

Opinion: Hare-Brained Bridgegate Scandal ‘Begrimed Everyone It Touched’

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Despite former Gov. Chris Christie’s protests to the contrary, it will be a considerable part of his legacy, forever associated with his administration



Carl Golden

It was in some ways anticlimactic. When the United States Supreme Court agreed to hear the appeal of two former New Jersey state officials convicted for their roles in the Bridgegate scandal, the universal reaction was that both would be cleared.

Yesterday, the court made it official, pitching a 9-0 shutout and [overturning the convictions](#) of [Bridget Anne Kelly](#), a deputy chief of staff to former Gov. Chris Christie, and Bill Baroni, former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

When the court accepted the case nearly a year ago, speculation spread quickly that it did so to bring clarity to laws governing misbehavior by public officials and viewed the Bridgegate appeals as an opportunity to warn prosecutors against bringing indictments based on political acts or motives.

Why else, the reasoning went, would the nation’s highest court agree to hear a case of relatively trivial consequence other than to use it to caution against overzealous prosecutions of individuals carrying out purely political decisions.

Not a federal crime

As Justice Elena Kagan pointed out in [the ruling](#), while Kelly and Baroni used deception to reduce access lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee in September of 2013 as an act of political punishment, “not every corrupt act by a state or local official is a federal crime.”

Neither profited financially from the lane restrictions and, therefore, were not guilty of violating federal fraud laws, Kagan wrote.

Kelly and Baroni were convicted in November, 2016 of conspiring with former Port Authority official David Wildstein to reduce the access lanes and create a mammoth four-day traffic jam in Fort Lee to embarrass and punish the town's Democratic mayor for his refusal to endorse Christie's reelection.

Wildstein reached an accommodation with the U. S. Attorney's office and testified against his co-defendants in return for a sentence of probation.

While Christie was never charged in the investigation, questions have lingered over whether he knew of the scheme either in advance or in its aftermath.

He was quick to react to the Supreme Court ruling, accusing former U. S. Attorney Paul Fishman of prosecutorial misconduct for pursuing an investigation as an act of political vindictiveness.

Christie goes after Fishman

Christie threw Fishman under the bus and backed it over him a time or two, implicitly blaming him for deliberately damaging the former governor's campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, even though by all measures the effort was a long shot at best.

He decried the damage Fishman had inflicted on people dragged through the mud, neatly overlooking the reality that Christie himself was one of the principal draggers, publicly firing Kelly and denouncing her as a backstabber who betrayed him.

Kelly expressed her faith in due process had been vindicated and the court ruling had "made the case right for me."

In a clear reference to others — likely Christie and his former deputy chief of staff Bill Stepien — Kelly said the outcome "does not absolve those who should have truly been held accountable."

While the court ruling effectively ends the six-and-a-half year saga of Bridgegate, the scandal will forever be a part of New Jersey political lore as the quintessential example of abuse of political power and an administration run amok.

That such a hare-brained scheme could have been concocted and implemented at the highest levels of government was the result of unrestrained arrogance, a belief

that power could be wielded indiscriminately and without consequence to bludgeon political opponents into compliance.

Part of the culture

Even if they mistakenly believed the plot and their involvement in it would never have been revealed, they felt comfortable that should it be uncovered, it would have been quickly dismissed as politics as usual.

Kelly and Baroni both have expressed regret over their actions, attributing them in large measure to having been caught up in a culture in which political victories became an end in themselves.

The Office of Intergovernmental Relations functioned as an arm of the Christie reelection campaign and punishing opponents was a cause for celebration.

It was, as the court said, an act of deceit and deception but not criminal. And, the proper cure for deceit and deception on the part of public officials is to be found in the ballot box, not the judicial system.

The scandal, though, begrimed everyone it touched, some, obviously, more than others.

And, Christie's protests to the contrary, it will be a considerable part of his legacy, forever associated with his administration. Kelly and Baroni have been cleared, but the scandal will remain a part of their personal histories as well.



Carl Golden

Carl Golden is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.