OPINION: SEXIST DEPICTION OF BRIDGET KELLY RETURNS BRIDGEGATE TO FRONT PAGE

CARL GOLDEN | APRIL 1, 2014

Why did Christie’s million-dollar lawyer think it necessary to portray Kelly as unstable, insecure victim of failed romance

While Gov. Chris Christie and his team of attorneys were prepared for the cynical reception of their in-house investigation that cleared him of any involvement in Bridgegate, they seem taken aback by the fierce backlash against the report’s portrayal of his former deputy chief of staff Bridget Anne Kelly as an emotionally distraught, if not unstable, and insecure woman so upset over a failed love affair that she conspired to close access lanes to the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee.

In exonerating Christie, the report placed all blame on Kelly and David Wildstein, a Christie-approved top staffer at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, for shifting the access lanes for four days in September, resulting in a massive traffic jam and eventually exploding into a scandal whose fall out has inflicted serious damage on the governor.

Singling out Kelly and Wildstein as the sole responsible parties while absolving the governor and his top staff was not unexpected, but the accompanying demeaning language characterizing Kelly elicited a storm of criticism accusing the lead attorney, Randy Mastro, and the governor of the worst sort of sexist behavior.

Mastro’s task as assigned by Christie was to determine if there was involvement by anyone in the administration -- other than Kelly who was blamed and fired by Christie in January -- in the lane-closure scheme.

In doing so, for some reason Mastro delved into Kelly’s personal life in addition to her professional career and, in what struck most people as totally unnecessary and gratuitous, said she was impelled to act as a result of the severing of a personal relationship she had with Christie confidante and campaign manager Bill Stepien.

Whatever Mastro’s motivation for including Kelly’s personal life in his report, it drew nearly universal condemnation as an assault on a woman for no apparent or logical reason, other than to shred her reputation and send a not-so-veiled message that she’d receive more such treatment if she decided to break her silence and reveal whatever she knows about others in the administration and their roles -- if any --- in the lane closure episode.

It all seemed so stupidly unnecessary. Mastro had the goods on her: Her “time for some traffic troubles in Fort Lee,” message and the subsequent e-mail exchanges she had with Wildstein, electronically chortling over the havoc they’d created.

He and his team could easily have pinned the entire scheme on her and Wildstein without the amateur psychoanalysis.

It raises also questions about the judgment of other members of Mastro’s investigative team, particularly the women, who apparently didn’t object to the rhetorical destruction of Kelly.
Didn't anyone in this roomful of high-powered lawyers utter “Whoa, this is trouble,” upon reading the portrayal of Kelly? Did no one foresee the potential adverse reaction to alleging that Kelly was victimized by her own hormones and couldn't help herself from retaliating against someone?

Even in his appearance on a Sunday morning news/talk show, Mastro was defiantly unapologetic, defending his work with the snarky observation that some people “can’t handle the truth.”

So, for a million bucks or so, Christie got a guy who can quote Jack Nicholson.

The governor has defended Mastro’s report and waved it in the air as conclusive and exhaustive proof of his repeated claims that he knew nothing about the bridge closing scheme until it hit the newspapers.

Critics suggest otherwise; that he got exactly what his administration paid for --- a report that validated his claims and supported his predetermined conclusions.

Whether he shares Mastro’s description of Kelly or whether he agrees that parading her private life in front of an enthralled media was a wise maneuver, Christie’s unwavering defense of the report suggests he wasn’t troubled by it.

Presumably he could have prevailed upon Mastro to delete that portion of the report in light of the other evidence which pointed to her culpability. The administration went out of its way to describe the report as “comprehensive and exhaustive.” It could have been both without recounting Kelly’s personal travails.

Through her attorney, rather than in person, Kelly expressed her anger with being identified as a scorned woman, psychologically incapable of dealing rationally with personal issues.

Her reaction led to speculation that the embarrassment she felt would translate into offering her version of events, her interactions with others on the governor’s staff, and -- at the core of the controversy -- whether she can tie Christie directly either to preknowledge of the lane closures or to participating in the after-the fact-attempt to disguise it as a legitimate Port Authority traffic study.

Kelly and Stepien are both embroiled in a court case in which they are challenging the validity of subpoenas for documents from the legislative investigating committee. At the same time, their attorneys have offered their clients’ cooperation if granted immunity from prosecution from the committee as well as from the United States Attorney.

Both have invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

The uproar over the report’s treatment of Kelly is a setback to Christie’s strategy of putting Bridgegate behind him by shifting the public debate onto firmer ground through his favorite town hall forums where he can reiterate his message of controlling government spending, cutting taxes, improving education, and so on.

At a time when Bridgegate began to show signs of a loss of momentum, when new revelations have ceased to spark renewed public and media interest, the outrage over the demeaning of Kelly has put the matter back on the front pages.

Christie is one of the more savvy politicians to hold the governor’s office and he’s shown no signs of a tin ear -- until now. Whatever one might think about the irresponsibility of Kelly’s use of her office to choke off traffic on the George Washington Bridge, portraying her as an emotional cripple was a major political blunder.

As for Mastro, he should settle in on a Saturday night to watch “A Few Good Men.” In the end, Nicholson was found guilty.

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