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TRANSCRIPT

BOB SCHIEFFER: Today on FACE THE NATION, the most talked-about governor in America, Republican Chris Christie of New Jersey. Some call him a truth teller, others a demagogue. But it was Christie who was among the first to take on public service unions in an effort to balance his state's budget, a stance that has set off a backlash from organized labor that brought out protests across the country yesterday.

And, we'll hear from our correspondents today in the Middle East for the latest on the trouble in Libya, where the death toll has climbed to more than thousand.

Then I'll have a final thought on priorities.

It's all ahead on FACE THE NATION.

ANNOUNCER: FACE THE NATION with CBS News chief Washington correspondent Bob Schieffer. And now from CBS News in Washington, Bob Schieffer.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And good morning again. Governor Christie is in the studio with us this morning. Governor, thank you for being here. But-- but before we get to this big news of home, we want to go to Libya where Moammar Qaddafi continues to cling to power.

(Moammar Qaddafi speaking foreign language)

BOB SCHIEFFER: Yesterday, the President called on Qaddafi to step down, the United Nations imposed a new set of stiff sanctions and the death toll there now stands at over a thousand. In addition, a UN refugee agency says as many as a hundred thousand people have fled the country. Kelly Cobiella is in the capital city of Tripoli and Allen Pizzey is on the western border in Tunisia. We go first to Kelly.

KELLY COBIELLA: Well, Bob, it's the start of the workweek here in Tripoli, and instead of flocking to jobs people are going to banks. They've been getting messages from the government saying there's a four-hundred-dollar gift waiting for them. And they've been very quick and very happy to collect. The government says this is part of their effort to show that they're listening to their people and answering some of their demands. They also say that they're giving some raises to state employees. Now we've seen a very heavy police and security presence throughout Tripoli. Every time we've pulled out our camera to film, within seconds there was a police car next to us, a car with soldiers next to us, all asking us if we had permission. We also saw men in plainclothes working alongside some of these police and soldiers and carrying automatic weapons. It's not clear if they're civilians or they're just police officers in plainclothes at this point. Qaddafi did make a promise on-- or a threat, as you may see it, on Friday night that he would begin to arm civilian supporters. And-- and we hear that that actual see did happen yesterday and some residents in some of the neighborhoods have said that these armed civilian militias are going through the streets, patrolling the streets keeping order. Now most of Tripoli is under Qaddafi's control. We've heard sporadic gunfire at night but nothing sustained and see no sign of widespread violence or clashes.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Kelly, is there any sign that the opposition to Qaddafi is backing off?

KELLY COBIELLA: There is no sign at all that the-- the opposition is backing off. An-- and no sign that there they are marching on the city either. We've heard many reports from outside of the city that something to that effect would happen, that these enemies of Qaddafi were closing in. Aside from a couple of neighborhoods within this city where people are-- are openly defiant of Qaddafi, we've seen really no sign of the opposition making inroads into Tripoli.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Kelly Cobiella. Kelly, thank you so much. CBS News correspondent Allen Pizzey is on the western border with Tunisia. Allen, what's the latest there?

ALLEN PIZZEY: Well, Bob, the refugees continue to stream across here most of them are Egyptians. The UN high commissioner for refugees says at least fifty thousand people have come into Tunisia since the troubles broke out in Libya, about eight days ago. Nearly forty-five thousand of them came across this particular border crossing. Many of them are Egyptians. They say-- they tell you stories of being robbed, other ones say they had no trouble. But they have no idea who is at the checkpoints. One guy said everybody has got a uniform. Everybody has a gun. I don't know who they are. I'm just glad to be out. Now the problem here is that the-- the Tunisians want them to keep moving. They don't want to get a refugee camp built up here. But there are so many coming that the pipeline is beginning to jam up. Yesterday, there was a lot of almost violence here at the border as these people got crossed. You know, tired, scared. Desperate to keep moving on. And that's calmed down now. But the problem is that they're stuck in Tunisia and the Egyptians aren't able to get them out. And still there is a refugee crisis building here, Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Allen Pizzey. Thank you so much, Allen.

And one other bit of news. Senators John McCain and Joe Lieberman, who are in the region called today for the United States to arm the rebels in that fight going on in Tripoli.

Well, now to the protests, back home protests of a very different kind. These are peaceful protests in Madison, Wisconsin, by union members. That demonstration is moving into its thirteenth day. Yesterday's turnout of seventy thousand was the largest yet. And yesterday, union workers across the country turned out to support them, these demonstrations over the Wisconsin governor's plan to reduce spending by ending the collective bargaining rights of teachers and many other public service employees.

Well Governor Christie, you took on the-- the public service unions in New Jersey. But you didn't talk about ending collective bargaining rights. Do you think Governor Walker out there in Wisconsin has gone too far?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE (R-New Jersey): Bob, let me tell you what-- what went on in New Jersey. My predecessor Governor Corzine stood on the front steps of the Capitol at a public sector union rally and said, "I'll fight to get you a good contract." And I thought to myself watching that, who's he fighting with? Once he says that the fight's over. What I believe in is true adversarial collective bargaining. And so, every state is different. I'm not going to micromanage Wisconsin from Trenton, New Jersey. I know Scott Walker. I like him. And I trust him. And I think he believes he's doing what's in the best interest of Wisconsin, the same way I'm going to do what I think needs to be done for New Jersey, which is, to reform the pension system and roll back health benefits for public sector workers, to put them more in line with the rest of the population in New Jersey, to put us on a long-term path to fiscal stability.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, but what about this idea? Do they have a right to collective bargaining?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Now listen. All these rights are legislatively created. They didn't come down from tablets at the top of a mountain. And so, political things change and go back and forth. And every state is going to make their own determination on that. Wisconsin is in the middle of making that determination. As you know, Bob, there are plenty of states in America where that right doesn't exist. And so, each state has to make their own determination on that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, is that good or bad for New Jersey? Do you think they ought to have the right in New Jersey to collective bargaining?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: What I've said in New Jersey is, as long as it's fair and reasonable collective bargaining. You know, we can't have what we've had before. You know, Bob, public sector workers, state workers in New Jersey, this past year, were working under a contract from my predecessor Jon Corzine, got seven percent salary increases in a zero percent inflation world. I don't think the people who are paying the bills think that's the result of fair adversarial collective bargaining. They want someone in the room representing the taxpayers. And that's what I'll be this June, when that contract expires.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Do you see a danger here that this is turning into some kind of may be not a danger, may be it's something you would encourage, turning into some kind of national political war, where you have Democrats and the unions on one side and Republicans on the other?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: I-- I don't think it is. I think again, there are so many states that don't have collective bargaining and there are a lot of states are not having this conflict right now. And so, I think this is really a state-by-state issue. There's a lot of interest in this right now because of the emotion that's going on in Wisconsin--strong stand by Governor Walker and a strong stand by the people on the other side. It'll be resolved politically in the state legislature in Wisconsin. So, I don't see it that way. Obviously, it has national interest in story, Bob, but we've been taking on the unions in New Jersey for the last year and that's gotten a lot of attention too. So everybody is doing it their own way.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let me ask you this. You really came on hard against the teachers' union. I think everybody in this country on all sides of all this thinks we need education reform that we've got to do something to make our educational system better. Do you worry that the stance you have taken has somehow demonized teachers and-- and will raise questions in young people's minds as to whether they want to go into the profession?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: No, I don't. In fact, I did quite the opposite. Listen, I think that the teachers in New Jersey, and there's thousands and thousands of great ones deserve a union as good as they are and they don't have it. And, I disagree with the premise of your question which is that everybody agrees there should be education reform. It's everybody, but the teachers union who believes that everything is fine. If you listen to them in New Jersey, they'll tell you everything is fine. I mean it's great. It's great except for the hundred and four thousand kids in New Jersey that are struck in-- stuck in two hundred chronically-failing schools. I mean, you know just because their zip code is in a poor urban center doesn't mean we should be fighting to change the system that's failing them. So, no. What I'm trying to do is have a merit-based system for teachers, so that great ones get rewarded and paid more and that the really great ones want to stay in the profession, not only because they love it but because they're rewarded financially for it. The union, Bob, they protect the worse of the worst. That's

what there for, they make it impossible to fire bad teachers and it's ruining our education system.

BOB SCHIEFFER: What do you think of President Obama's plans to reform education at the federal level by his-- you know let's reward good teachers. His, you know, the-- the things that Secretary Duncan has outlined. Are-- are you-- generally think he's on the right track?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: I do. And-- and I've said that publicly. I think the President has shown some real courage, especially for a Democrat who's been dependent upon the teachers union nationally for political support to come out for merit pay and race to the top and some of the things he's done to push reform, I think the President has been on the right track. I'm little concerned about comments I heard yesterday from Secretary Duncan that seemed to be, you know blowing the hornet for treat on that a little bit. And I-- I hope that that's not an election year ploy for them to cozy back up to the NEA and the ATF, as the President prepares for re-election. But in general, I think the President has been very strong on this. And that's why you see Republicans agreeing with him on it.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You have a reputation as a straight talker I think. Do you believe that the budgetary problems across this country can be resolved without raising taxes?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, let's take New Jersey, for instance, Bob. We raised taxes and fees a hundred and fifteen times in the last eight years. And we still have one of the worst budget problems in America. And so, I think unless you deal with the underlying structural expense problems and we've been dealing with them in New Jersey, you-- there's no amount of taxation is ever going to keep up with the amount of spending increase that we have. And so, my view is we've already done things on the tax side in New Jersey. We have one of the highest top marginal income tax rates one of the highest sales tax rates, one of the highest corporate business tax rates. What we need to get to now is cutting back the size and scope of government and have those two things meet. For instance, this year in my budget, while we still reduce spending, I added two hundred and fifty million dollars to K-12 education. We're going to do things that make sense. But we're not going to continue the spending spree and we're certainly not just going back to raising more and more taxes. The people in New Jersey have had enough of that. Hundred and fifteen times in eight years, I think they'd given it the office, Bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: You know there are some groups, anti-tax groups that ask people, especially people who are running for the Republican nomination for president to take a pledge not to raise taxes. I know you're not running. I know what you've said about running. But it's-- would you do that? Would you ever take a pledge not to raise taxes?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, listen. If I were running, I guess I'd have to make that decision. But at the end of the day I think what matters much more is what you do and not anything that you sign or-- or that you say. You have to prove and do it. And I think the reason why people in New Jersey are responding to what we're doing is I'm actually doing in the job, Bob, what I said I would do. I said if there were income tax increases I would veto them. I did and my veto was sustained. I said I would cut spending in the size of government. We've now cut spending two years in a row--not projected spending, real spending. And we're taking on the things that they're not taking on at the federal level--pension benefits and health care. And we're doing those two things to cut back the cost of that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: One of the things that you have spoken out on is something that a lot of people in politics have not. Here's what you said at the American Enterprise Institute this week in Washington.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE (February 16): You're going to have to raise the retirement age for Social Security. Oh, I just said it and I'm still standing here. I did not vaporize into the carpeting and I said it.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. You said it.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: I did.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Should-- should other people be saying that?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Of course, I mean, listen, you know and I know that the overall majority has a problem on the federal level comes down to three programs--Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. And unless we go about tackling those three issues, all the rest of the things that the President is talking about and others on Capitol Hill are talking about are minor league issues. Not saying they're not important. Not saying they're not, you know, interesting and-- and-- and I might like some of them. But if you don't deal with those three, those three are going to eat up everything else. And so, we've to start dealing with it. And I think the people of the United States are-- are ready for a frank, adult conversation about it. I've seen that in New Jersey. I've done a lot of things that people say I don't like but I'm glad you're taking it on because you have to, because we know we're in trouble. And so, my view on it and the reason I came down and gave that speech was to say to people stop being afraid and stop telling-- selling the people of America short. They're smart. They know we have to do this.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Governor, let's take a break here. And we'll come back and talk about this and some other things, including the government shutdown that may be coming in this country in-- in-- in Washington.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And we're back now with Governor Christie. Governor, Congress is back this week and the first thing they've got to tackle is some sort of emergency stopgap legislation to keep the con-- government from shutting down. But I know there are a lot of people in your party, especially on the Tea Party side, who say maybe just let the government shut down. Let's do not compromise on-- on spending. Do you think it would be a good idea to shut the government down?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: I don't, unless that's the only way to forward your principles. And I think they're going to be able to find a way to find compromise that protects the principles that, you know the folks in my party got elected on and the ones that are important to Democrats. I mean their job is to solve these problems and not just to stand in a corner and hold your breath. So-- and I say that about both sides. So let's get together. They've got a week to figure it out. Let's get in the room and figure it out. I was a little surprised they took the last week off, to tell you the truth, given that this was looming. Why? I-- I think most Americans wanted to know why they weren't go to work, but they're getting back to work tomorrow. So let's get back to work and let's get it solved.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, what do you say to the Tea Party folks who say, look, I mean, it-- it's our way or no way. We have simply got to stop this and if it takes shutting down the government, shut it down.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, those are two different things, right? I mean, I think that you can accomplish the goals of downsizing government, of cutting spending, and you can do it in a way that I think Democrats will go along with you on. I mean you have to have some fights. And that's fine. As you know, I'm not, you know averse to a fight. But I think also you just have to get in a room and start working it out with people. That's what we've done in New Jersey, Bob. Now I have a democratic legislature. And the things that I've accomplished with cutting spending and putting a cap on property taxes, cap on interest arbitration awards, reforming initially for new employees pension and benefits, I've done that with a democratic legislature. It means I don't get every ounce of what I want but we get in a room and we work it out. And that's what they should do down here.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): Well--

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: The President should lead on that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Once they get this stopgap measure to keep the government running then they have to take a vote on-- on whether to raise the debt ceiling. What's your view on that?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: My view on it is that it better be in line also with some real long-term commitments to cutting spending. You've got to do both. And-- and I think it's a good moment to force that conversation and they should. And-- and I-- I just believe that if the President shows leadership on this, he can bring the parties together. That's what a president's for.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Let's talk about-- let's talk about President Obama. What do you think of the job he's doing?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Listen, there are some things I like and there some things I don't like. The spending has been out of control and not as advertised when he ran for president. And-- and that's very disappointing to me. I'm-- I'm not a fan of the health care reform. And I think it's unnecessarily hamstrung states. And I doubt that it's constitutional. Now on the other side, as I said before I like what he's done on education reform. And I think it's a Nixon to China kind of moment. You know, we need a democratic president to make these reforms in education to lead the way. I-- I like some of the things he's had to say in renewable energy because I think we need to find a path to lower our dependence on foreign oil and-- and we can see what's going on in the Middle East this week. That it can turn things upside down for us. So I like some of the things he's been doing on that as well. But, you know, overall, I didn't vote for him. And I doubt I'll vote for him next time.

BOB SCHIEFFER: A lot of Republicans, you know are giving hints, indications and so forth that they may or may not seek the Republican nomination to run against Barack Obama. You have said in one of the-- one of your memorable quotes, I've-- if I have, I-- I'd have to commit suicide to convince people I'm not running. Well, you may or may not walk back from the ledge on that. What-- you haven't been all that kind I guess is what I would say to-- to some of the people that do seem to be suggesting they're going to run. What do you like about the field so far and what don't you like?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, we don't have a field yet. First of all, no one has declared. And-- and what I've said is let's judge the complete field once they all get in. You know lots of people can flirt with it, Bob. But you know it's-- it's an enormous decision to make the decision to run for president of the United States and enormous personal commitment. When the team that we're going to field gets in there, then I'll make my evaluation of them. And I don't think I've said anything uncharitable about any of them. I've said some very nice things about Governor Daniels but I've said those things because I really believe that Governor Daniels is speaking about the issues that need to be spoken about and has a track record in Indiana that proves he can actually do it. That doesn't mean I'd endorse Governor Daniels if he ran. But what it means is, I think those are the things that other people who are considering running should be looking at and talking about, to having an honest conversation with the American people.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Well, what you have said is they've got to get out here and talk about these things that are going to be the issues, that you can't finesse it.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: No, you can't finesse it. And then-- and you have to have unscripted moments. I mean you cannot be blow dried and, you know, poll tested and come out here. That's not what the American people want. They want somebody who is going to speak straight to them. And they want to ask you questions, so they want unguarded moments. That's when they can really judge your character.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Is that-- is that aimed at, say, Sarah Palin who seems to talk to people mostly on her website and-- and not-- and she doesn't do many interviews?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, I-- I think it's-- it's aimed at all of them. But certainly, when I first made that comment, it was in response to a question about Governor Palin. And I think if she wants to prove she's ready for this, you got to have to have some unscripted moments. Now she may very well be up to it and if she is, good for her, but I think people want to see that. Very-- they're very much interested in her. So they want to see that about her to make a judgment as to can you trust somebody in the Oval Office who can do that? Unless you do those unscripted moments, I think it's hard to get the person to pull the lever for you.

BOB SCHIEFFER (overlapping): What-- I mean do you think she's ready?

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, listen. She's got to make that judgment herself. And you know what, Bob, I'll make my vote in the voting booth privately like every other American.

BOB SCHIEFFER: All right. Let me-- let me ask you this. Some of the people on the right have sort of poked fun and made fun of Michelle Obama, because she's been trying to get people to eat better. I know that you have done dieting. You have worked on your weight and so forth. You described yourself as portly. Do you think-- what do you think about this criticism coming from the right of Michelle Obama, because she's trying to get people to eat better.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Well, I think it's unnecessary. I think it's a really good goal to encourage kids to eat better. You know, I've-- I've struggled with my weight for thirty years and it's a struggle. And if a kid can avoid that in his adult years or her adult years, more power to them. And I think the first lady is speaking out well. I mean, I don't want the government deciding what you can and what you can't eat. I still think that's your choice. But I think Mrs.

Obama being out there encouraging people in a positive way to eat well and to exercise and to be healthy, I don't have a problem with that.

BOB SCHIEFFER: Governor Christie, thank you so much. I hope you'll come back to see us.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE (overlapping): Absolutely, I will.

BOB SCHIEFFER: We enjoyed having you.

GOVERNOR CHRIS CHRISTIE: Thank you, bob.

BOB SCHIEFFER: And we'll be back with some final thoughts in just a bit.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And finally today, well, we are two months into the New Year and I hear Congress and the White House are finally, finally getting close to an agreement on spending that will keep the government running for another two weeks or so, which means that in two weeks they can have the same argument again or I guess they can. Frankly, I-- I tuned out and went to Houston to see something more interesting last week than the Washington back and forth. People in Houston were raising money for the Texas Children's Hospital, which leads the fight against children's cancer. They don't mess around in Houston. They put on a dinner and raise just over four and a half million dollars--one dinner, one night, four and half million dollars and there was even more. A man named Lester Smith and his wife Sue said they would match whatever the dinner brought in. So he wrote a check for another four and a half million, which brought the take for one night to 9.1 million dollars to fight children's cancer. Even better was the afternoon I spent at the cancer hospital where Doctor ZoAnn Dryer gave me even more astounding numbers. She told me in 1965 the survival rate for children with leukemia--the leading cancer among children was just five percent. Today, it is eighty-five that survive. Now that makes you proud. But when she told me why it is so important to keep private contributions flowing into cancer research, that is because government funding continues to shrink, especially for children's cancer, yes, I said especially for children's cancer, I didn't find much to be proud of there. But it did remind me it was time to get back to Washington, where the priorities may get out of whack but the argument never ends.

Back in a minute.

(ANNOUNCEMENTS)

BOB SCHIEFFER: And that's it for today. Thank you for watching FACE THE NATION. And stay up to the second on all the news by tuning in to cbsnews.com on your computer. We'll see you next week.

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