
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Christie's bigger sins

Commentary | By Craig Gurian | Politics

Jan. 15, 2014 — Yes, he's a thug. Yes, he's trying to change the subject. But isn't there a lot more to report on about New Jersey Governor Chris Christie? Like the fact that he's been guilty of wildly irresponsible and sometimes lawless behavior before.

Transportation problems, for example, seem to be a Christie specialty. As bad as it was to torture Fort Lee with massive traffic congestion for four days, his actions in 2010 to kill the construction of a Hudson River tunnel for the use of New Jersey Transit were far more consequential and have and will hurt the entire region for decades to come.

Amtrak and New Jersey Transit have long been forced to share a single, two-track tunnel. The arrangement sharply limits overall capacity, and not infrequently results in cascading delays (if an Amtrak train is stuck in the tunnel, New Jersey Transit trains have nowhere else to go).

Decades of planning came to fruition with the decision to build the "Access to the Region's Core," or "ARC" Tunnel. Funding came not only from New Jersey itself, but also from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and from the federal government.

So what did Governor Christie do with the job-creating, congestion-reducing, economy-propelling, and environment-restoring project? After the last minute (that is, once the work on the project was underway), he withdrew New Jersey's support, losing both \$3 billion in federal financing and a golden opportunity to strengthen the region for the long term in the process.

The excuse he gave — cost overruns — was a flimsy cover for his real goal. Christie had made a campaign promise not to raise his state's gasoline tax. As *The New York Times* [reported in 2012](#), after cancelling the ARC Tunnel project, he "subsequently steered \$4 billion earmarked for the tunnel to the state's near-bankrupt transportation trust fund, traditionally financed by the gasoline tax."

And it turns out that Christie played fast and loose with the facts about cost overruns and New Jersey's share of the costs. A [2012 GAO report](#), the spur for the story in the Times, found that New Jersey's share of the project's cost was dramatically lower (14.4 percent) than the 70 percent the governor had claimed. The report also found that cost estimates had been essentially unchanged in the two years prior to Christie's withdrawal from the project, putting the lie to his claim that his decision was driven by newfound information.

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The tunnel fiasco illustrated Christie's irresponsibility and shortsightedness. His handling of affordable housing illustrates his lawlessness. New Jersey's courts, in what is referred to as the Mount Laurel doctrine, long ago decided that municipal land use regulations that prevent the construction of affordable housing for poor and moderate-income families are illegal, and that each municipality must act affirmatively to take a "fair share" of regional need.

Responsibility for implementation rests with the Council on Affordable Housing (COAH), an independent state agency. COAH has [hardly done a stellar job](#), but even halting progress has been too much for Governor Christie and others who seek to keep exclusionary zoning in place. (How do these advocates of exclusion defend the social engineering that operates to keep existing class- and race-based residential patterns in place? By echoing the "states' rights" claims made by segregationists of the 1960s. Their preferred term is "home rule.")

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So Christie, contemptuous of the law, has repeatedly sought to sabotage the COAH process. Among his brazen stratagems: trying to abolish COAH altogether and trying to seize unilaterally more than \$100 million in municipal housing trust funds earmarked for affordable housing in order to cheat his way to a balanced budget. In each case, the [Fair Share Housing Center](#), whose mission is to end exclusionary housing patterns, has successfully fought Governor Christie in court, winning decisions finding that Christie did not have the authority to act as he did.

Why hasn't the press paid more attention to these and other substantive failings — before, during, or after this past November's gubernatorial election? It's the usual story. Once the press anoints a politician with rock star status — be it John McCain, Michael Bloomberg, or Chris Christie — it is typically only a "smoking gun" that can change the narrative.

And the definition of smoking gun that the press uses is remarkably narrow; it generally requires a scandal, it demands that a politician be caught out. At the moment, it certainly appears that Christie's "Bridge-gate" qualifies. But the bigger and more important scandals are almost always the ones hiding in plain sight. They require the press (even political reporters!) to report persistently on what a politician has done and not done — and the continuing impact of that conduct on the public — instead of focusing on the question of how and whether a politician will be able to spin something to his or her advantage.

I can hear the rejoinder already: "We already reported the tunnel story," for example. The disingenuousness is palpable. This standard, for example, never gets applied either to stories of the Christie-is-popular flavor (or of the entitlements-must-be-reformed category, for that matter). Those stories represent an editorial decision that these subjects have continuing importance.

The decisions change over time. Only very recently, stories about income inequality (which did, after all, exist prior to 2013) have made the leap to repeat-coverage status. It shouldn't be too much to ask to have more issues of substance join the list.

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