

New Jersey governor faces deepening crisis over bridge scandal

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The scandal involving New Jersey governor Chris Christie and the four-day diversion of traffic onto the George Washington Bridge that created chaos last September continues, with no end in sight.

Last week, the governor, an unannounced candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, held a two-hour news conference, where he couped endless apologies for the scandal with repeated attempts to cast himself as the victim—of deceit by his top aides. These gubernatorial appointees apparently orchestrated the traffic gridlock, closing two lanes connecting the town of Fort Lee with Manhattan as revenge against the town's mayor for refusing to endorse Christie for reelection.

So far, four heads have rolled, including that of Bridget Anne Kelly, the deputy chief of staff whose firing the governor announced at his news conference. E-mails released under subpoena the day before Christie met the press indicated that Kelly had essentially ordered the bridge lane closures with an August 13 proposal that it was “time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee.”

Last Friday, the state legislature released about 2,000 pages of documents that contained more details, including evidence of an attempted cover-up of the incident between the time of the traffic tie-ups and the e-mail revelations of January 8.

Christie's appointees at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the bi-state agency that operates the bridge, discussed the affair with one of the governor's press spokesmen in early October. The governor's chief spokesman, Michael Drewniak, wrote foul-mouthed denunciations of reporters as well as Democratic appointees on the Port Authority as questions about the affair continued in ensuing weeks.

One question that arises is how far the possible attempted cover-up will go. David Samson, the chairman of the Authority, who owes his job to Christie, was aware of the planned lane closings before they took place.

Samson later fought behind the scenes with the executive director of the agency, Patrick Foye, a Democratic appointee who was raising questions about the incident. While David Wildstein and Bill Baroni, other Christie appointees to the Port Authority, resigned their posts in December, Samson continues in his job.

During a period of more than three months, Christie repeatedly made light of the whole affair, repeating the claims that a traffic study had been taking place, and accusing Democrats and the press of looking for a scandal where none existed. According to the governor, it was not until December that he got around to asking his top staff to let him know if there was anything to the charges of dirty tricks in the bridge gridlock, and he claims he was satisfied by their denials. He never asked for e-mails or any other evidence, and now charges that he was betrayed, not by one but by at least four of his appointees and close advisers, some so close that he socialized with them and their families.

Democratic state assemblyman John Wisniewski pointed to questions raised by the latest documents. In a statement quoted in the *Washington Post*, Wisniewski declared that Christie's aides were involved in “spin control,” and then added, “How much of the full picture was the governor's senior staff given regarding the development of this lane closure project? With the tight control this administration maintains, it doesn't stretch the imagination that they were given more information than they let on. When they were preparing spin control, how could they not have been given the whole story?”

Wisniewski additionally raised the issue of Christie's own knowledge of the affair:

“...the documents submitted by David Wildstein and his attorney are documents they deemed specifically related to the lane closures at the

George Washington Bridge as per our subpoena request. Included in these documents is a reference to what appears to be a meeting between Port Authority Chairman David Samson and the governor one week before Bridget Kelly issued the order to cause ‘traffic problems’ in Fort Lee. By submitting these documents, Mr. Wildstein is telling us they are related to the lane closures in some way. The question that demands answering is how?”

There are already three investigations into the scandal under way, including probes by the Port Authority, the New Jersey legislature, and the office of the federal US attorney for New Jersey. Apparently, a fourth inquiry is going to be launched in connection with the Christie administration. New Jersey congressman Frank Pallone has complained about New Jersey tourism ads last year, costing \$4.7 million and paid for with the help of federal funds dedicated to recovery from Hurricane Sandy. The ads, placed in the middle of the governor’s reelection campaign, prominently feature his family, including his wife, son and daughter. The federal Department of Housing and Urban Development is going to look into the charge that the advertising violated rules against political misuse of federal funds.

While some leading Republican politicians have issued statements in support of Christie and praising his news conference performance in general terms, they have also left loopholes in their support. Former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani said he believed Christie, and then added that if he is not telling the whole truth, his career is finished.

Statements from former New Jersey governor Thomas Kean, who won reelection in the 1980s by a record 40-point margin, were considered most damaging to the current governor. Kean, typical of the dwindling breed of so-called moderate Republicans, said that Christie had left “unanswered questions” and that his sometimes “dangerous” governing style might cause him political problems if he ran for higher office. “I think he’s the most able politician since Bill Clinton,” said Kean, before adding, “On the other hand, you look at these other qualities and ask, do you really want that in your president?”

Ultra-right and libertarian elements in the Tea Party also have complaints about Christie, stemming in their case from his professed willingness to work with Democrats

and his departure from tax-cutting orthodoxy. Last November, Kentucky senator Rand Paul, in testimony before a Senate committee, while not naming Christie directly, clearly alluded to New Jersey’s overlapping tourism/Christie campaign ads. “I’m thinking there might be a conflict of interest there,” said Paul. “That’s a real problem, when people are trying to do good and trying to use the taxpayer’s money, they’re offended to see our money spent on political ads.”

The latest scandal has also called attention to past charges of bullying on the part of Christie. As the *New York Times* mentioned in a recent story, a Rutgers professor lost state financing after he voted against the Republicans’ favored redistricting map on a state commission; a Republican state senator’s candidate for a judgeship went nowhere after he voted against a plan backed by Christie to change the state’s medical education system; and a former governor lost his police security at public events because Christie perceived he had not been quick enough in backing some appointments. And there were the numerous incidents caught on video of the governor dressing down or humiliating questioners or critics at news conferences, town hall meetings and other public events.

The political gangsterism of the Christie administration is not unique among either Republican or Democratic politicians, but the New Jersey governor stands out as a figure whose political persona and popular appeal are strongly based on a demagogic pugnacity. Sections of Republicans hoped that his candidacy could bridge divisions within the party, appealing to the most reactionary Tea Party elements, while advancing economic and social policies directly tailored to the interests of Wall Street. The mounting scandals are increasingly calling such a candidacy into question.



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