

OPINION

Corruption in the Soprano State

By Matt Katz

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Six years ago New Jersey's new governor, Chris Christie, walked into a movie theater with a political ally named Bill Baroni and several actors from "The Sopranos." The film they were there to see was "The Soprano State," a documentary on political corruption in New Jersey, filled with tales of no-show jobs, cash-stuffed envelopes passed across linoleum diner tables and government contracts won with pay-to-play campaign donations.

Mr. Christie, who had just been elected governor on the strength of his record of busting dirty politicians of both parties as the state's high-profile United States attorney, was featured in the film. "When people found out I was from New Jersey they would bring up one of two things — either political corruption or 'The Sopranos,'" he said to the camera.

He ran for governor vowing to clean up the state. But over the past two weeks, a federal corruption trial in Newark has made it disappointingly clear that the governor failed. As it has turned out, Mr. Christie, who is now running Donald J. Trump's transition team to fill top jobs should Mr. Trump win the White House, ended up tarnishing his own administration.

Mr. Baroni, the governor's theater companion and one of his top appointees to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, sits at the defense table with a former Christie aide, Bridget Anne Kelly. Both are charged with orchestrating, and then covering up, a four-day traffic jam of disaster-movie proportions to punish a local Democratic mayor for not endorsing Governor Christie's 2013 re-election bid.

The trial has put into stark relief the corruption that seems rife in New Jersey politics. If the lawman Chris Christie couldn't fix it — if he could, in fact, turn government into a taxpayer-funded organ of his political ambitions — then who's to save the Garden State?

Before joining the Port Authority, Mr. Baroni served in the State Senate and Assembly, taught ethics at a law school and served as an F.B.I. informant. In that role, he collected dirt on politicians so federal investigators — who were led by Mr. Christie at the time — could build the very corruption cases that would help make Mr. Christie governor. After working to get Mr. Christie elected, Mr. Baroni then became the governor's \$290,000-a-year man at the Port Authority, a New York-New Jersey agency with tens of billions of dollars in assets and control over the region's airports, ports and river crossings.

In the state's time-honored tradition of patronage, Republican hires soon filled the Port Authority, including a part-time soap opera actor who co-wrote Mr. Baroni's weight-loss book, "Fat Kid Got Fit and So Can You!" For one new Port Authority appointee, David Wildstein, a job was created: director of capital projects. This was a sham title because Mr. Wildstein's real job title would not have looked good on a business card: dark-arts political operative.

Mr. Wildstein's credentials for the post were his bizarre and sordid political past, like once stealing Senator Frank Lautenberg's suit jacket before a debate so the Democrat would look uncomfortable onstage in a borrowed coat. Mr. Wildstein testified that Governor Christie used to call him Mr. Wolf, for the "Pulp Fiction" character played by Harvey Keitel who specialized in cleaning up dead bodies. Soon enough, Mr. Wildstein was spying on Port Authority employees.

Mr. Wildstein told jurors that he served "one constituent" — Governor Christie himself — and not the millions of motorists a year who pay \$15 to get over the world's busiest bridge to New York City. Among his tasks, Mr. Wildstein was to use the leverage of the Port Authority to win endorsements for the governor's re-election as Mr. Christie pondered a race for the White House.

Mayors whose endorsements were sought were wooed with behind-the-scenes tours of the Port Authority-controlled ground zero, and gifts of flags that flew over the site and commemorative burned steel salvaged from the rubble. To keep these activities furtive, Christie officials directed Mr. Wildstein to use a private email address to evade public records laws.

Despite years of Christie courtship (New York Giants tickets, cocktail parties at the governor's mansion and a shuttle bus for his town), Mayor Mark Sokolich of Fort Lee declined to endorse Mr. Christie. That's when Mr. Wildstein closed lanes from the town of Fort Lee to the George Washington Bridge, causing gridlock on the first four days of school and compromising emergency medical response.

He has pleaded guilty and testified for the prosecution, saying in court that he and Mr. Baroni "bragged" to the governor about the traffic jams while they were happening. The bragging took place at ground zero, before a solemn Sept. 11 anniversary event. Mr. Wildstein also testified that he told the governor that they were ignoring cries from the mayor, who was upset that the lane closures were endangering residents.

Mr. Christie laughed at this news, Mr. Wildstein testified. "I was pleasing my one constituent and I was proud of it," he told the court. "I was happy that he was happy."

After the lanes reopened on Sept. 13, 2013, reporters began asking questions. That's when Mayor Sokolich wrote a letter to a local paper saying he didn't think the lane closures were retaliatory. But he testified that he sent the letter only because he was "petrified" — petrified of his own state government.

Shortly after the mayor's letter was published I asked Governor Christie at a news conference if he had had anything to do with the lane closings. "I worked the cones actually, Matt," he replied. "Unbeknownst to everybody, I was actually the guy out there, I was in overalls and a hat. You really are not serious with that question."

But Mr. Wildstein testified that by this point, in December 2013, in addition to the governor, he had also told several top Christie aides about what he had done. Still, the administration denied that anything was amiss. They kept with Mr. Wildstein's cover story of a traffic study.

Through their lawyers, those aides deny this. As does Mr. Christie, who is not charged in the case. If Mr. Wildstein told him something about traffic at the ground zero ceremony, the governor has said, he wouldn't have paid it any mind because there's always traffic at the bridge.

Now, as Mr. Christie vets potential appointees for a Trump administration, a look at how he operated in New Jersey — and the one-constituency rule — might be instructive. Already, Mr. Trump has brought onto his campaign team two former Christie aides who were deeply involved in the endorsement courtships. (This,

despite Mr. Trump's having said during the primary that the governor "totally knew" about the bridge scandal.) New Jersey-style politics may soon go national.

Mr. Christie's time as governor is nearing an end, regardless. He is term-limited out in January 2018. He'll leave behind a deeply wounded Port Authority, with higher tolls and decaying infrastructure. Mr. Christie and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York jointly vetoed bills to reform the agency, so the potential remains for it to continue to be co-opted by the political and personal interests of wealthy insiders like David Samson, the former Port Authority chairman and state attorney general, and a father figure to Mr. Christie.

Mr. Samson recently pleaded guilty to bribery while Port Authority chairman, admitting that he pressured United Airlines to operate a weekly flight to South Carolina so he could get to his vacation home. Mr. Christie's former transportation commissioner has also been charged in the case.

Pessimism about the state's direction is the worst since two months before Mr. Christie took office in January 2010, according to the latest Rutgers-Eagleton poll.

I would ask the governor about why this is, but after he dropped out of the presidential race, I was told by an intermediary that I'm "dead" to him. So for insight let's go back to that day six years ago when Mr. Christie screened "The Soprano State." On the way into the theater, the governor offered a bit of sad truth: "We'll always have a corruption problem in New Jersey."

Matt Katz is a political reporter for WNYC and New Jersey Public Radio and is the author of "American Governor: Chris Christie's Bridge to Redemption."

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