

Gov. Christie's Failed Press Conference

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 10, 2014 | Distinctly Catholic

Governor Chris Christie gave a commanding performance yesterday, taking questions from reporters for about two hours, until there were no more questions to be asked. Indeed, that was the whole point of the exercise: Stand there, take the heat, and let the narrative going forward become, "He answered every question we had, ergo, there must be no more questions and the case is closed."

The idea of undertaking a marathon-press conference for the purpose of closing a troublesome chapter first debuted when vice presidential nominee Geraldine Ferraro held a press conference to treat the subject of her family's finances. She, too, took questions until none of the reporters had anything else to ask and, voila, the issue went away. The case was closed, it was obvious she had nothing to hide, and, as an added benefit, she was shown to be tough enough to stand up to the press corps with no time limit. Surely, Gov. Christie was hoping to achieve a similar success, not least because it was a humble, not a bullying, Christie who stood behind the lectern for two hours. His toughness was cloaked in gentleness. There were no outbursts, no condescending comments.

The problem for Christie is not how he handled himself during the presser. The problem is that he came to the presser unprepared. He did not "close the case" yesterday because he admitted that he had not spoken with his recently fired deputy chief of staff, Bridget Anne Kelly, to ascertain why she had done what she did. Christie said that he could tell from the emails that she had lied and that was enough for him to send her packing. He did not want to hear any excuses.

There are two problems here. The first has been much commented on in this morning's papers. Gov. Christie seemed to think that Ms. Kelly's principal infraction was lying to him when, in fact, her real crime was an abuse of power, unnecessarily snarling traffic for thousands of people as a form of political retribution. Thank God, there were no real victims, no one who died as a result of the lane closures on the Fort Lee entrance ramps. (The family of one elderly woman who did die en route to the hospital that week said that it was Granny's time to go and that they did not hold the Governor responsible.) But, throughout yesterday's proceedings, Christie painted himself as the victim. Certainly his presidential ambitions took a hit. And, yes, it must be frustrating to have staffers who lie. (It is also frustrating to have a boss who creates an office culture where retribution and deceit are considered fair game.) But, Chris Christie cannot sustain the "poor, little, ol' me" routine effectively.

The second problem is the more worrisome. Christie's failure to question Ms. Kelly as to her motives kept him from answering the "why" question. Indeed, he said he could not recall any big effort to secure the endorsement of the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee, which is one reason he found the charges so ridiculous when the scandal first broke. On this point, the mayor agreed: He, too, could not recall any major effort on the part of Christie's political team to garner an endorsement. At the press conference, Christie, more than once, said his aides' actions were "stupid" precisely because they were disproportionate to the political lapse of failing to endorse a governor of a different party.

Since the story broke, the assumption has been that it all came back to a desire to exact political retribution against the mayor of Fort Lee. What became obvious yesterday is that, perhaps, there was a different reason Ms.

Kelly suggested his friends at the Port Authority create some traffic snarls in Fort Lee. Maybe this whole thing had nothing to do with the mayor? And that question opens a whole new line of questioning, a whole new cast of characters, in short, in seeking to dismiss the whole episode as fool-hardy, and largely succeeding, Gov. Christie unwittingly opened up a new can of worms. That is exactly the last thing he needed to do.

Last night, Rachel Maddow noted that the day before Ms. Kelly sent her now famous email calling for traffic problems in Fort Lee, the Governor held a press conference at which he announced he was not renominating a Republican judge to the State Supreme Court because he did not want to subject her to the ?animals? who run the State Senate. Turns out, the Democratic-controlled chamber had given Christie a hard time on judicial nominees after he broke with New Jersey tradition and declined to re-nominate a previous judge to the court. N.J. has a quirky system in which judges are nominated for a seven year term and then re-nominated for life, and in all previous instances, under governors of both parties, judges were routinely re-nominated. Christie broke the mold. The Democrats in the State Senate objected. Bad blood all around. And, guess what, the Democratic Leader in the State Senate represents a district that includes Fort Lee.

The whole nation now knows Fort Lee mayor Mark Sokolich. Now, we will get to meet State Senator Loretta Weinberg from Fort Lee. And Helen Hoens, the judge whose re-nomination Christie declined to make the day before the email about lane closures. And Hoens? husband who works for Christie. And former Judge John Wallace, the first judge Gov. Christie declined to re-nominate. Each of these new actors will have a story to tell. Each will get their fifteen seconds of fame, maybe more. Each may know something else that is unflattering about Gov. Christie, yes, even the Republican Hoens who learned that Gov. Christie is not allergic to throwing long-time aides under the bus when needed.

Here is what lawyers call an ?alternative theory of the crime.? It is one of the things it was Gov. Christie?s job to foreclose yesterday. Instead, he fed it. The drama will continue. So, for all his seemingly effortless candor, his humility, real of well-played, Gov. Christie failed yesterday to achieve one of his principal goals: bringing the story to a close. The investigations will continue. The reporters, having smelt blood, will not soon depart. Next time he gets stuck in traffic, Gov. Christie can ponder what he will do now that his chances for higher office are plummeting.

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