

Between the Lines / By Peter McDermott

Wider ambitions all but done by Dec. 13

Ron Ziegler, the White House press secretary under Richard Nixon, famously referred to the Watergate break-in as a "third-rate burglary."

In essence, he was saying: why would the president or anybody round him have anything to do with such an amateurish operation? It just doesn't make sense. He is, after all, well on his way to trouncing the Democratic candidate in November.

Gov. Chris Christie, at his press conference last Thursday, was taking the same line with regard to the George Washington Bridge shutdown. Mayor who? I had enough endorsements and we didn't ask for his anyway. And therefore none of this makes sense in the context of the inevitable landslide in November.

There was an interesting difference. When Ziegler made his comment, the storm clouds were far off on the horizon. Last Thursday, the governor employed this defense while also announcing the resignation of his 2009 and 2013 campaign manager Bill Sepien, known as the "ultimate Christie insider."

Last Thursday and Friday, it was the local media that cracked down hard on the governor. The New York Daily News, which backed Mitt Romney in 2012, declared Christie's national ambitions all but "kaput."

National political commentators lamely asked: this couldn't really affect his chances in 2016, could it? (The honorable exception was author Joan Walsh at Salon, who stated that even his position as governor was in question; a year ago she suggested that he was temperamentally ill-suited for high office.)

The 2016 question that should have been posed last month. In-



Before Bridget Anne Kelly there was Bob Haldeman.

deed, there was enough evidence by the end of Christie's press conference on Dec. 13 (a Friday) to argue then that his national hopes were on life support.

We'd already heard that there were four-hour traffic delays over the course of four days before an appalled official in another state put a stop to the fiasco. Christie's appointee to the Port Authority Bill Baroni (\$291,000 salary) and his "acquaintance" David Wildstein (\$150,000) both resigned because "mistakes were made." There was no promise from the governor, however, to get to the bottom of the "traffic study" that wasn't.

Anybody with political antennae could look to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary two years hence. Leave aside, for a moment, New York City and New Jersey and the busiest bridge in the world that links

them. It's also I-95. How would the slowing down of a stretch of the interstate system to a crawl – for no good reason – play in any part of the country?

We could reasonably expect a TV spot from Jeb Bush or Paul Ryan or Marco Rubio featuring honking horns, crying children and stuck emergency vehicles. There are ad guys out there who could make you feel the pain of someone sitting in a traffic jam, and some of them could even put you in the car.

On Dec. 2, Christie joked about traffic cones, but by Dec. 13, he had two hostages to fortune. Things became more obvious on Jan. 9 with the publication of Wildstein's communications. It made for one of the most dramatic days in the annals of scandal.

Reporters are concerned mainly, when covering political



A view of the George Washington Bridge in 1978.

scandals, about the facts -- for instance, who knew what and when did they know it? But in the Watergate case, some divined the essential truth long before others did, even if they couldn't prove it.

Take the essayist and novelist Mary McCarthy, who wrote dispatches for the Observer on the hearings in 1973, and the Washington Post's cartoonist Herblock (the subject of a fine documentary shown at last year's Tribeca Film Festival). Then 61, McCarthy had come of age during the Great Depression and had followed Nixon's career since his rapid rise in the late 1940s. Likewise, the 64-year-old cartoonist had been crossing swords with the Californian politician since his first term as vice president two decades before. From their perspectives, Haldeman and Erlichman, the "Berlin Wall," were Nixon's creations, their ways Nixonian. McCarthy and Herblock saw that one couldn't logically separate the boss from

his top aides.

Likewise, knowledge of Gov. Christie's style tends to color people's view of Bridget Anne Kelly's order to someone in a higher pay grade, and Wildstein's reply, "Got it."

The day after the Friday the 13th press conference last month, the New York Times report on it was headed "Christie Shrugs As Aides Quit In Bridge Row." The paper said that at the end of the news conference, when "he named a former prosecutor and close aide of his, Deborah Gramiccioni, to Mr. Baroni's post, Mr. Christie suggested it might be worth examining why Fort Lee should have local access lanes. But he added that he was not about to call for it right away: 'Everybody needs some time to calm down.'"

So, three months after the traffic jams and a couple of weeks into the scandal, the governor was still saying: nice access lanes, shame if anything were to happen to them.

Nuns' story

Sr. Pat Murphy, Sr. Lillian Murphy and Sr. Theresa Kane, all Irish-American members of the Sisters of Mercy, are among those featured in a documentary that has its New York City premiere this Friday night at the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th St. As reported previously, "Band of Sisters" tells the story of U.S. nuns' work for social justice in the wake of Vatican II. The filmmaker is Mary Fishman, the granddaughter of immigrants from County Armagh.



(Pictured right) American nuns headed for Peru in 1961.

SISTERS OF MERCY, REGIONAL COMMUNITY OF CHICAGO ARCHIVE

The Irish Echo Quiz

1. Name the Catholic priest born in Venice in 1678 who composed the violin concertos known as "The Four Seasons."
2. Who was the first Irish writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature?
3. Name the journalist (1937-2005) from Louisville, Ky., whose first book was about the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang.
4. What golfer has a record 18 major championships to his credit?
5. Tenor John McCormack became in 1914 the first to record what song strongly associated with World War I?
6. What actress, who made her 1931 debut in "The Bad Sister," said "I was the Marlon Brando of my generation."
7. The Republic of South Africa rejoined in 1994 what organization it had left in 1961?
8. Name the 1944 film about an insurance claim starring Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck and Edward G. Robinson.
9. Which 20th century U.S. president was from the region of his state known as the Hill Country?
10. MacGillycuddy's Reeks is a mountain range in which Irish county?

Answers are on Page 40