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COLUMNIST

Doubling Back on Bridgegate and the Dazzle of Arrogance

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Now that the U. S., Supreme Court will decide whether to overturn the convictions of two officials in Gov. Christie's administration for their roles in Bridgegate, the basic, simple question that has floated around since the 2013 scandal has yet to be answered: Why? Why did a few individuals undertake such an incredibly idiotic scheme that was certain to be uncovered and create a political firestorm?

It isn't the duty of the justices to delve into the why of it; theirs is the task of determining whether the mission embarked upon by Bridget Anne Kelly, former deputy chief of staff to Christie, and Bill Baroni, former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, violated the Federal law under which both were convicted and sentenced to jail.

The court is expected to deliver its opinion in six months or so.

By now, the story is familiar to all: Baroni, Kelly and David Wildstein, a Port Authority official, conspired to re-align the access lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee to create a massive traffic jam and embarrass the town's Democratic mayor for his refusal to endorse Christie's re-election.

Consider, though, a bit of background:

*Fort Lee is a town of 35,000, nestled on the Palisades overlooking the Hudson River on the eastern edge of Bergen County.

*In 2013, it was home to 18,300 registered voters, of whom 6,992 cast ballots.

*Christie received 3,735 (55 percent) defeating the Democratic nominee State Sen. Barbara Buono of Middlesex County who received 2,941 (45 percent).

What exactly was the point or the goal to be achieved by seeking the mayor's endorsement and dropping the political hammer on him when he refused? Another few hundred votes for Christie? A few more percentage points in the victory margin? The mayor could bring little of significance to the table.

By any objective measure, the election outcome was irrelevant. It was never in doubt. Christie's margin never fell below 15 percentage points in pre-election polling; Buono had been abandoned by her party leadership and the governor never broke a sweat on his way to a 60-40 victory.

The conclusion is inescapable — Bridgegate was the result of unrestrained arrogance, the fulfillment of a "we did it because we could" certainty of a few individuals convinced they'd never be found out or, if they were, the consequences would be minimal and quickly forgotten.

Teaching the mayor of Fort Lee a "we'll show you what happens to people who mess with us" lesson became the prize.

It blinded all the participants to the reality that the entire scheme was bound to unravel and their roles exposed.

Did any of them seriously believe that a few thousand cars, trucks and buses backed up in the streets of Fort Lee for four days would escape notice?

At any point, any of the plotters could have come to his or her senses and realized clearly the absurdity of it all.

Yet, the record shows that not one of them expressed any concern with what they were doing. No one stood up and cried: “This is nuts. This is sheer lunacy. We gain nothing by doing this and could lose a great deal if we do.”

It was a group obsession — we have the power, we know how to use it and the message won’t be lost on the mayor of Fort Lee or any other elected official who thinks he or she can get away with crossing or defying us.

When the scheme collapsed – as it was bound to do — it burst into the most serious scandal in recent history, engulfing the Administration for months and arguably costing Christie any credibility he may have had in seeking the Republican presidential nomination.

Kelly and Baroni were convicted in Federal court in November of 2016 while Wildstein turned state’s evidence, testified against his two co-conspirators and served his probation in Florida.

Christie fired Kelly after first publicly brutalizing her as a liar who’d betrayed his trust. He put some distance between himself and Wildstein, suggesting he barely knew him even though his intervention secured Wildstein’s appointment at the Port Authority.

Christie also cut loose his deputy chief of staff Bill Stepien who, critics believe, was the brains behind the plot or, at the very least, was aware of it at each step and did nothing to stop it.

Kelly, a single mother of four, came across as an unwitting dupe in the entire episode, a staffer who did what she was directed to do by others.

It was, though, her damning e-mail — “Time for some traffic troubles in Fort Lee” — that sealed her fate, contradicting the perception of her as a minor player and establishing her as a central figure in the plot.

Stepien was never charged and left the Administration before landing a position in the Trump Administration — a development that prompted one observer to quip sardonically that while Kelly was on her way to the Big House, Stepien was on his way to the White House, a blunt reference to the seeming injustice of it all.

Her and Baroni’s appeal of their convictions rest on the argument that theirs was a political act, the sort carried out routinely anywhere government exists, and that it did not rise to the level of a Federal crime.

It was merely politics at play — hardball politics, but politics nonetheless — and punishing them criminally, the attorneys argued, opened the door to tossing people in jail for exercising political retribution from which they neither profited nor received anything of value.

Commuters may have been seriously inconvenienced and the community itself may have suffered to some extent, but they argued that neither of those was the result of criminal behavior.

The few justices who questioned both government and plaintiff's attorneys seemed receptive to the argument, wondering if the acts committed by Kelly and Baroni, while devious and malicious, were mitigated by the reality that real world politics itself is often devious and malicious.

If their convictions are overturned, it is vindication of a sort, but Kelly and Baroni will forever bear the marks of convicted felons while others more sympathetic will see them as victims caught up in a political disaster not of their own making and spun out of control.

Their journey, though, is a testament to what happens when prestige and power get into one's head and crowds out sound judgment and sober perspective.

Arrogance can be an ugly trait and nothing good can come from it. In politics, though, its allure is bedazzling, stimulating and powerful and without a doubt, in another time and another place, there will be more Baronis, Kellys and Wildsteins willing to cast aside their inhibitions and doubts to pursue the chimera of invincibility.

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