

## CHRISTIE'S RIGHT HAND

*Kingmaker Bill Palatucci plays a critical role*

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By Eliana Johnson

“You can teach everything else, but you can’t teach smart, and you can’t teach loyal.” That’s how Chris Christie praised his chief of staff, Kevin O’Dowd, earlier this month, but he could just as easily have been talking about his friend and adviser Bill Palatucci.

He does not often make headlines, but Palatucci is widely considered to be Christie’s closest counselor and most trusted confidant. If the Garden State governor makes a run for the White House in 2016, Palatucci will play a unique part in the Christie operation as gatekeeper, fundraiser, adviser, and friend.

Palatucci’s role in the Christie administration is not tidily defined. He’d be the first to tell you he plays no role at all, and, technically speaking, he doesn’t. The governor’s former law partner, Palatucci has no formal position in the Christie administration. His influence, though, is unquestioned. “There is probably nobody more important to Chris Christie’s political operation than Bill Palatucci,” says Jay Webber, a New Jersey Republican assemblyman and former chairman of the state’s Republican party.

Christie’s inner circle is small and tight-knit, and getting Palatucci to talk about his friendship with the governor or his role in key decisions is like pulling teeth. “I’m on the outside of the official office, and so my view is, I’m helping my good friend who happens to be the governor right now, but beyond that, there’s not a whole lot I want to talk about,” Palatucci said when we first spoke. He’s a private person who would rather operate in the back room than in the spotlight, and he takes pains to shine it elsewhere. “We have a fabulous group of very talented people” in Trenton, he says.

Despite his protests to the contrary, Palatucci is more than just a friend to the second-term governor; he is also one of New Jersey’s most powerful political power brokers. In the state, where he has played a key role in nearly every Republican presidential campaign since 1984, his imprimatur matters. “If you’re running for statewide office in New Jersey, you would want to make sure to clear the way with Palatucci first,” says a Christie donor and longtime Republican activist. Former GOP Senate candidate Steve Lonegan, who has known Palatucci for a decade, calls him “the consummate kingmaker.” In October, Lonegan, the former mayor of Bogota, N.J., lost his bid for Senate to Newark mayor Cory Booker. “Had I established that sort of relationship with Bill Palatucci ten years ago, I would probably be the governor today, and that’s the highest tribute I can pay the guy,” Lonegan tells me.

In a business where loyalty matters and where operatives often flit from one office to another, Palatucci’s allegiance to Christie is unquestioned. “If it serves the greater good, he’ll do it, and the greater good is always Chris Christie’s interests,” says one New Jersey politico. The two are so close that Republicans familiar with the Christie operation say Palatucci serves, in some venues, as a proxy for Christie. In 2010, Christie installed him as national committeeman for the New Jersey Republican State Committee, replacing David Norcross, who had held the post for 30 years. He is described as Christie’s eyes and ears on the committee, which decides how the presidential primary process works. A Christie donor puts it more bluntly: “People know that when Palatucci speaks, it is really Chris Christie speaking.”

Palatucci is also an aggressive fundraiser on Christie’s behalf. As chairman of his reelection campaign, he helped the governor amass a record sum in the primary season, over \$6 million, and over \$12 million by



Election Day in November. Now that Christie has taken the reins at the Republican Governors Association, Palatucci is helping him raise money for gubernatorial races across the country. “He understands that finances make the world go round,” says Palatucci pal and veteran GOP operative Scott Reed. “It’s a way to show political strength, and he’s become a closer.” Palatucci’s skills will redound to Christie’s benefit if he mounts a presidential campaign. Says Reed: “They’re going to have a national finance infrastructure in place overnight.”

At home in New Jersey, Palatucci is a Christie enforcer. Those on the receiving end of his reproofs for veering off-script or failing to demonstrate sufficient devotion to the governor say his message is clear. “If you’re even off the mark a little bit, you’re toast. You learn the rules of the road, and the rules are complete and total cooperation and loyalty or exclusion and suspicion,” says one New Jersey Republican. Asked whether this iteration of New Jersey politics can go national, Reed says yes. “National politics is not beanbag, it’s the ultimate sport, like the NFL, so you better put your pads on,” he tells me. “Palatucci’s an NFL player.”

The fourth of five children raised in a devout Italian Catholic family, Palatucci is trim, tanned, and handsome, his dark hair Romneysque. Like the governor, he is a straight-talking Jersey lawyer with little patience for phonies or nonsense.

His political instincts were honed at Frank’s Tavern, the bar owned by his father and situated next door to the family’s home in Haskell, N.J. The clientele, he says, was composed of “working stiffs” clad in flannel shirts who stopped by for a beer after work or dropped in after dinner. “My dad worked every evening until between midnight and 1 . . . so if I wanted to see my dad, I would go next door, sit behind the bar, typically watch a ballgame,” Palatucci says. “You got to know the guys on the other side of the bar. These were Reagan Democrats before Ronald Reagan.” They had “great antennae” and “could spot a phony from a mile away.”

To this day, assessing political candidates, “I try really hard to look at them through the eyes of the guys who were at my father’s bar.”

Outside of his work at the bar where, as a small-business man, Palatucci’s father “didn’t appreciate government interference,” the elder Palatucci also helped people — carpenters, electricians, and other blue-collar workers — prepare their taxes. He resented watching their tax rates inch up. “I had no chance of being a Democrat,” Palatucci says. “The highlight of the week every week was every Sunday, we would go to church, come home, and we would watch as much of Bill Buckley’s *Firing Line* as we could before my mom would call us in to Sunday dinner.”

His formal entry into politics came in 1980 when, while a senior at Rutgers University, he met the man who would become the two-term governor of New Jersey. Palatucci was president of the university’s student government, and Thomas Kean Sr., who had made an unsuccessful run for governor in 1977, was considering another one. He delivered a speech at Rutgers, struck up a friendship with the young Palatucci, and eventually picked him up as an unofficial aide. Even before Kean officially launched his campaign, the 22-year-old began chauffeuring him around the state in his 1963 Pontiac Bonneville, watching firsthand as Kean built and managed his campaign apparatus. In 1985, Palatucci managed the governor’s reelection effort. “If I have any political instincts, it’s because I spent so much time with him for an entire year before he actually became a candidate,” Palatucci says. He went on to serve as the executive director of George H. W. Bush’s campaign efforts in New Jersey in both 1988 and 1992. “He knew the landscape, he knew all the people in the state, he knew everyone,” recalls Russ Schrieffer, who worked with Palatucci on the ’88 campaign.



*Palatucci and George W. Bush, 1988*

It was on the 1988 campaign that Palatucci met George W. Bush, the vice president’s son, who visited the Garden State several times to campaign for his father. New Jersey was one of the top states targeted by the campaign (the other was California), and Palatucci became a key player in the presidential election. “That was a big point in my career,”

he says, in part because he struck up a friendship with George W. Bush, one of the major surrogates for the Bush-Quayle campaign. “I liked him immediately,” Palatucci tells me. “I would pick him up at Newark airport in my silver Honda Accord and drive him all over New Jersey.” Few considered the younger Bush a president-in-waiting, Palatucci says. “If anybody ever thought anybody was going to run for president, it was Jeb Bush. We developed a genuine relationship.”

George W. Bush was the first campaign surrogate to visit New Jersey after the Republican National Convention, which was held in mid August. In early September, the [Eagleton poll](#) had Dukakis leading the elder Bush by 18 points. Two months later, Bush carried the state by more than 13 points and with over 50 percent of the vote. “One of the reasons Christie liked to say that he wanted to get more than 50 percent of the vote in 2013 was because he was sick and tired of hearing me say that I ran the last campaign in New Jersey where a Republican got more than 50 percent of the vote,” Palatucci says. 1988 is also the last year a Republican presidential candidate carried the state of New Jersey.

Two years later, Palatucci met Christie when the future governor, then a recent law-school graduate, was looking to do work for Christine Todd Whitman, who was challenging Bill Bradley for his seat in the U.S. Senate. They went on to work together on George H. W. Bush’s reelection campaign in 1992 and, when Bush lost, Christie asked Palatucci to join his law firm, Dughi & Hewit. It would turn out to be a critically important decision for Christie.

In 1999, when George W. Bush, then the governor of Texas, began to mull a presidential bid, he invited Palatucci to lunch in Austin. Palatucci would eventually make five trips to the Texas capital with influential New Jersey donors and politicians in tow: among them, his then-law-partner Chris Christie. Later, it was Palatucci who sent Christie’s résumé to Karl Rove and suggested he might make a good candidate for U.S. attorney in New Jersey, the position that paved the way for his gubernatorial candidacy. For Bush, it was a controversial appointment. Christie had never practiced criminal law, and critics charged that the appointment was a reward for Christie’s fundraising efforts on Bush’s behalf. He went on to garner bipartisan plaudits for his aggressive prosecution of the state’s notoriously corrupt politicians.

Reed, who worked with Palatucci on the 1984 Reagan-Bush campaign, says Palatucci is “filling an invaluable role for somebody who is running for president.” “He keeps an eye on the ad guys, he keeps the pollsters straight, he oversees day-to-day management. That’s an increasingly common role in national politics.” Bob White, a former colleague of Mitt Romney’s, played a similar role for the former Massachusetts governor on the 2012 campaign; Don Evans, the longtime George W. Bush pal who went on to become the 43rd president’s campaign chairman and later, secretary of commerce, did much the same thing for him. “You know, there are people in politics for all different reasons,” Bush said of Evans in April 2000. “In his case, his question is, ‘What can I do to help George W. Bush?’”

Palatucci though, is not only a best friend but also a sharp and savvy political operative. Asked what he saw in Christie when he recommended him for the U.S. attorney job, and whether he envisioned a political future for his friend, he bristles. “I recommended him for one reason,” he says, “and that’s because he’s a very good lawyer.” Palatucci is also a very good strategist, and whether he had more in mind for Christie, and for himself, he won’t say. “When you have somebody who can manipulate the shark-infested waters of politics, that is a very important component of moving on to higher office,” Lonegan tells me. Christie’s success is a fitting reflection of Palatucci’s acumen. In the words of one Christie donor, “Bill Palatucci rightly deserves that coveted role as Christie’s wingman and confidant because Bill Palatucci helped make Chris Christie.”

— *Eliana Johnson is media editor of National Review Online.*