

Scandal talk follows Christie on Florida GOP fundraising jaunt

Written by Bob Jordan | @BobJordanAPP
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ORLANDO, FLA. — When Chris Christie was in his first campaign for governor in 2009, congressional Democrats wanted the state's former top federal prosecutor to explain how he chose a firm headed by his one-time boss, John Ashcroft, for a rich no-bid contract to monitor a company accused of corporate crime.

Gov. Chris Christie. / Tom Spader/Staff Photographer

They didn't get the answers they were looking for. Christie, in the middle of a House hearing, said, "I don't want to cut anybody off, but I need to go and catch a train," and walked out.

If only Bridgegate were that simple. The Republican governor joined up with Florida Gov. Rick Scott on Saturday to kick off a weekend of political fundraising events in the Sunshine State but couldn't escape the biggest scandal his administration has faced.

Prior to the arrival of Christie and Scott at the posh Country Club of Orlando for a meeting with potential donors, Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz ripped into Christie, saying he had no business leaving New Jersey the day after several of his closest advisers were served with subpoenas.

Wasserman Schultz led a small counter event at a park less than a mile away from the golf course hosting Christie and Scott. Christie, because of his presidential aspirations, was the main target.

There had been speculation that Christie would cancel this trip because of the trouble at home, but he didn't, and Wassermann Schultz called that "pretty stunning."

"He has 20 subpoenas dropped on him by his own state government. There are countless questions left to be answered that he hasn't answered, and his top priority was to fly to Florida to raise money at private fundraiser

The bridge is operated by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, and Christie's top two executive appointees at the authority ordered lane closures that brought traffic to a standstill in the town of Fort Lee for four days. Later, the appointees, who have since resigned under pressure, claimed their intent was to perform a traffic study, an assertion refuted by others at the authority. Christie's critics have charged that the incident was meant to punish the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee for not endorsing Christie in the November election.

Christie claims to have no involvement, and he fired a senior staff member and his campaign manager when their emails and text messages — discovered from a previous round of subpoenas ordered by investigating lawmakers — were made public.

Political analysts say Christie has a history of resiliency. In his first gubernatorial campaign, Christie ousted incumbent Democrat Jon Corzine despite charges that Christie, as U.S. attorney for New Jersey, used his influence to allow Todd Christie, his brother, to avoid prosecution on securities fraud charges. He also fended off allegations that Michele Brown, now the head of the state Economic Development Authority, aided Christie's campaign from inside the prosecutor's office after Christie left. Brown spent 18 years at the U.S. Attorney's Office.

New Jersey residents with a sketchy memory of the Christie-Corzine campaign issues can expect a reintroduction to the old stories if Christie can advance his presidential campaign plans, especially if the furor over Bridgegate subsides, said Ben Dworkin, a Rider University political scientist.

"All these Christie stories from the past are sure to be exhumed and brought back to life. There's going to be a whole new reassessment of Chris Christie as rivals for his party's nomination and the national Democrats take aim at him, which means all the things that the New Jersey media and the Corzine campaign came up with on Christie four years ago will get new life," Dworkin said. "Those were issues that the New Jersey voters largely dismissed in 2009 for whatever reason, and they weren't even on the table in his gubernatorial re-election because his opponent (Democrat Barbara Buono) never posed a serious challenge."

Carl Golden, an aide to former Govs. Tom Kean and Christie Whitman, said Christie took a battering in the campaign against Corzine, "but was helped by Jon Corzine not exactly being our most-beloved governor."

Golden said there's a way Bridgegate could actually bolster Christie's presidential chances.

"If there's no smoking gun in his hand, and this thing dies out a little and gets moved off the front pages, he can point to how he always maintained he had no involvement and was truthful from the start," said Golden, now a senior contributing analyst with the William J.

When Christie and Scott were at the country club, the entrance driveway was manned by two sheriff's officers, who said the event was invitation only.

An RGA spokesman said another event later Saturday at the Palm Beach home of Florida Crystals sugar baron Jose F. "Pepe" Banjul Jr. and a Sunday meet-and-greet in North Palm Beach at the home of Home Depot Co-Chairman Kenneth Langone were also off-limits to the public.

Langone told USA Today he has invited 150 donors and that they'll be asking about the bridge scandal.

"I've got to believe one of the questions is ... were you involved in this? Did you know anything about it?" Langone said.

The RGA didn't provide an estimate of how much money was expected to be raised this weekend.

"We won't be sharing details of the fundraisers. They are private," said RGA spokesman Jon Thompson.