

# Could federal indictments of allies derail a Christie presidential bid?

By Thomas Zambito | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com  
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**NEWARK** — The outlines of a Chris Christie presidential run have been drawn.

There was the State of the State address that sounded more like a presidential stump speech. [February trips](#) have been planned for New Hampshire and Iowa — states that will play a pivotal role in who secures the Republican party's nod as the GOP tries to win the White House back in 2016.

And this week came news that Christie has formed a political action committee called [Leadership Matters for America](#), which will allow him to hire a staff to orchestrate a presidential run.

So what happens if some of the governor's former aides and Port Authority of New York and New Jersey appointees end up indicted in a long-running federal criminal probe into politically-motivated traffic snarls at the George Washington Bridge in September 2013?

New Jersey U.S. Attorney [Paul Fishman](#) won't say when his investigation — now at one year and counting — will wrap up or whether anyone will be arrested.

But political observers say Christie has clearly gamed out a worst-case scenario or he wouldn't be making overtures for a presidential run.

"No one associated with him is waking up in the morning and saying 'what do we do now?'" said Ruth Mandel, the director of the Eagleton Institute for Politics at Rutgers University. "They've made a plan and assessed the odds."

Negotiating "minefields" is part of the job description for a presidential candidate and if Christie hadn't figured out a way to keep himself from getting blown up he wouldn't run, she said.

"Even candidates who face tremendous odds believe they can win," she added. "I would say that right now since we see him taking determined steps in a clear direction he believes he has an opportunity to win the election."

Indeed, some believe Christie could turn indictments into a political advantage, a chance to demonize detractors while putting his trademark bravado on display as he makes a case for his defense.

"I don't think it's a problem in a Republican primary because there are things he can use to his advantage, like 'the Democrats are out to get him,'" said Stuart Rothenberg, the publisher of the Rothenberg Political Report, a nonpartisan newsletter that covers presidential politics. "It doesn't contradict the core Christie brand of toughness."

Fishman is a Democrat nominated by President Obama in 2009.

Rothenberg said Christie could reprise his January 2014 press conference in Trenton, when he fielded questions about emails that had emerged suggesting one of his top aides may have played a role in causing the traffic jams.

Then, Christie denounced the bridge tie-ups as "completely inappropriate" and promised that "people will be held responsible for their actions."

He announced the firing of deputy chief of staff, Bridget Anne Kelly, whose August 2013 email — "Time for some traffic problems in Fort Lee" — appeared to link the bridge backups to the Christie administration.

"He acted decisively," Rothenberg said. "He took questions. When he found out he did what he needed to do. Leadership is important in a presidential primary. Strength is important."

Precise political parallels for the situation Christie finds himself in are hard to come by.

But George Arzt, a veteran New York City public relations strategist and former press secretary to Mayor Ed Koch, recalled how his former boss' third term was dogged by questions about scandals that engulfed several city agencies and Koch political allies.

Each day brought more questions about whether Koch knew what was going on and, if he didn't, what that said about his ability to lead, Arzt noted.

Like Koch, Christie will likely try to distance himself from any misdeeds that may have been committed by his aides, Arzt added.

"He'll have one of his long, long press conferences and answer all the questions," said Arzt. "And then at the end of it people will decide whether they're going to believe him. I think he will have to say he was disappointed and betrayed because these are his people."

Still, the Democratic strategist believes the taint of scandal will be hard for Christie to overcome because of the questions it raises about his leadership.

"People will remain split about whether he's guilty or not," Arzt said. "But there's an old saying in politics that the fish stinks from the head."

Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic political consultant, says much will hinge on just who gets indicted, if anyone.

"It all depends on whether the indictments are people close to him or far from him," Sheinkopf said. "If it's someone close to him it poses a serious set of problems."

Then, Sheinkopf says, he'll have to convince conservatives and evangelical Christians who make up the party faithful in a key state like South Carolina that he has the moral authority to lead.

"If you lose in South Carolina, you lose everything," he said.

Christie could take to reminding voters of his record as a federal prosecutor, when he was the one bringing the indictments, he said. Christie adopted such a strategy in his successful bid to oust incumbent [Gov. Jon Corzine](#), a Democrat, to become governor in 2009.

"He can say 'I'm the U.S. Attorney who put away 'X' number of Democratic politicians,'" Sheinkopf said.

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