



OPINION: IMPEACHING CHRISTIE — A BAD IDEA WHOSE TIME HASN'T COME

CARL GOLDEN | NOVEMBER 16, 2016

The Democrats would be the real losers in any impeachment effort, demonstrating they're as vindictive as the governor himself — which would surely cost them support in 2017



Despite the apparently serious demands of its supporters, impeaching Gov. Christie over his involvement in or knowledge of the George Washington Bridge lane closure scandal is wishful thinking.

The response ranged from unenthusiastic to outright opposition to the proposal by Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg (D Bergen) for the Assembly to begin impeachment proceedings based on testimony offered during the seven week federal trial of two former Christie administration officials charged with

orchestrating the access lane closures in Fort Lee in September 2013.

Former deputy chief of staff Bridget Anne Kelly and former deputy executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey Bill Baroni were found guilty and both have filed motions for a new trial. The pair was accused of conspiring with David Wildstein, former director of interstate capital projects at the authority, to reroute the access lanes over a four day period, creating a massive traffic jam, backing up into the town's streets, to embarrass and punish Mayor Mark Sokolich for refusing to endorse Christie's reelection. Wildstein reached a deal with prosecutors, pleaded guilty and turned state's evidence.

While some legislators may sympathize privately with Weinberg, at this point she seems to be the lone voice raised in support of impeachment.

Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald (D Camden), for instance, quickly dismissed her suggestion, saying he saw no hard evidence that Christie had acted improperly and there was no point in proceeding.

Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto (D Hudson), was a bit more circumspect, saying that "all legislative activity" would be considered, but he expressed his annoyance that Weinberg had broken courtesy and legislative protocol by announcing her intention through a news release rather than informing him first.

Translation: No way.

With Christie now in his final 14 months in office, Democrats see no point and nothing to be gained in a full scale impeachment effort. It would be time consuming, expensive, and likely to dominate the news and political environment through the 2017 election campaigns.

Democrats are certain to maintain their majorities in the Legislature —if not build on them —and all early signs indicate the party will retake the governor's office.

Why muddy up what appears to be a sure thing with weeks and months of debate and strife over a certain to fail attempt to drive Christie out of office.

Impeachment could, furthermore, become a serious political liability for Democrats, portraying the party as more interested in political kabuki theater than in offering voters clear and compelling reasons to support its candidates. Drowning out a public policy, issue oriented message with one of pointless political posturing is not a particularly wise strategy.

By agreeing to Weinberg's request, Democrats could place themselves in a position similar to Republicans in the House of Representatives who were roundly criticized for their Inspector Javert like pursuit of impeachment of President Bill Clinton in 1998.

Republicans then —like New Jersey Democrats today —knew full well Clinton would be acquitted in a Senate trial (he was in early 1999) and their entire effort was a money wasting, embarrassing charade.

Christie has already been damaged badly by the Bridgegate episode and trial. His support in the state has fallen below 20 percent; he's been dismissed as chairman of the transition team for President elect Donald J. Trump; and there is growing speculation that any hoped for Cabinet or staff position in a Trump administration has vanished. Numerous reports suggest that Christie has lost an internal power struggle within the Trump inner circle and that Trump himself has been convinced that the Bridgegate baggage is simply too onerous to shoulder.

The governor is in lame duck status, perilously close to caretaker. Any major or substantive legislative agenda or administration initiatives are likely to receive short shrift from Democrats who will be more concerned with building their own record than assisting in creating a Christie legacy.

A protracted impeachment process would overwhelm the Legislature and only serve to distract Democrats from focusing on the prize within their grasp.

There is, moreover, little to be learned about the Christie administration and Bridgegate that isn't already known or hasn't been chewed over endlessly in the media. There is nothing of value to be had in a reiteration of the administration's obsession with political advantage, or its system of rewarding friends and punishing enemies while celebrating what it had done, or in describing the culture of vindictiveness which ruled.

While Christie was not charged by the U. S. Attorney and did not testify at the trial, his was an ethereal presence during the seven weeks of testimony and argument.

While the governor has insisted he knew nothing of the lane closures either before or after they were set in motion, five witnesses testified they informed him on different occasions and that members of his staff were involved.

A few days after the guilty verdicts were delivered, Christie, in a rather lawyerly fashion, said he had no recollection of being told of the scheme. He stopped short of conceding he'd been informed, just that he did not remember the conversations.

His name was invoked repeatedly during the trial as the defense attorneys sought to convince jurors their clients acted at the behest of others, implying that Christie had knowledge of the plot and had a hand in setting up Kelly as the scapegoat.

Two jurors spoke publicly after the deliberations, one suggesting that Christie should have been on trial as well and the other describing the governor as the "master puppeteer" behind the scandal.

Under media questioning, U. S. attorney Paul Fishman defended his decision to indict Kelly, Baroni, and Wildstein, saying that his office brought charges against those whose guilt could be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

