Tuesday, July 9, 2024 / Dancing in the Dark Money

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP192ThF5u4)*>NORCROSS PRESS CONFERENCE – New Jersey Attorney General MATT PLATKIN: Good afternoon thank you all for being here today.*

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): This New Jersey press conference was not your average press conference.

<[AMBI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP192ThF5u4)>: *press conf setting up, people murmuring*

SEAN: Yes, you’ve got your podium, your reporters, your suits, and ties. But one guy in a suit in the very front row isn’t wearing any socks.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP192ThF5u4)*> New Jersey AG Matt Platkin: We're here today to announce the unsealing of a 13-count indictment charging George Norcross with leading a criminal Enterprise \*KEEP RUNNING\**

SEAN: George Norcross is sitting sockless at the press conference being held to announce charges against George Norcross.

SCORING IN — Big Stupid Wolly, PI

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP192ThF5u4)*> New Jersey AG Matt Platkin: It's often said that in New Jersey politics is a blood sport and what's meant by that is that if you don't go along with the demands of those in political power you'll get hurt..*

SEAN: New Jersey party boss George Norcross got arraigned today. The trial of Senator Bob Menendez is winding down – that’s the one with the gold bars. Why New Jersey political corruption hits different, ahead on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

<CLIP> FRANKIE VALLI – “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You”

*At long last, love has arrived  
 And I thank God I’m alive*

*You’re just too –*

*PATRICK BOYD (Today, Explained engineer) – day, Explained*

SEAN: New Jersey political corruption is not like your everyday political corruption.

NANCY SOLOMON (WNYC reporter): *It's pretty bad. Some people have argued that it's the worst in the country. New Jersey politics is still under the grip of machine politics.*

SEAN: Nancy Solomon covers Jersey for WNYC. She’s been reporting on the state’s politics for decades. And today is a big day on her beat.

NANCY: Yes. It's the arraignment for six defendants in a really sweeping corruption case that involves the man who is considered the most powerful unelected person in the state. He's a party boss. He controls a lot of South Jersey. His name is George E. Norcross, the third. And he and his brother Phil, and a former mayor of Camden and two business partners, and his personal attorney, which is very unusual, have all been charged with a racketeering case.

SCORING IN – Bees - Marble Beat - BMC

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP192ThF5u4)*> New Jersey AG Matt Platkin: The indictment unsealed today contains 13 counts count one charges all six defendants with a first-degree racketeering conspiracy in violation of NJSA 2C 41 2D. The pattern of racketeering activity alleged by the state includes violations of the federal Hobs act. theft by extortion Financial facilitation of criminal activity …*

NANCY: I mean, this is RICO. These are the statutes that were first, written in the 60s to take down the mob. It's very unusual looking back over the last 20 years to see this kind of a case brought.

MUSIC BREATHES

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EP192ThF5u4)*> New Jersey AG Matt Platkin: this indictment alleges that a group of unelected private businessmen use their power and influence to get government at the state and local levels to Aid their criminal Enterprise and further its interests through their alleged acts the Norcross Enterprise …*

NANCY: George Norcross says everything I do I do for the betterment of Camden. And he already talked about it on the day of the indictment.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ZW7K_wWr-c)*>NORCROSS: When I finished listening I said to myself where’s the beef? Where is the beef here?*

*Reporter: What did you aim to do coming today? What was the reason that you came?*

*NORCROSS: Because I want to witness an extraordinary, embarrassment an outrageous conduct from a government official who stands up there and tries to act like he's holier than thou.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: So when you say George Norcross is a ‘party boss’ in South Jersey, it's, like, evocative of, I don't even know, like some, bygone era or maybe *The Sopranos.*

*<CLIP> TONY SOPRANO: What you gonna do, you know?*

SEAN: What does that mean exactly?

NANCY: Yeah, I've been, recently I've been watching *Boardwalk Empire*, which is kind of like a busman's holiday for me.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>   
  
NANCY: And it's just incredible. I mean, that story is really tells the story of a party boss, a real party boss.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEbVfPKdL_M)*> BOARDWALK EMPIRE – NUCKY THOMPSON: First rule of politics, kiddo: Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.*

NANCY: And so what it means essentially is you have, you have county party organizations in New Jersey. There are 21 counties And the machines really rise up out of those county party organizations.

What you have is the chairman of the county party who really has enormous power to get people preferential treatment on the ballot, and raise money to get them elected and then reelected and then hold politicians feet to the fire to do things that turn out to be favorable to companies and people with money who then contribute back into the campaign war chest of the machine.

You raise the money to keep people in power, and then they're beholden to you. And with George Norcros he basically has a grip on all of South Jersey,

He started developing a machine in the 90s that finally started to really rival the North and became very powerful by creating a coalition of all the elected leaders, all the towns, all the county commissioners, like all across South Jersey, he was able to build this power base. And he also does business around the state. He's a, he has an insurance company and he sells insurance to government entities and makes money all over the state. And, you know, he's able to parlay some of that political power into economic benefit for himself.

SEAN: Most of what you're saying, if not all of it sounds aboveboard, if you know what you're doing. But it sounds like Norcross gets himself into some trouble at some point.

NANCY: Nominally, yeah, it is legal, but it really gives rise to so much power concentrated into people who are not elected, um, and who are largely unregulated. And so it really does open the door to all kinds of corruption or, you know, in, in a few cases, illegal activity.

SCORING IN — Triangle Time (hip hop, bass, breaks, old school, 8bit synth, sidechain)-07

NANCY: ~~Yeah.~~ So what the state attorney general, Matt Platkin, is alleging in this indictment, is that George Norcross and his brother Phil ran a criminal enterprise in which they, extorted land on the Camden waterfront. ~~Meaning they were able to use their political power in Camden to force the rightful owners of property and the rights to develop on the Camden waterfront front to sell at a price below the market. So that's by definition extortion, meaning theft by force and harassment.~~

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtV-z0U4WxM)> CBS PHILADELPHIA: Platkin alleges the group used coercion and extortion to gain property rights on the Camden waterfront, then collected millions in state tax credits.

NANCY: They also had worked with the state legislature to rewrite the state's tax break law and, make it so that there were these super charged state tax breaks that any business could apply for, and many could get to move to Camden.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXbmdFaDRN4)> NJ SPOTLIGHT: The economic opportunity act - The new law collapses 5 existing business tax incentive programs into 2 and lowers the threshold for participation so that small businesses can get state help as well as large ones.

So they get the land on the Camden waterfront, and then they and their business partners and their allies, their clients get the tax breaks, which is basically it's so generous, these tax breaks that it's basically referred to as a free building program.

You're able to get 100% of your investment to move into Camden and build a building, or to move into Camden and rent a building, that you, you get a free building.

SEAN: Quite a deal

NANCY: Yeah. And in fact, $1.6 billion in state tax breaks went to Camden alone. And of those of that $1.6 billion in state tax breaks, 1.1 billion went to businesses either owned by or connected to George and Phil Norcross.

SEAN: Wow.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: How do you think a jury will see this character George Norcross? I mean, it sounds like he makes a lot of people a lot of money. It sounds like he can plead a case that, you know, he's just doing his job, which is developing Southern Jersey and benefiting the residents of South Jersey.

NANCY: This is a central part of his defense and I've talked to him about it numerous times. over the course of my reporting, he has this line that he loves to say that it used to be in Camden that you could:

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Pri-NMu5g)> *GEORGE NORCROSS: … get murdered buy drugs or buy sex, all on the same block.*

NANCY: Like that, that is his line that he says, and he says he came in, it's his hometown and he came back and he invested his own money and everything is about, you know, Camden rising.

SEAN: Mmm.

NANCY: And I think the other thing that he says, and that will clearly be a part of the case, is it illegal to be tough and to negotiate with your opponents and make threats.

He will argue he's being a tough negotiator. And so then the question becomes, well, you know, when does a threat become a criminal threat.

SEAN: It sounds like Norcross has been at this game for a long time. What changed? Why is he being tried now?

NANCY: Yeah, I think a lot of that answer has to do with the state attorney general, Matt Platkin. He's shown a real commitment to, uh fighting corruption and, uh going after powerful people. He worked as the chief counsel to Governor Phil Murphy, uh during Governor Murphy's first term and during that time. ~~So chief counsel is his top lawyer, not a personal lawyer, but a lawyer for the state, for the governor's office. Um And during that time~~, he was involved in Governor Murphy's uh audit of the state tax break program, which was a direct kind of shot across the bow of the Norcross machine.

<CLIP> PLATKIN: We will not shy away from tough fights when they are the right fights

NANCY: So he seems to be going for broke. He may go broke, but you know, you got to respect a guy who's you know, he's going for what he believes in.

SEAN: And he's met his match maybe in George Norcross.

NANCY: This is going to be one heck of a fight. Yes.

SCORING IN – Stone Sober

SEAN: When *Today, Explained* returns, Nancy’s gonna tell us the one about the U.S. Senator with the gold bars who googled how much gold bars are worth.

Stick around!

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> GARDEN STATE*

*BRAFF: What are you listening to?*

*TODAY, EXPLAINED engineer ANDREA KRISTINSDOTTIR: Today, Explained.*

*PORTMAN: You know ‘em?*

*BRAFF: No.*

SEAN: We are back with WNYC’s Nancy Solomon, who’s covering not one, but two major corruption cases in Jersey at the moment.

NANCY: We have a sitting U.S. senator that is charged in a bribery case that is just kind of jaw dropping at every level.

*<CLIP> NBC: NJ senior senator Bob Menendez is facing federal bribery charges. The senate democrat and his wife wer e indicted today. Menendez is accused of taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from business men in NJ as well as the egyptian government. Investigators say they found gold bars and cash stuffed in jacket pockets bearing the Senators name.*

SCORING IN – Funkyzeit (2015 loop & tweak) (bouncy, bass, headnod)-02

SEAN: Tell us where we start with this one.

NANCY: So in late September of last year, Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and his wife and three businessmen were charged in a scheme that involved Menendez helping the government of Egypt to get weapons sales that had been frozen because of human rights violations. And a new Jersey businessman who got a monopoly on halal meat certification for the entire United States’ exports to Egypt.

*<CLIP> NBC: Wael Hana is one New Jersey businessman accused of paying bribes. Prosecutors say Hana wanted the senator's help securing an overseas Halal meat inspection business with the Egyptian government. As then chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, the senator oversaw hundreds of millions in aid to Egypt. In 2019, Hana's firm ISEG Halal suddenly won an exclusive contract with Egypt.*

NANCY: In the indictment and in the trial that's going on right now, basically what's alleged is that, Menendez accepted cash and gold bars …  
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
NANCY: … to the tune of more than a half a million dollars and got Egypt its weapons sales, got the business guy a monopoly on halal meat exports. Money from the halal meat exports was used to fund the bribery scheme.

*<CLIP> NEW JERSEY AG MATT PLATKIN: Today, I'm announcing that my office has obtained a three count indictment charging Senator Robert Menendez, his wife, Nadine Menendez, and three New Jersey businessmen: Wael Hannah Jose Uribe and Fred Davies for bribery offenses.*

SCORING OUT

NANCY: And then he did a couple of other sundry allegedly illegal things for these businessmen in terms of running a little interference with both the federal prosecutor in new Jersey and the state attorney general trying to get help with other criminal cases that they were charged with. And then there was a real estate deal~~. It's just, you know, to me, to to to close it out, there was a real estate deal~~ involving one of the businessmen, and the country of Qatar and getting the royal family there to invest in his deal. So it’s a pretty wide ranging scheme and conspiracy.

SEAN: In the grand scheme of New Jersey corruption, where does this Bob Menen dez business, you know, rate? Where does it land?

NANCY: Oh man, If he's convicted, if these charges are all proven to be true to a jury, that is will decide. You know, you have a sitting senator doing business with the country of Egypt while he's on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and then the the cash and the gold bars, like the cash was stuffed into his jacket, his bomber jacket with his insignia on the outside and his boots and and the gold bars were in his wife's closet.

SCORING IN – World 3 - Ocean (video game, playful, waltz, synth).wav

NANCY: I mean, the house. It's like this little New Jersey ranch house that hasn't been renovated since the 1980s, and they've got a half a million dollars, like stuffed in, you know, sweatshirt pockets and Burberry bags.

SCORING - REVERB ON CASH EFFECT HERE .. SO HER LAST LINE IS IN THE CLEAR

NANCY: It was just it's just the details are mind boggling.

SAME SCORING BACK IN

*<CLIP> NBC REPORTER: A duffel bag with $100,000 in the basement, other bags with thousands more and even more cash found in closets in boxes and in shoes. The FBI says this is what they found executing the bribery related search warrant at Senator and Nadine Menendez's Englewood Cliffs home.*

SEAN: Wasn’t there also something about he was just googling like, how much are gold bars worth?

NANCY: Exactly. Yes. How much is gold worth?

SEAN: Oh my gosh. Amazing.

SCORING OUT  
  
SEAN: Are Democrats in New Jersey at any risk of losing this seat? Does, does this case with Menendez stink that badly?

NANCY: Well, you know, there's a, an extra little wrinkle …

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1wk0QJ6t44)> *Menendez: Hello this is senator Bob Menendez. For the last 19 years I’ve had the honor and privilege…*

NANCY: … which is that he has filed to run as an independent in the November election.

SEAN: Mmm.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1wk0QJ6t44)> *Menendez: I know many of you are hurt and disappointed in me with the accusations I'm facing. Believe me I am disappointed at the false accusations as well*

NANCY: So we have the Democratic congressman, Andy Kim, who won the primary and is quite popular in the state, running against a Republican, Curtis Bashaw, who has very little name recognition, no political experience but money. So I don't think anybody would consider that that was a race that the Democrats are going to lose.

SEAN: Yeah.

NANCY: But when you have Menendez, like, does he come in? And just make up the Democrats chances enough to make it a real race. I think it's possible, but I still think Andy Kim has a pretty clear path to victory on this one. But, you know, I don't know. You know, it's these are crazy political times. It's you know, nobody wants to be like trying to predict something at this point because it's it's kind of insane.

SEAN: Okay. We'll give you a pass then.

NANCY: <chortles>  
  
SEAN: Is this level of corruption we see in New Jersey, is it like a particularly, like, Democratic thing or is it a Republican thing, too?

NANCY: Yeah. I mean, it only looks like a Democratic thing in New Jersey because there are more Democrats.

SEAN: Yeah.

NANCY: There's a million more registered Democrats. And then there's a whole lot of independents who don't register with the party, you know, so the Republicans are fairly weak in the state. And the way that you build a political machine, whether it is just an effective political organization or whether it's a corrupt criminal enterprise, you do that by having a lot of votes to leverage in your county. And so you just have a lot of Democratic voters. And the party bosses have been able to, you know, use that as a way to build power in the state.

SCORING IN – Neutral Irene - reverb last note copy

SEAN: Do you think with, with the Norcross trial and the Menendez trial happening at the same time, is is there enough coverage and controversy for this to be something of a turning point for New Jersey? Or is there just some light being shed on something that's, that's, I don't know, too entrenched a tradition to change.

NANCY: Yeah. I, I think it's possible.

I mean, I think the caveat is that many a party boss has gone to prison, and the next party boss just came right in and took his place. And I'll say his because it's been men. So I think there is a scenario in which not a whole lot changes, even if a few people go to prison. But, you know, I think there is this sort of perfect storm of a crusading attorney general who seems, at least from the outside looking in, seems to have integrity and a real desire to challenge what he sees as wrongdoing. And you have an activist base that came, really started to grow after the first Trump election in 2016.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4qTgn9-2RU&t=25s)*> PBS REPORTER: Whether Republicans retain a majority in the House of Representatives or Democrats take control. Comes down to a few key races around the nation. Two seats in New Jersey are becoming bellwether because they're taking place in moderate Republican districts.*

NANCY: And so you have this political movement that rose up against Donald Trump and flipped several congressional seats in 2018. And so you've got that happening at the same time, and then you've got these high profile criminal charges and investigations and trials. So I think there is a scenario in which, you know, we do see some real reforms and change happening. I think it's going to take many years, though.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And what would that change look like?

NANCY: It would look like a more diverse state legislature where people elected to the state legislature don't get reelected year in and year out because of the machine backing, but actually face competitive primaries because they voted against the interests of their constituents. That would be, you know, number one on my list. It would be ballots that are laid out the way the rest of the 49 states do it so that they're fair and just, you know, more transparency and openness in terms of like, you know, where the money comes from and how these elections happen and who is the power behind them. And, you know, all of that, I think, would lead to more reform candidates, more women, more people of color and more young people. And we would start to see real change.

SEAN: Do you think the corruption and the messiness of New Jersey politics tells us anything about the messiness and corruption on the federal level? Obviously, you know, you mentioned the former president a couple of times and some of these stories you tell about Norcross and Menendez, even you can't help but think about the former and potentially future president.

NANCY: Right. I mean, the day that George Norcross showed up at the press conference of the attorney general and stared him down was so Trumpy, right? I mean, it just was. So it was hard not to think about that connection.

You know, I think one of the things going on nationally that relates very much to what's going on in New Jersey is the dark money in politics. And the Supreme Court and members of the Supreme Court accepting gifts and favors from, you know, wealthy people. And I think you see that. I mean, what Bob Menendez was doing is just kind of like a few ticks beyond what is legal and what happens everywhere.

There is a definite connection between the problems that we see at the federal level, primarily with the influence of money in politics and what we see here in new Jersey, for sure.

SCORING IN – Born\_to\_Win\_CEZ\_CEZ\_4205\_00401\_APM-02

SEAN: Nancy Solomon. WNYC. Nancy hosted a great show about New Jersey corruption and maybe murder? It’s called Dead End: A New Jersey Political Murder Mystery, and it features a whole lot more of George Norcross if you couldn’t get enough today. Find it wherever you find your podcasts.

This episode of *Today, Explained* was produced by Peter Balonon-Rosen with help from Hady Mawajdeh. We were edited by Matthew Collette, fact checked by Laura Bullard, mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. More from us tomorrow.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]