

# Historic corruption roundup seen as helping Christie in race for Statehouse

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After guiding an historic roundup of allegedly corrupt public officials that reached from the Assembly chamber to the mayors' offices in Hoboken, Secaucus, and Ridgefield to third string Jersey City inspectors, New Jersey's top federal lawmen stood before a pack of reporters and TV cameras Thursday and took turns calling on the public to rise up against corruption.

"New Jersey's corruption problem is one of the worst, if not the worst, in the nation," said FBI Assistant Especial Agent Ed Kahrer. "Corruption has become ingrained in New Jersey's political system and the impact it has on New Jersey is profound."

In detailing the depth of the corruption uncovered in an ongoing 10-year investigation, Kahrer, Acting U.S. Attorney Ralph J Marra Jr., Internal Revenue Service Acting Special Julio LaRosa and FBI Special Agent Weysan Dun stopped just short of urging New Jerseyans to go to their windows, lean out and shout, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore."

Kahrer's comment that New Jersey could be the most corrupt state in the nation made the ABC national evening news.

And one of the first questions for Marra, who was appointed by President Obama, was how much a role former New Jersey U.S. Attorney Chris Christie, the Republican candidate for governor, played in the investigation before leaving office in December.

Marra realized the political ramifications of his response. He paused, chose his words carefully, and said only that the long investigation had run through Christie's tenure and now it was ongoing during his own tenure.

Actually, Christie can be credited with bagging 130 corrupt public officials. There was never an acquittal.

Thursday was a good day for Chris Christie.

By Friday his campaign released a new TV ad touting his corruption-busting background.

"As U.S. attorney, I put corrupt public officials in jail - Republicans and Democrats," Christie declares as the ad opens. Christie goes on to promise to "change Trenton" with "the same tough, independent decisions" that he made as a federal prosecutor.

At a campaign stop in West New York, he declined to speculate on the timing of the roundup.

Thursday was not a good day for Gov. Jon Corzine.

As the Democratic governor, who is seeking a second term, joined in the call to end corruption, a key cabinet member, Community Affairs Commissioner Joseph Doria quickly resigned as federal agents carried computers and boxes from his Trenton office and Bayonne home. Doria has not been charged in the investigation.

All this with Christie's lead over Corzine among potential voter growing wider with each new poll. The latest poll puts Christie 15 percentage points ahead.

On Saturday, Corzine will be looking for positive news for his campaign. He is expected to name 74-year-old Sen. Loretta Weinberg, (D-Bergen) as his candidate for lieutenant governor at an announcement in Bergen County.

Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (D-Union), state Democratic chairman, said Friday he sees the federal roundup as a bipartisan scandal that does not benefit either candidate.

"Nobody, absolutely nobody, questions Governor Corzine's ethics and honesty," he said. "From our standpoint, this election is still about the economy, education and the future of New Jersey. And from our standpoint, I promise you people will question Chris Christie's awarding of no-bid contracts and his deferred prosecution agreements and the handling of his office."

The Corzine campaign has been attacking Christie's role as U.S. attorney, charging he awarded millions of dollars in no-bid contracts to Republican colleagues.

Prof. Ben Dworkin, director of the Rebovich Institute for New Jersey Politics at Rider University, said the naming of his lieutenant governor candidate was to top off a period in which Obama campaigned for Corzine in Holmdel and the governor traveled to Washington to push for gun control.

Instead, Dworkin said, the Corzine's campaign news has been dominated by the corruption roundup and his seemingly inability to settle on a running mate.

But Dworkin said the over three months remaining in the campaign gives Corzine time to overcome Christie's lead.

"The whole thing is a net gain for Christie. I don't see how it can be interpreted any other way," said Rutgers Political Science Professor Ross Baker. "Nobody questions Governor Corzine's personal integrity but this brings up what he has to do as governor to handle the political bosses.

"For Christie, this benefits him because of his career as a prosecutor," Baker said. "These charges brought by on of his predecessors underscores that corruption continues in New Jersey and if you care about that, having a governor who is against corruption is not a bad idea."

Baker said the federal interest in Doria hurts Corzine. "Subtract him from the list of perps and this doesn't look so bad," he said. "This links the Corzine administration to these corrupt individuals. Even though Corzine is innocent of any taint, it just makes it that much worse. Doria adds to the equation and it makes it just that much more difficult for Corzine to dodge the bullet.

Baker said to attempt to cut into Christie's lead, Corzine might consider establishing a commission to determine how corruption might be weeded out of state and local government and what laws need to be strengthened to combat the problem. "Symbolically it would show Corzine cares about it," he said.

Ingrid Reed, director of the New Jersey Project at Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics, said despite calls by federal authorities for the public to join in rooting out official corruption, it is difficult for challengers to raise funds and garner the publicity needed to unseat incumbents.

She described New Jersey politics as very local and very clubby. "You are talking about changing the Legislature and very often changing people in local government," she said. "That is very easy to say but for the people who have to take it on, it is not easy to change the status quo."

Reed said the federal roundup validates what Christie tried to do as a federal prosecutor. "In that sense, it's good for him," she said. "It draws attention to a problem that still exists that he has been discussing a great deal."

Reed said Corzine has attempted to instill ethics in government and provided training for public employees on how to recognize corruption and avoid it.

"He is trying to deal with a problem and that is not east to get credit for when you are trying to prevent something," she said. "All of that is difficult to explain in a campaign. For Corzine, (combating corruption) is just another thing that is not going well in New Jersey. It doesn't seem like people are in the mood to hear what he has done. It just adds another challenge that he has as he attempts to convince people that his record deserves another term."

"For Governor Corzine, this is the kind of problem where he needs to empathize with the people and say, 'I know how disappointed you are,'" she said.

Reed reflected on Corzine inaugural address with all the legislators seated behind him at the War Memorial Building in Trenton in January 2006.

"When he came into office he said he would address ethics," Reed said. "You know he got a hard time from the people behind him."

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