



OPINION: BRIDGEGATE TESTIMONY LEAVES NO ONE UNTAINTED

CARL GOLDEN | OCTOBER 20, 2016

Disconcerting picture emerging from trial is of an administration that is equally ugly, vindictive, and profane



A month into the Bridgegate trial, one conclusion appears inescapable: No one —defendants, witnesses, and those who were mentioned in testimony —will emerge unscathed from the ordeal, and the future of all will be affected to one extent or another.

Whether they were knee deep in the swamp of political misbehavior or far enough removed so only the soles of their shoes were dirtied, the taint of Bridgegate will last a very long time.

In greatest jeopardy, of course, are defendants Bill Baroni, former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and Bridget Anne Kelly, former deputy chief of staff in Gov. Chris Christie's office. If found guilty, they are forever branded convicted felons and face jail time for their roles in conspiring to close off access lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee in September 2013, creating a massive traffic jam as part of a plot to punish the town's Democratic mayor for refusing to endorse the governor for re election.

The central figure in the scheme, David Wildstein, who held the title of director of interstate capital projects at the Port Authority, struck a bargain with the U. S. Attorney, pleaded guilty, and turned state's evidence.

Over the past four weeks, much of the testimony revealed an ugly, vindictive side of politics, marked by profane outbursts directed toward the administration's critics.

The use of wide ranging executive powers to grant favors to supporters and to take revenge on opponents was a common and constant theme in the administration, according to the testimony.

In more than a week on the stand, Wildstein implicated Baroni and Kelly as key figures in the planning and execution of the lane closures and claimed both were aware that the scheme was designed to send a message to the Fort Lee mayor that his refusal to endorse the governor came at a steep price.

He testified further that Christie was informed of the plot, as were numerous other administration figures, and all were told the action would be justified as an authority sanctioned traffic study.

The governor has maintained he knew nothing of the plot —either before or after the fact —and, aside from Wildstein's testimony, there's been no evidence to contradict him.

Baroni, in his time on the stand, insisted that Wildstein controlled events in the days immediately following the lane closures and that he (Baroni) feared him because he believed Wildstein answered to no one except Christie.

The traffic study cover story that Baroni laid out in significant detail before the legislative investigating committee collapsed with the disclosure of an e mail from Kelly to Wildstein that essentially put the lane closure scheme into motion and drew the administration directly into the center of the maelstrom.

Charles McKenna, then serving as chief counsel to the governor, testified that he was informed by Wildstein that a wholly legitimate traffic study was authorized and carried out, and that he accepted the explanation and pursued it no further.

Other high ranking administration staffers, as well as others close to the governor politically or personally, were also aware that creating the traffic jams was retribution and that the traffic study rationale was bogus, according to Wildstein.

It is the task of the jury to sift through the conflicting stories and determine their credibility.

Which portrayal of Wildstein will the jury accept? That of an out of control political operative, an accomplished liar consumed by his own ego, obsessed with enforcing his brand of discipline, while currying favor with Christie? Or as someone who regrets his actions, did only what he was convinced was in the best interests of the administration, willing now to accept responsibility and tell the truth about who else was involved in what, in retrospect, was the most monumental political blunder in recent history.

He also made it clear that his cooperation with prosecutors was motivated by his desire to avoid serving time in prison.

The three —Wildstein, Baroni, and Kelly—will be forever associated with Bridgegate, no matter the eventual jury verdict. Their futures will be impacted heavily as they attempt to move on, put the entire episode and its sordid, seamy circumstances behind them.

But there will be a cost to others as well. Christie, for instance, has admitted that the scandal damaged his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Moreover, polling data shows that it has contributed significantly to his record low approval ratings which now stand in peril of dipping below 20 percent.

For someone whose political future glowed brightly as little as four years ago, the fall from grace must be bitter indeed.

The others drawn into the scandal will suffer in varying degrees. Those in an administration due to close out in 15 months may find their involvement —peripheral or larger—to be an obstacle in seeking public sector c aq
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