New Jersey Governor Christie caught up in scandal over bridge vendetta

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A major political scandal with national implications erupted in the state of New Jersey on Wednesday, with the publication of emails and text messages between key aides of Republican Governor Chris Christie indicating that they had orchestrated a plan to punish a local Democratic mayor for refusing to endorse the Governor's re-election campaign last year. Two lanes leading to the busy George Washington Bridge connecting Fort Lee, New Jersey to New York City's Manhattan were closed for four days in September on the pretext of a traffic study, leading to huge delays and virtual gridlock.

Until January 8, Christie, a tough-talking Northeastern Republican in the mold of former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, had made light of the incident. Following the email revelations, however, the Governor spent much of the day planning his next moves, and then held a news conference on Thursday morning that began with an opening statement in which he said he was "embarrassed and humiliated" by the new exposures.

As in other scandals, the question that began to emerge more prominently was not simply the events themselves but also a possible cover-up. Christie claimed he had been lied to by top aides. Last month, as the unanswered questions mounted, two Christie appointees to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Deputy Executive Director Bill Baroni, and director for interstate capital projects David Wildstein, resigned.

Thursday, as the scandal moved closer to the Governor, he announced that he had fired his deputy chief of staff Bridget Anne Kelly and had asked Bill Stepien, who had been his campaign manager in both the 2009 and 2013 gubernatorial races, to withdraw his nomination to head the Republican State Committee, and to resign as a consultant to the Republican Governors Association, which Christie now heads. Christie then proceeded to answer questions on the scandal for the next two hours.

The bogus traffic study scandal has been dubbed "Bridgegate" in the media. Although it involves a sitting governor and not the president, there are some obvious parallels to the Watergate scandal that brought down Richard Nixon. The questions now arise as to what Christie knew about the incident and when he knew it. The governor repeatedly denied knowledge of the whole affair—which has been roiling in the New Jersey press for the past several weeks—and insisted that he had remained in the dark because he accepted the denials of aides who had not told him the truth. He characterized his reaction as one of "sadness," and not yet of anger. He did not attempt to explain why he had surrounded himself with top aides who would behave in this fashion.

Answering the suggestion that his own behavior had created the conditions for the recent incidents, Christie told the news conference, "I am not a bully," perhaps unconsciously echoing Richard Nixon's famous claim, "I am not a crook."

The governor apologized profusely to the whole state, and announced that he would pay a visit later that day to Fort Lee Mayor Mark Sokolich to personally accept responsibility for the incident. When informed that Sokolich had refused to meet with him, Christie said he would go to the town anyway to apologize to residents.

The emails lift the curtain ever so slightly on what is the typical modus operandi in capitalist politics. Christie aide Kelly wrote sarcastically in an August 13 note to Wildstein of the Port Authority, "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee." "Got it," responded Wildstein, a high school classmate and close confidante

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of Christie. The phony lane closure went into effect a month later, on September 9. When the Fort Lee mayor appealed for assistance in dealing with gridlock conditions on September 10, his emails were ignored. Later one of Christie's aides referred to him as "this little Serbian," evidently unaware of or indifferent to the fact that Sokolich's background is Croatian.

The consequences of the traffic jams caused by this political dirty trick were by no means confined to inconvenience. Ambulance response times were tripled during the four-day period, with at least one possible death attributed to this, that of a 91-year-old woman who died in a hospital after waiting seven minutes for assistance that should have arrived in about two minutes. The fall re-opening of the town's schools were also severely disrupted, with students in some cases only reaching their classrooms by noon.

In another echo of the Watergate scandal of more than 40 years ago, these events took place while Christie was cruising toward an easy re-election against his Democratic opponent Barbara Buono. All of the polls showed a wide margin, and it turned out to be more than 20 points, as literally millions of workers, mostly Democratic voters, stayed home.

Christie and his advisers, however, with their eyes already set on a run by the governor for the Republican nomination for president in 2016, wanted an absolutely crushing win, and this was the motive for the pressure for endorsements from local Democratic mayors and other officials.

The nature of Christie's appeal as a presidential candidate to ruling circles is that he might be able to resurrect the electoral coalition that worked especially well for them under George W. Bush—using law-and-order rhetoric and his "tough" persona to bring together ultra-right Tea Party zealots and backers of Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh and similar elements, as candidate Mitt Romney had failed to do in 2012, while maintaining a "moderate" veneer and the argument that he could fashion a bipartisan approach and get things done in Washington.

Christie made many enemies as he walked the fine line between pandering to the ultra-right and governing New Jersey. He enraged many in the Republican Party when he accompanied President Obama on a tour of areas of the state devastated by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and was blamed by some for Obama's re-election just days later. These elements are among those no doubt taking some pleasure from the Governor's current problems.

Christie's firings and press conference are not going to put an end to the "Bridgegate" scandal. There are three separate investigations of the events either taking place or planned. The New Jersey legislature, still under Democratic control, has launched a probe. The Port Authority is in the midst of its own investigation, and the office of the U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, the post held by Christie himself before he became governor, is also going to be looking into the incident.

It is quite possible that at least some of those who have resigned or been fired in the scandal so far may face criminal charges. And, of course, depending in part on what those who have "disappointed" Christie have to say in their own defense, the Governor may face his own deepening political or legal quagmire.

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