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Christie's Weiner



By Marty Kaplan



SPENCER PLATT VIA GETTY IMAGES

I did not have sex with that bridge.

That was Chris Christie's Hail Mary play at his press conference last week. He looked us in the eye, he told us he'd done nothing wrong and he prayed it would turn out better for him with George Washington than it did for Bill Clinton with Ms. Lewinsky.

We are good at being lied to. I was not alone in wanting to believe that President Clinton was being straight with us. I was not an outlier when I swallowed Colin Powell's WMD story at the UN. Despite his hair, I even fell for John Edwards. (Don't get me started on Lance Armstrong.) But my most embarrassing week of wishful thinking was when I tried to stay open-minded about Anthony Weiner.

Now Weiner is back in the public eye. In a nice piece of stunt casting, he has a cameo in the finale of *Alpha House*, the Gary Trudeau series streaming on Amazon. Do you remember the early days of the Weiner scandal? A right-wing Web site posted a selfie of some dude's boxer-brief bulge. The picture had been sexted to the Twitter account of a 21-year old Seattle woman, and the item identified Rep. Anthony Weiner as the sender. He vigorously denied it, saying it was "obvious" his Twitter account had been hacked. Later, he admitted he was lying. But for several days, his story was credible enough for two hard-boiled Politico reporters to cut him some slack, writing, "If [his version is] true, Weiner certainly would not be the first high-profile person to have his Twitter hacked." The jury was still out for Slate, too, which ran a piece subtitled "Weinergate: The Evidence For and Against."

I admit it: I had wanted to believe Weiner. I liked his gutsiness on cable news and in the well of the House. He championed things I was for, like a public option in the health care reform bill, and he nailed opponents I wanted nailed. Sure, he was full of

himself, but I could tolerate his ego because of the progressive ballsiness that came with it. In retrospect, of course, what was I thinking?

We are now at the “I’ve been hacked” stage of the Christie scandal.

Last week he told us he was heartbroken, heartbroken to find that retribution was going on in his establishment, and that he’d fired the rogues responsible for it. Here’s the challenge to anyone who thinks Christie is telling the truth: You must find it credible that an outrageously slimy and publicly harmful act of vengeance was carried out by the inmost circle of a legendarily hands-on executive, but they never told him about it. And if you believe that, you also need to explain *why* he was in the dark about their scheme.

I can come up with only two scenarios for that. Either they didn’t think it was such a big deal that he needed to know about it, or they worked really hard to keep it from him.

If the governor’s top people can cook up a plan whose collateral damage would infuriate and potentially endanger a million of his constituents, and if that plan doesn’t rise to level of needing his signoff, or even filling him in about it, that means Christie had totally delegated the authority to make vicious mischief to his staff. Another day, another kneecapping. Why bore the boss with details? Makes you wonder whether even a *House of Cards*-inspired killing they dreamt up would rate a couple of minutes of face time with him. At the very least, it’s not an encouraging preview of the 2017 White House staff.

The other possibility is that Christie’s team actively conspired to keep the plan from him. This would be no easy feat. These are people he trusts, talks to and texts night and day. Pulling off a shock-and-awe assault on commuters, and keeping it going for four days, in close quarters, without Christie, his chief of staff or his chief counsel finding out, would have required the stealth of a Navy SEALs operation.

OK, give them the secrecy. They whispered into their cellphones in the bathroom; they met in Trenton bars; they spoke Navajo code talk. Why would they need to do that — because they thought he’d stop them? If they actually believed he’d be against it, why would six of his most loyal lieutenants go ahead and do it anyway? Christie had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Obama after superstorm Sandy. (I liked that.) Was his staff afraid he’d gone soft? Was it for Christie’s own good that they’d played the bully card for him? No, I can’t believe that, nor can I believe it never occurred to Christie’s team to tell him. But I can believe the m.o. of their dirty work routinely affords Christie the pretense of deniability.

What makes it possible for anyone to buy Christie’s denial is the swagger with which he makes it. His rise to power was propelled by his snarling contempt for anyone who’d dare challenge him. His ruthlessness was seen as an asset; to take on the vested interests, you have to show your enemies how big a bat you swing. It’s the political equivalent of Weiner’s lewd pictures: Look how large I am!

Weiner thought putting his package online would be seductive. Christie’s exhibitionism is the bully’s version of Weiner’s bulge; he, too, thinks voters are turned on by a macho man with the ‘nads to whup stropy teachers, veterans and mayors. Christie has good reason to believe that. A Trump, an O’Reilly, a Limbaugh, a Cheney, a Rumsfeld: they bet that deep down, beneath the Jeffersonian lip-service, what people really want from their leaders is balls that clank. If Christie survives this, it won’t be because he’s innocent. It will be because he knows we loves us some badasses.

That’s what’s genius about cartoonist Barry Blitt’s *New Yorker* cover art. It’s called “Playing in Traffic,” and it depicts Christie as a spoiled boy, looking like Chubby from *Our Gang*, dribbling a ball and blocking lanes on the GW Bridge. The image instantly drains Christie’s testosterone from the story. Christie isn’t some bare-chested American Putin whom we secretly long for. He’s just a brat who needs his butt kicked.

This is a crosspost of my award-winning column in the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, where you can email me if you’d like.

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