Probes continue in scandal involving New Jersey governor

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10 March 2014

Two months after the revelation that key aides to New Jersey governor Chris Christie were behind the creation of traffic chaos in the city of Fort Lee last September, Christie is continuing to try to change the subject in hopes of riding out the political storm.

The scandal erupted in early January, with the publication of e-mails showing that several top gubernatorial appointees, including his deputy chief of staff Bridget Anne Kelly and David Wildstein, a Christie appointee to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ), were involved in unnecessary lane closures at the George Washington Bridge that were designed as political payback to the mayor of Fort Lee for his refusal to endorse Christie's reelection bid last year.

In recent weeks, the governor has been holding frequent "town hall meetings" in cities and towns around the state, avoiding questions on the "bridge vendetta" scandal wherever possible, and renewing his attacks on public employees' alleged responsibility for the state budget deficit.

At a two-hour press conference in early January, Christie, who has been widely touted as a likely presidential candidate for the Republicans in 2016, claimed to know nothing about the bridge incident and said he had been lied to by some of his closest aides. Kelly was fired immediately, and the governor cut ties with his former campaign manager, Bill Stepien.

Questions remained, however, as leading Republicans like former New Jersey governor Tom Kean and Kentucky senator Rand Paul raised questions about Christie's temperament. The refrain, "What did the governor know, and when did he know it?" began to be voiced, in an echo of Watergate.

Ongoing media attention to the bridge scandal has not been the only distraction facing Christie. A number of official inquiries into the affair are continuing, including a probe by the New Jersey legislature and, most significantly, an investigation by the US Attorney's office in New Jersey, the very same federal Justice Department post held by Christie himself between 2002 and 2008.

As far as the legislative investigation is concerned, lawyers for former campaign manager Stepien and former deputy chief of staff Kelly are expected in court on March 11 to argue against subpoenas asking them to turn over calendars and electronic devices that could provide additional evidence on their role in the lane closings.

Stepien, who before the scandal broke had been picked by Christie for the politically sensitive post of chairman of the state Republican Party, is arguing through his lawyer that complying with the request for records would be forcing him to testify against himself, in violation of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. "Any response by Mr. Stepien will have a tendency to ensnare him in the wide net the committee has cast," wrote Kevin Marino, Stepien's attorney, in court papers filed this past week. Kelly's lawyers have made a similar claim.

In the federal probe, US Attorney Paul Fishman has said nothing beyond an acknowledgment that the office is investigating the affair. In the meantime, additional charges have been aired that may turn out to be more significant that the bridge tie-up. Another Democratic mayor of a New Jersey town, Dawn Zimmer of Hoboken, has said that Christie aides tried to trade funds earmarked for relief from the effects of Hurricane Sandy in exchange for the mayor's approval of a local real estate project favored by Christie.

The Justice Department may be looking into this matter, and it may be more likely to lead to criminal

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charges than the bridge incident. According to the papers filed by Stepien's attorney, an agent from the FBI called the former campaign manager in early January and later called his attorney, who turned down a request by the authorities to interview Stepien. Stepien's home was later visited, according to the legal papers as reported in the *New York Times*, and his landlord was questioned "about his conduct and character—was he married, was he a rowdy tenant, did he pay his rent on time?"

The simmering scandal has led, in addition to the legal and legislative inquiries, to far greater media attention focused on Christie's other connections, especially with the major law firm headed by David Samson, the man appointed by Christie to head the PANYNJ. A lengthy feature in the *New York Times* suggested that Samson had used his public position to benefit both his own firm and the political fortunes of his longtime friend and colleague, the governor.

Samson had served briefly, in 2002, as New Jersey State Attorney General while Christie was the US Attorney. Their friendship and political alliance have continued since then, with Samson serving as the lawyer for the Christie campaign during his first run for the governorship in 2009. The ramifications of this close relationship are politically significant whether or not there is any question of legal misconduct raised.

The Port Authority approved bridge construction contracts for New Jersey, including for work on the 80-year-old Bayonne Bridge, that went to clients of Wolff and Samson, the firm headed by the Port Authority chairman himself. Samson did not recuse himself from various votes in which clients of his firm stood to benefit to the tune of several billion dollars. Wolff and Samson is also one of the largest bond counsel firms in the state, advising on billion-dollar bond offerings by the state.

Meanwhile, Governor Christie argued strenuously for massive subsidies to convince Honeywell Industries to stay in New Jersey. Huge tax breaks and other public aid were granted, and Samson's firm raked in $540,000 in lobbying fees from Honeywell over the three-year period from 2010 through 2012.

Samson has retained a particularly high-profile attorney—Michael Chertoff, the former head of the Department of Homeland Security under George W. Bush. Chertoff issued a statement this week saying that his client's "commitment has been to benefit the region and not about personal gain."

It would be politically naïve to regard the revelations surrounding the Christie administration as an isolated case. The opposite would be far closer to the truth. It is business as usual, and investigations that went deep enough would find similar escapades taking place in Albany, Sacramento and various state capitals around the county, whether under Republican or Democratic control—not to mention Washington, D.C., itself, the center of official corruption.

While the timing and circumstances of these events may have something to do with the arrogance and downright stupidity of the people surrounding Christie, it is also true that the scandal is being used by powerful elements in the political and media establishments to put the New Jersey governor under the microscope, metaphorically speaking, before his hopes for a presidential nomination go any further. The US ruling class has many decades of experience in vetting and testing those who aim to represent its interests in the White House.

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