

Forget Bridgegate ... It's Fandom That May Hurt Chris Christie



In a piece he wrote for the Politico earlier this week entitled “Why Republicans Are Ready for Hillary,” Matt Latimer makes some compelling points for why the prospective field of GOP presidential candidates should recognize Mrs. Clinton as a very beatable opponent in 2016. He also tackles some popular media myths about some of the candidates.

One of those *myths*, Latimer writes, is that New Jersey Governor Chris Christie was permanently damaged by the Bridgegate controversy:

“The scandal remains—solely—a Washington fixation. Want to bet how many people in South Carolina or Iowa or the Super Tuesday states can recite the details of that episode? Mention “Bridgegate” to most of them and they’ll think you’re referring to tires. If there’s one thing candidates can count on, it’s the short attention span of the voters.”

I agree with Latimer. As desperate as MSNBC and other media outlets have been to derail Chris Christie’s imminent candidacy, the controversy hasn’t done a whole lot to hurt the governor. No one but the hard left cares about it, and Christie has been pretty well cleared of any wrongdoing.

What I *do* think will hurt Christie, however, is something Latimer touches on earlier in his piece:

“He [Christie] didn’t make himself a presidential contender through his sensible compromises with Democrats in the New Jersey legislature, but his passionate harangues against conservatives’ favorite enemies: the media, big unions, government bureaucracy. It was for that reason that so many Republicans pined for him to run in 2012—the great hope of conservatives and the world.”

These qualities are certainly what turned *me* onto Chris Christie a few years ago. Boldly and effectively laying out conservative principles, and then actually implementing them into effective policies is what made Christie a darling of many on the right. Conservatives liked his blunt, unapologetic talk and they liked how he took on the big government institutions that were crippling the state of New Jersey. He was a rock star in a political party full of dry personalities that was in desperate need of a charismatic figure to get behind.

Somewhere along the way, however, the Christie persona began to change – and not in a good way. I touched on this in a piece I wrote two years ago about some growing similarities I noticed between him and former California governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. Both rode into office on a bold platform of principled, conservative *change*. Both did their best to implement that change for the good of their states. But once they felt slighted by the people whose opinions mattered the most to them, they seemingly began to worry more about their own, personal popularity than they did being strong leaders.

I believed that Christie was starting to enjoy – a little too much – the mainstream *celebrity* status he had achieved by embracing President Obama in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, and publicly blasting big names within his own party. When he showed up in a comedy skit on Saturday Night Live, and later danced with Jimmy Fallon on his show, I was sure of it. Sucking up to *the left* (including Hollywood) can come with its rewards, but it doesn’t necessarily bode well for an aspiring

Republican presidential candidate.

Still, from an optics standpoint, it's not so much the apparent need to be in front of the camera that hurts Christie the most... To me, his biggest problem is that he now comes across less as a celebrity, and more as a fan who is seeking acceptance from his celebrity superiors.

In response to the now famous video of Christie celebrating the Dallas Cowboys' playoff victory with owner Jerry Jones last Sunday, Byron York of the *Washington Examiner* tweeted this: "*Probably not Chris Christie's most presidential moment.*"

York's comment nails the problem.

Some pundits are claiming that the moment was politically damaging from a team-loyalty and electoral-map perspective, but I don't think that's much of an issue. The issue is that when Christie appears on camera embracing people like President Obama, Bruce Springsteen, or Jerry Jones, he comes across as the least commanding presence in the shot. When he dances with Jimmy Fallon, he doesn't look like the good sport he's trying to look like, but rather a court jester. He tends to carry himself as a fan hoping for an autograph, and that's just not a good thing if you're hoping to be the leader of the free world.

Where is the Chris Christie of old – that larger-than-life fellow who seemed very much his own man?

Am I being unfair or petty? Maybe. But as someone who thinks Christie might make a good candidate and even a good president, I'm also being honest. Optics *do* matter, especially when you're already dealing with a news media that wants to see you fail. *Looking* presidential is pretty important if you hope to be the president.

Heroes & Goats

Part of the reason that people enjoy watching sporting events is because the outcome is clear cut. One team wins, another loses. Outcomes aren't usually so black and white in any other area of life. That being said, my problem with sporting events is that far too often team defeats are laid at the feet of a single individual.

For instance, in 1991, with the score 20-19 in favor of the New York Giants, Buffalo Bills kicker Scott Norwood missed a game-ending 47-yard field goal in Super Bowl XXV. Buffalo fans haven't forgiven him to this day. God only knows when Baltimore Ravens fans will forgive Billy Cundiff for missing a 32-yard attempt in the recent AFC playoff or San Francisco fans will cut Kyle Williams some slack for fumbling the ball during the NFC playoffs in the 49er loss to those same Giants. [Related: "7-year-old 49er fan commiserates with receiver"]

For most Americans, December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001 are dates that will live on in infamy. But for Chicago Cubs fans, a third date is October 14, 2003. That was the day when, with the Cubs leading the Florida Marlins 3-0, just five outs away from advancing to the World Series for the first time in 58 years, Steve Bartman, a fan in the stands inadvertently got between outfielder Moises Alou and a foul ball. By the time the smoke cleared, the Marlins scored eight runs in the eighth inning and 26-year-old Bartman was a marked man.

Back in 1951, Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Ralph Branca gave up the three-run homer to Bobby Thomson of the NY Giants, costing the Dodgers their shot at the World Series. It later turned out that the Giants had a spy tucked away in the scoreboard with a pair of binoculars who signaled the manager Leo

Durocher, who in turn signaled Thomson what pitch to expect. Of course Thomson still had to hit "the shot heard 'round the world," as it came to be known. But Brooklyn fans didn't know about Durocher's shenanigans at the time, and it probably wouldn't have mattered if they did. Sports fans don't want excuses, except, of course, when it comes to their own fumbles, errors and mistakes.

In the same way that certain moments can taint a career, others can be magnified all out of proportion in the other direction. I am thinking of the moment during the South Carolina debate when Newt Gingrich used John King's question about his first marriage to paint himself as the moral avenger. Because snippets of Marianne Gingrich's ABC interview had been all over radio and television that day, everyone knew the question was coming. To his credit, Mr. King asked it first in order to get it out of the way, but it was the manner in which Gingrich employed verbal jujitsu to make himself out to be the victim of an unjustified attack that reversed the entire momentum of the campaign.

But I contend that Newt's response had less to do with the reversal than the standing ovation it received from the folks in the auditorium. It was the thunderous applause that touched off the Pavlovian reaction in the voters at home. After all, what did his predictable slap down of the moderator, something he'd been doing regularly since the first debate, have to do with his electability or his qualifications to be president?

That is why my favorite debate was the one moderated by NBC's Brian Williams. Before the first question was asked, Mr. Williams told the audience to hold their applause, thus providing the four contenders with more time in which to respond. As a result, it's my opinion that all four men, including Rep. Paul, had the opportunity to make their strongest case yet to the electorate.

Recently, my friend Bernie Goldberg reported on a 2008 Pew

Poll that indicated that it isn't just conservatives who recognize that the elite media is filled with left-wingers. In the post-election poll, 62% of Democrats acknowledged that the media had been in the tank for candidate Obama. Of course every conservative is well aware of media bias, but I had assumed that most Democrats regarded themselves and their lap dogs in the fourth estate as middle of the road moderates and regarded the rest of us as being way out on the right shoulder of the road, along with the weeds and road kill.

Speaking of Obama, a friend send me a definition of "ineptocracy," a made-up word that is deftly defined as "a system of government where the least capable to lead are elected by the least capable of producing, and where the members of society the least likely to sustain themselves or succeed, are rewarded with goods and services paid for by the confiscated wealth of a diminishing number of producers." It would be a challenge to do a neater job of summing up the Obama administration in 50 words or less.

Finally, lest anyone conclude that just because he isn't my first or second choice, I would not vote for Newt Gingrich if he were to garner the GOP nomination, let me assure one and all that I will vote for any Republican running against Obama, and that includes Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley.

Granted, there are a number of things that I don't like about Mr. Gingrich, but the main one is that I think he would have a tougher time defeating Obama than either Romney or Santorum. I also think that all the talk about the way Newt would manhandle the ex-community organizer in a debate is a whole lot of hooey. In the aftermath of those events, Democrats inevitably think their guy wins, Republicans think our guy wins, and independents, whose votes unfortunately determine the election, are busy watching "The Kardashians" or alphabetizing their canned goods.

For my part, I think Gingrich's strengths would be wasted in the White House. Being quick-thinking and verbally adroit can certainly come in handy, but they happen to be skills I possess and I know only too well that I shouldn't be allowed to come within a mile of the Oval Office.

With his short fuse and excess baggage, Newt Gingrich really isn't cut out to be the president of the United States.

Instead, if he came to me for vocational guidance, I'd tell him to host a radio talk show or go be a judge on American Idol.

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