Wildstein on the spot when he learned what he had done.

Wisnewski, realizing the political migraine he'd created for the administration, went after bigger game, calling for the resignation of former New Jersey State Sen. Bill Baroni, a close associate of Christie who appointed him as the authority's deputy executive director. Baroni was Wildstein's supervisor and the person ultimately responsible for his dismissal3idj33(mmit)8.001 Tw\u00dfuell4ck\u00e4001 Tw3376 TDG\u00a4(or h(4\u00e401))

There has been no suggestion, allegation, or evidence that the governor was informed of the laneclosing plan in advance or that he approved it. Christie's public response was to laugh it off and quip sarcastically that he secretly moved the traffic cones personally as a part of the study.

It's highly unlikely that Christie, someone who has exhibited finely tuned political instincts as governor, would have entertained seriously a cockeyed scheme to punish a small town mayor by paralyzing his town with traffic.

He may very well have been victimized by his own appointees whose hubris outweighed their better judgment. The political landscape is littered with such instances.

Like a great many issues, though, this one has landed on the governor's doorstep, his non-involvement notwithstanding. The administration is in a semi-hunkered-down position, referring inquiries to the Port Authority and declining comment on Wisnewski's demands.

Democrats, though, have the bit in their teeth, something they haven't had for four years. How far they can run with it remains to be seen.

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

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