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My Chris Christie Hypocrisy



By Marty Kaplan

I was against Chris Christie before I was for him.

If Obama wins, when all the exit polling gets sorted through, it's those images of the Democratic president touring the hurricane damage arm-in-arm with the Republican governor that may turn out to have given him his advantage. If that happens, then the election will have been determined by two things I find it uncomfortable to grapple with as historical forces: by luck - bad luck in this case, as in Sandy - and by the awkward upside of hypocrisy.

And if Romney turns out to win, luck and hypocrisy will still have played a bigger part in the outcome than civics classes - do such things still exist? - would care to admit.

Like many Democrats, until last week I was not a fan of Chris Christie.

When Karl Rove fired nine U.S. Attorneys for refusing to buckle to his political muscle, I recalled that Christie, a top fundraiser for George W. Bush and New Jersey counsel to his presidential campaign, had been named U.S. Attorney in 2001 with zero experience in criminal law.

In 2010, when Governor Christie called a press conference to blame bungling federal education bureaucrats for preventing New Jersey's winning a \$400 million Race to the Top award, I wasn't surprised when Christie fired his Education Commissioner for warning him before the press conference that his charge against the Obama administration was false.

This year, when Christie said he'd veto a gay marriage bill, I thought it was cowardly for him to say he'd prefer a referendum, and appalling how he justified it: "people would have been happy to have a referendum on civil rights rather than fighting and dying in the streets in the South."

When Christie called a reporter "stupid" and called a former Navy SEAL at a public event an "idiot," I didn't think it was refreshing Jersey straight talk - I thought it was bullying.

When in his Republican National Convention keynote he excoriated Obama for "absentee leadership," and when on the campaign trail he asked, "What the hell is he doing asking for another four years?," he struck me as a partisan hack in the worst Rudy Giuliani tradition.

But oh my, when Sandy struck, and Christie praised the president for his crisis leadership and management competence, and put his own body on the line in photos and footage attesting to Obama's bipartisanship, I found it effortless to turn on a dime and say about Chris Christie, "Now there's a real leader."

And when Christie smacked down Steve Doocy on *Fox & Friends* for asking when Romney would get his own disaster tour, and when Rupert Murdoch whined about the valentine that Christie had treacherously given to Obama, I really felt the glow of kinship for Christie warming my Newark-born heart. Even the political calculation now being ascribed to Christie - that his Obama love gives him big bipartisan cred for his own 2016 presidential bid - didn't diminish my budding Christie bromance.

If Mitt Romney had flip-flopped on Christie the way I did, I'd have called him a hypocrite, an Etch a Sketcher, a revisionist and no doubt, somehow, a liar. But because it confirms the narrative I'm invested in, I have no difficulty in suddenly discovering the virtues of Christie's blunt outspokenness, and his ability to put partisanship aside for the good of country.

The brain is wondrous organ, and the political brain is especially nimble. But as Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, rationality is not the default setting of our wiring. The brain has a confirmation bias, which can transform any new data, however contradictory, into evidence for something we already believe is true. This accounts for the tragic uselessness of facts in political discourse. The brain can also convince itself that a brand new narrative, utterly at odds with what we believed before, is no different from what we'd been thinking all along. In you, it's hypocrisy; in me, it's insight.

Kahneman is especially unsettling on the huge role that luck plays in our lives. As their supporters tell it, the Romney story is about character, effort, merit - not about being born a member of the lucky genes club - and the Obama story is about values, vision, resilience - not about reverse discrimination. Good luck gave Romney a single credible primary opponent who one debate night forgot the third item on a list. Bad luck brought misery and tragedy to millions last week, but also an exquisitely timed opportunity for Obama to comfort and to lead, and for Christie, whatever his motive, to throw away the obstructionist GOP script.

Every political victory or loss is the consequence of innumerable factors and the work of innumerable hands. Money, sadly, is a big part of it. So is storytelling - our species' appetite for narrative, fiction and self-delusion. And so, too, is luck. I don't think Sandy was part of God's plan, no more than I think climate change is divine in origin. But to me it's inescapable that the 2012 election has as much to do with things in no one's plan as it does with anything that money can buy.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director