



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on January 9, 2014

Christie Apologizes for George Washington Bridge Scandal

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, speaking to members of the media during a press conference on January 9, apologized for the role members of his staff played in the still-unexplained closings last September of two of the three lanes connecting the borough of Fort Lee to the George Washington Bridge (shown). The lane closures resulted in four days of mammoth traffic jams in Fort Lee that impeded the flow of school buses and emergency vehicles.



The George Washington Bridge crosses the Hudson River between New Jersey and Manhattan.

[Christie began the conference by stating:](#)

I come out here to this office where I've been many times before and I've come out here today to apologize to the people of New Jersey. I apologize to the people of Fort Lee and I apologize to the members of the state legislature.

I am embarrassed and humiliated by the conduct of some of the people on my team.

There's no doubt in my mind that the conduct that they exhibited is completely unacceptable and showed a lack of respect for the appropriate role of government and for the people that were trusted to serve.

Christie said, significantly: "This morning I've terminated the employment of [Deputy Chief of Staff] Bridget Kelly, effective immediately. I've terminated her employment because she lied to me."

[AP has reported](#) that it and other news organizations obtained copies of e-mails and text messages on January 8 that implicated Kelly in the lane closings, allegedly as political retribution against Fort Lee Mayor Mark Sokolich, a Democrat who did not join other members of his party in endorsing Christie during his campaign for reelection last November.

In August, Kelly wrote in a message to David Wildstein, a top Christie appointee on the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey: "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee."

Wildstein replied: "Got it."

A few weeks later, starting on September 9, Wildstein closed the lanes connecting Fort Lee to the George Washington Bridge. Shortly after 8 a.m. on September 13, Port Authority police removed the orange cones that had shrunk access to the bridge.

"We just got a phone call saying that the Port Authority was lifting the plan," Fort Lee Police Chief Keith Bendul said.

Port Authority spokesman, Steve Coleman, issued the following explanation in an e-mail: "The Port Authority has conducted a week of study at the ... bridge of traffic-safety patterns. We will now review those results and determine the best traffic patterns.... We'll continue to work with our local law



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enforcement partners.”

Apparently, even the executive director of the Port Authority, Patrick Foye, did not know about the lane closures in advance, stating that he first learned about them after receiving inquiries from the media. Foye sent an e-mail to agency executives on September 13 ordering the reopening of the closed lanes. Foye did not state in the e-mail why the lanes had been closed, or who ordered their closure, but he said the decision to do so without notifying the public was “hasty and ill-advised” and that he was “appalled” by it, reported the (Bergen County, N.J.) [Record newspaper](#).

Mayor Sokolich called the lane closures “appalling” and said that, in his opinion, the traffic jams appear to have been deliberately created. “Their job is to keep us safe and to make the right decisions and to make those decisions with venomous motivation, is completely inexcusable to me,” the mayor was quoted as saying by [CBS news](#).

Sokolich said the gridlock put people in danger by holding up emergency vehicles and that those responsible should resign. “When it’s man-made and when it was done with venom and when it was done intentionally, it is, in my mind, the prime example of political pettiness,” he said.

Two Christie appointees to the Port Authority have indeed resigned — Wildstein and Port Authority deputy executive director (and a former N.J. state senator) Bill Baroni. The governors of New York and New Jersey each appoint six members to the agency’s board of directors. (An executive director, appointed by the Board of Commissioners, is responsible for managing the operation of the Port Authority in a manner consistent with the agency’s policies, as established by the Board.)

Wildstein is consistently referred to by the media as a longtime friend of Christie, but when asked about this relationship during the press conference, Christie said:

It is true that I met David in 1977 in high school. He’s a year older than me. David and I were not friends in high school. We were not even acquaintances in high school....

I knew who David Wildstein was. I met David on the Tom Kean for governor campaign in 1977. He was a youth volunteer, and so was I.

Really, after that time, I completely lost touch with David.... So we went 23 years without seeing each other.... I know David and, you know, I knew that Bill Baroni wanted to hire David to come to the Port Authority, and I gave my permission for him to do it, but that was Bill’s hire. He asked for permission, I gave my permission for him to hire David. But let’s be clear about the relationship, OK?

When a reporter asked Christie who had initiated the traffic closures, the governor responded:

I don’t know.... Up to this point in time, up till the emails released yesterday, it was Senator Baroni’s testimony that Mr. Wildstein initiated it at his approval — with his approval.... Clearly, Mr. Wildstein played a major role in it. Whether it was his idea in initiation, as Senator Baroni testified, I guess time will tell. But clearly, there was knowledge of this action, whatever it was, prior to the beginning of it with Bridget Kelly.... And I was lied to. And for that, she’s been terminated.

New Jersey’s [Record newspaper](#) reported on December 13 that Christie had announced Baroni’s resignation that morning, acknowledging “that his top two executives at the agency [Baroni and Wildstein] had made mistakes.” Wildstein tendered his resignation the same day.

“When mistakes are made, people have to be held accountable for them,” Christie said, describing himself as “bothered” by the errors but not angry.



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Port Authority Chairman David Samson issued a statement on January 8, saying he was “extremely upset and distressed” about the e-mails and text messages that have come public.

Samson said no one on the board had any knowledge of the lane closures until they received an e-mail from Executive Director Patrick Foye ordering the lanes reopened. “We expect to get a complete picture as a result of the Port Authority’s Inspector General’s investigation, which commenced a few weeks ago, and thereafter will take appropriate action,” he said.

In his dismissal of Bridget Kelly and by making a public apology for the actions of his staffers during today’s press conference, Christie followed the advice — consciously or not — offered by former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer in a National Review Online column yesterday. “He should get out on TV, and he should do it today,” said Fleischer. “He should apologize to the public, apologize to the mayor, he should dismiss his staff, and move forward. He needs to be blunt, he needs to be direct, and he should be himself.”

“If you’re going to run for president, the media will make issues like this a defining matter if you’re a Republican,” Fleischer continued. “Because it’s not a major policy issue but an easily understood issue, especially for a governor whose potential candidacy is really a personality-based candidacy, it shines a light on his personality. He needs to move fast to put it a positive light rather than a negative light.”

Republicans who have placed great hope in Christie as a potential standard bearer against a Hillary Clinton candidacy will understandably be worried by this ongoing scandal. However, more constitutionalist voters have become disenchanted with Christie’s straying from conservative positions on such important issues as gun control, immigration, and same-sex “marriage.”

In an article in the [Washington Post](#) for January 9, columnist Sean Sullivan noted: “Christie has long been viewed with skepticism by the right because of his cooperation with Democrats — most notably President Obama during the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy — and his positions on guns, immigration and gay marriage. Now, amid a scandal involving his aides’ decision to close a bridge as an apparent act of political retribution, some on the right are again raising red flags about the prospect of a Christie 2016 presidential campaign.”

Whether “Bridgegate” will be Christie’s political funeral dirge remains to be seen. As Watergate demonstrated, however, the major media tend to devote more attention to scandals than to substantive political issues, and this story seems to be still gathering momentum. So unless Christie can bounce back with amazing agility, the governorship of New Jersey may prove to be the apex of his political career.



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