

We learned a lot about Christie in Bridgegate

By Richard Cohen, Updated: January 9 at 9:06 am

There is a word that, until now, was never used in relation to Chris Christie. Stupid! Bully? Yes. Hot tempered? Yes. Vindictive, voluble? Sure. But stupid? Never. Still, you tell me a better word to describe Bridgegate — the monumentally moronic attempt to get even with the mayor of Fort Lee, N.J., by flooding his town with cars, gridlocking it for four days by closing a major entrance to the George Washington Bridge. This is not old-timey politics. This is high school.

Christie has not been implicated — not yet, anyway. But his closest aides have been — people who were named by him to staff his office and someone who has been a close friend since high school. These vindictive pranksters were a fair reflection of Christie, an extension of the man himself. When it came to the bistate authority that runs the GW, it was well known that nothing much was approved unless Christie approved. The governor does not delegate political decisions.

The decision to close the bridge approach is clearly in a category of its own. It was apparently an attempt to punish the mayor of Fort Lee, a Democrat, for not endorsing Christie's reelection bid. Christie was going to win big, but he wanted to win with Democratic support, showing the nation and the GOP that his appeal was as wide as, well, he was — or used to be. He was, in other words, presidential material.

Creating a four-day traffic jam is a strange sort of political payback. In the first place, the ones who suffered were drivers — some of them undoubtedly Republicans — and residents of the town who had to breathe some pretty foul air. Children could not get to school and emergency vehicles could not get through. It's a miracle that no one died. What were Christie's guys thinking?

They weren't. Most forms of political payback are deniable, not clear political vindictiveness. But Bridgegate was out in the open. It showed a heroic arrogance, a to-hell-with-the-people attitude on the part of the governor's aides that just had to be reflection of Christie himself. Would he secretly approve? Would his chest swell with pride? My God, after all, they did it for him.

This arrogance is best exemplified by the various e-mails Christie's aides sent one another. They put it all on paper. They left a record in the hard disc. That's how confident they were in their own invulnerability. They wrote about their contempt for the Fort Lee mayor. They joked about kids who could not get to school. They chortled about the mayor's protestations.

In Watergate, it was not Richard Nixon who ordered the burglary. It was the president's men. They were, in some way, a true reflection of the paranoid, vindictive nature of Nixon himself. It's hard for me to believe that whatever the outcome, we have not learned something very troubling about Chris Christie. He may not have ordered the lane closings and he may not have known about it afterward, but he hired the sort of people who did both.

Stupid.

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