

Christie Apologizes For Traffic Jams

N.J. Gov. Also Fires Top Aide For Behavior

BY ANGELA DELLI SANTI AND GEOFF MULVIHILL
Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. — Gov. Chris Christie fired one of his top aides Thursday and apologized over and over for his staff's "stupid" behavior, insisting during a nearly two-hour news conference that he had no idea anyone around him had engineered traffic jams as part of a political vendetta against a Democratic mayor.

"I am embarrassed and humiliated by the conduct of some of the people on my team," he said as he addressed the widening scandal that could cast a shadow over his expected run for the White House in 2016.

The famously blunt Republican fielded dozens of questions from reporters with uncharacteristic patience and at times a sorrowful tone.

Christie, who had previously assured the public that his staff had nothing to do with the lane closings in September that caused major backups at the George Washington Bridge, said he fired Deputy Chief of Staff Bridget Anne Kelly "because she lied to me" when he demanded weeks ago that anyone who knew anything about the episode come forward.

The gridlock in Fort Lee delayed emergency vehicles, school buses and countless commuters for four days.

Kelly was the latest casualty in the scandal. Two other top Christie appointees have resigned in the past few weeks.

The investigation broke wide open on Wednesday, with the release of emails and text messages that suggested Kelly arranged the traffic jams to punish Fort Lee's mayor for not endorsing Christie for re-election.

In other developments: — The chief federal prosecutor in New Jersey, U.S. Attorney Paul Fishman, said he is "reviewing the matter to determine whether a federal



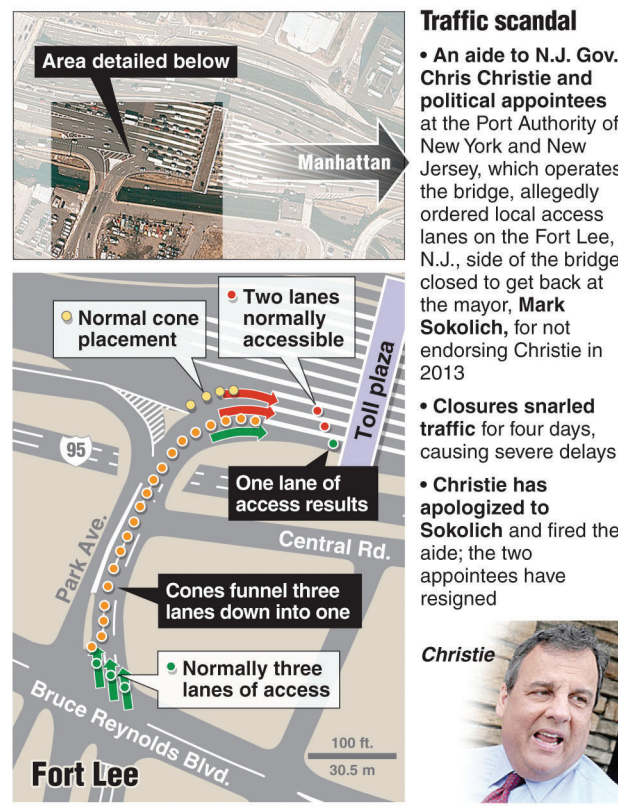
The world's busiest bridge

- Opened to traffic 1931 (upper level), 1962 (lower level)
- Length 4,760 ft. (1,450 m)
- Width of roadway 90 ft. (27 m)
- Number of toll lanes 12 on upper level, 12 on lower
- Traffic volume (2012) 49.1 million vehicles

Source: Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, ESRI, AP, Chicago Tribune, MCT Photo Service, ESRI, Aerogrid, AEX, GeoEye, Getmapping, i-cubest, IGN, IGP, the GIS User Community, USDA, USGS
Graphic: Pat Carr and Robert Dorrell, MCT and R.L. Rebach, The (Bergen County) Record
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Looking at the bridge toll plaza

The toll plaza on the Fort Lee, N.J., side of the George Washington Bridge allows access to the busy bridge, which connects New Jersey and New York along Interstate 95.



Traffic scandal

- An aide to N.J. Gov. Chris Christie and political appointees at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates the bridge, allegedly ordered local access lanes on the Fort Lee, N.J., side of the bridge closed to get back at the mayor, Mark Sokolich, for not endorsing Christie in 2013
- Closures snarled traffic for four days, causing severe delays
- Christie has apologized to Sokolich and fired the aide; the two appointees have resigned



law was implicated." The Legislature is also investigating. Using public resources for political ends can be a crime.

— David Wildstein, a Christie appointee who resigned from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey after being implicated in the scandal, was found in contempt Thursday by a legislative committee after he invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and refused to answer questions. The Port Authority operates the bridge.

— Christie traveled to Fort Lee later in the day and apologized in person to Mayor Mark Sokolich.

The political-payback allegations turned a local traffic furor into a national issue and raised questions about Christie's leadership and integrity as he lays the groundwork for a White House bid. Democrats at the national level have seized on the scandal as more evidence that Christie is a bully.

The governor brushed off

questions about the effect on his presidential prospects, saying he was too busy governing the state to think about that.

"I am absolutely nowhere near beginning that consideration process," he said. "I haven't even been sworn in for my second term yet."

Afterward, some political analysts on both sides of the aisle said Christie would probably pull through OK — provided there are no more surprises.

Democratic operative David Axelrod complimented Christie for handling the news conference "as well as he could," writing on Twitter: "Unless smoking gun turns up tying him to scheme, or others arise, he lives 2 fight another day."

Besides firing Kelly, Christie cut ties to former campaign manager Bill Stepien, asking him to withdraw a bid to become the next state GOP chairman. The governor said he was disturbed by the "callous indifference" displayed by Stepien in the emails re-

leased Wednesday. Stepien had widely been seen as a potential campaign manager for Christie if he runs for president.

Christie said he is still looking into the traffic-jam episode and will take action against other senior staff members if it is warranted.

Over and over, Christie took responsibility for the affair by virtue of his role as governor, while simultaneously blaming his staff for doing something "stupid" and for not telling him the truth when he asked.

He said he saw the emails and text messages for the first time on Wednesday, and was "blindsided" by what he read and outraged by the callous language. He said he was left "heartbroken" and "betrayed" by his tight-knit circle of advisers.

"I had no knowledge or involvement in this issue, in its planning or execution," Christie said of the lane closings. "And I am stunned by the abject stupidity that was shown here."



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT
U.S. President Barack Obama speaks Thursday about ways the federal government can help economically challenged communities through five new Promise Zones, during an East Room event at the White House in Washington, DC.

Obama Unveils First 5 'Promise Zones'

BY JIM KUHNHENN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Invoking his own personal story, President Barack Obama made a plea for bipartisan work to combat poverty and declared, after a 2013 marked by struggles and disappointments, that "this is going to be a year of action."

Obama on Thursday offered a glimpse at his coming State of the Union address and its expected emphasis on economic disparities while announcing five communities that will be targeted for tax incentives and federal grants under a government "Promise Zone" program.

"We've got to make sure this recovery — which is real — leaves nobody behind," he said. "And that's going to be my focus throughout the year."

Obama named the new zones — a blend of rural, urban and tribal communities — at a bipartisan White House assembly, underscoring the type of administrative actions Obama wishes to employ that don't all require congressional action.

Amid a slow recovery that has not reached many at the lowest rungs of the economy, addressing poverty has become an emerging issue in Washington. Obama has made it a central part of his agenda, and leading Republicans, including potential 2016 presidential contenders, are using the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty to offer policy pro-

posals aimed at the poor and struggling workers.

Obama welcomed the bipartisan interest, saying, "this should be a challenge that unites us all."

In a rare public reference to his own upbringing, Obama compared himself to a young man invited to the White House event Thursday who graduated from high school under a 1997 Harlem program and become the first member of his family to attend college. As described by Obama, the student, Roger Brown, was the son of a single mother and was nearly expelled from school before deciding to make a change in his life.

"There was a period of time in my life where I was goofing off," Obama said. "I was raised by a single mom, I didn't know my dad. The only difference between me and Roger was my environment was more forgiving than his. That's the only difference. If I screwed up, the consequences weren't quite as great."

Thursday's five zones are the first of 20 the administration intends to announce over the next three years. They're in San Antonio, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, southeastern Kentucky and the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Under the program, communities in the zones would have a leg up applying for federal grants, benefit from more coordinated government assistance and would be singled out for possible congressionally approved tax incentives.

Cutting Food Stamps Could Backfire, Doctors Say

WASHINGTON (AP) — Doctors are warning that if Congress cuts food stamps, the federal government could be socked with bigger health bills. Maybe not immediately, they say, but over time if the poor wind up in doctors' offices or hospitals as a result.

Among the health risks of hunger are spiked rates of diabetes and developmental problems for young children down the road.

The doctors' lobbying effort comes as Congress is working on a compromise farm bill that's certain to include food stamp cuts. Republicans want heftier reductions than do Democrats in yet another partisan battle over the government's role in helping poor Americans.

Food stamps, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, feed 1 in 7 Americans and cost almost \$80 billion a year, twice what it cost five years ago. Conservatives say the program spiraled out of control as the economy struggled and the costs are not sustainable. They say the neediest people will not go hungry.

The health and financial risks of hunger have not played a major role in the debate. But the medical community says cutting food aid could backfire through higher Medicaid and Medicare costs.

"If you're interested in saving health care costs, the dumbest thing you can do is cut nutrition," said Dr. Deborah Frank of Boston Medical Center, who founded the Children's HealthWatch pediatric research institute.

"People don't make the hunger-health connection."

Probe Tempers Hagel's Morale Effort

F.E. WARREN AIR FORCE BASE, Wyo. (AP) — Hoping to boost sagging morale, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel made a rare visit Thursday to an Air Force nuclear missile base and the men and women who operate and safeguard the nation's Minuteman 3 missiles. But his attempt to cheer the troops was tempered by news that launch officers at another base had been implicated in an illegal-narcotics investigation.



Hagel

Two officers at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana are being investigated for allegations of drug possession, said a service spokesman in Washington, Lt. Col. Brett Ashworth. Both of those being investigated are ICBM launch officers with responsibility for operating intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The launch officers' access to classified information has been suspended, and they have been prohibited from serving on missile launch control duty while the Air Force is investigating, another defense official said. That official provided no further details and spoke only on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the matter publicly by name.

At the Wyoming nuclear missile base, meanwhile, Hagel addressed officers and airmen after a series of security lapses and discipline problems that were revealed in Associated Press news stories in 2013. Officials have said the service members are increasingly tired of working in what can seem like oblivion. They win no battles, earn no combat pay and only rarely are given public credit of any kind.

"You are doing something of great importance to the world," Hagel told the group. "Lest they sometimes doubt that importance, he said, "You have chosen a profession where there is no room for error — none."

Obama Still Weighing NSA Phone Policy

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama is still grappling with key decisions on the future of the National Security Agency's phone collection program and the makeup of the secret court that approved the surveillance, congressional lawmakers said Thursday following a 90-minute meeting at the White House.

Obama is expected to back tighter restrictions on foreign leader spying and also is considering a presidential commission's recommendation to strip the NSA of its ability to store telephone records from millions of Americans. The president could announce his final decisions as early as next week.

"The president and his administration are wrestling with the issues," Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat and privacy advocate, said after the meeting. "It's fair to say that the next few weeks are going to be crunch time in terms of judgments being made in both the administration and the Congress."

Iraqi Government Holds Off On Offensive

BAGHDAD (AP) — Iraq's government is holding off on waging an all-out offensive to retake two key cities from al-Qaida because of fears that civilian casualties could incite Sunni anger and push moderate tribal leaders to side with the extremists, analysts and military officials said Thursday.

More violence flared in Baghdad, where a suicide bomber killed 21 people at an army recruiting center in a clear effort to demoralize the military.

Al-Qaida-linked fighters overran parts of the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Sunni-dominated Anbar province last week, seizing control of police stations and military posts, freeing prisoners and setting up their own checkpoints.

The United States, whose troops fought bloody battles in the cities, has ruled out sending its troops back in, but has been delivering missiles to bolster Iraqi forces. It is expediting shipments of more American-made missiles and 10 surveillance drones, but those may not arrive for weeks.

Welcome to the World

The following babies were born at Avera Sacred Heart Hospital in December 2013:

ADALEE	CORT	JOHN	MEAH
ADALYN	DARREN	KENZIE	PERRY
ALECZANDER	DRAKE	KIMBERLY	REED
ANAYA	ELISE	KYARA	SAWYER
ANNA	EMMA	KYNDELL	TACEA
ANTONICE	EMMET	LIAM	WES
BELLA	EMMETT	LOGAN	WILLIAM
BRYLEE	HUNTER	LUCIAN	WYATT
CHARLES	JAREN	LUCY	ZYLAR
CHRISTIAN	JAXSON	MACIE	
COLLIN	JERZEY	MASON	

Avera Sacred Heart Hospital
www.AveraSacredHeart.org