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Mario Cuomo, Ex-New York Governor and Liberal Beacon, Dies at 82

By ADAM NAGOURNEY JAN. 1, 2015

Mario M. Cuomo, the three-term governor of New York who commanded the attention of the country with a compelling public presence, a forceful defense of liberalism and his exhaustive ruminations about whether to run for president, died on Thursday at his home in Manhattan. He was 82.

His family confirmed the death, which occurred only hours after Mr. Cuomo's son Andrew M. Cuomo was inaugurated in Manhattan for a second term as governor. The cause was heart failure.

Mario Cuomo led New York during a turbulent time, 1983 through 1994. His ambitions for an activist government were thwarted by recession. He found himself struggling with the State Legislature not over what the government should do but over what programs should be cut, and what taxes should be raised, simply to balance the budget.

Still, no matter the problems he found in Albany, Mr. Cuomo burst beyond the state's boundaries to personify the liberal wing of his national party and become a source of unending fascination and, ultimately, frustration for Democrats, whose leaders twice pressed him to run for president, in 1988 and 1992, to no avail.

In an era when liberal thought was increasingly discredited, Mr. Cuomo, a man of large intellect and often unrestrained personality, celebrated it, challenging Ronald Reagan at the height of his presidency with an expansive and affirmative view of government and a message of compassion, tinged by the Roman Catholicism that was central to Mr. Cuomo's identity.

A man of contradictions who enjoyed Socratic arguments with himself, Mr. Cuomo seemed to disdain politics even as he embraced it. "What an ugly business

this is," he liked to say. Yet he reveled in it, proving himself an uncommonly skilled politician and sometimes a ruthless one.

He was a tenacious debater and a spellbinding speaker at a time when political oratory seemed to be shrinking to the size of the television set. Delivering the keynote address at the 1984 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, he eclipsed his party's nominee, former Vice President Walter F. Mondale, seizing on Reagan's description of America as "a shining city on a hill" to portray the president as unaware of impoverished Americans. "Mr. President," he said, "you ought to know that this nation is more a 'tale of two cities' than it is just a 'shining city on a hill.' "

The speech was the high-water mark of his national political career, making him in many ways a more admired figure outside his state than in it.

He enjoyed victories in New York. He closed the Shoreham nuclear plant on Long Island, ending a long and divisive fight over its potential dangers. He signed ethics legislation under a cloud of scandals involving state lawmakers and their employees.

But he may be remembered more for the things he never did than for what he accomplished. His designs on the presidency became just flirtations. He encouraged President Bill Clinton to consider him for a seat on the Supreme Court but pulled back just as the offer was about to be made in 1993. For all his advocacy of an activist government, he did not always practice it, or could not, because of the fiscal obstacles he encountered in Albany.

Always given to self-doubt and second-guessing, Mr. Cuomo said that if he had any regrets about his governorship, it was that he had never identified himself with a large initiative that might have been his legacy, as the expansion of the State University of New York was for Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller.

Mr. Cuomo noted that he had built more prison cells than any chief executive in the state's history. But he added, "What I didn't do was pick one thing and keep saying it over and over again, so I could have gotten credit for it."

He had a pointed sense of humor. When an engine failed in a puff of smoke on a state-owned Gulfstream G-1 jet one morning with the governor aboard, he barely noticed, and kept talking about national politics until he noticed that a reporter

across the way had stopped taking notes and had turned ashen. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “Aren’t you in a state of grace?”

Mr. Cuomo served longer than any of his 51 predecessors except Rockefeller and, in the early years of the republic, George Clinton. He might have surpassed Rockefeller, but in seeking a fourth term in 1994, he was defeated by George E. Pataki, a little-known Republican state senator from Peekskill. Mr. Cuomo’s advisers had counseled him not to run again, but he overruled them.

Andrew Cuomo, a former housing secretary under President Clinton, sought to become governor himself in 2002, but withdrew from the Democratic field amid an uproar over remarks he had made questioning Governor Pataki’s leadership after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He ran again in 2010 and was elected. It was a redemptive moment for the Cuomo family, and the first time in New York’s history that a father and son had been elected chief executive. Andrew Cuomo was handily re-elected in November.

Mario Cuomo, a lawyer by profession, could trim his sails in the face of opposition, but he held to more than a few positions that went against the grain of public opinion. Most prominent was his opposition to the death penalty, an unpopular view that contributed to his defeat by Edward I. Koch in the 1977 mayoral primary in New York and that nearly derailed his first bid for governor. His annual veto of the death penalty became a rite, and he invoked it as a testimony to his character and principles.

He was similarly resolute when he defied his church in 1984 by flying to the University of Notre Dame to proclaim that Roman Catholic politicians who personally opposed abortion, as he did, could appropriately support the right of a woman to have an abortion.

Mr. Cuomo’s essentially liberal view of government never wavered, even after he effectively lost the argument when Democrats embraced the centrist Mr. Clinton. Years afterward, Mr. Cuomo would produce a copy of a speech he delivered to the progressive New Democratic Coalition in 1974, reading passages aloud with the same electric spirit and rolling cadences that had made him so evocative a speaker.

In the end, two images of Mr. Cuomo endure. The first is of him, as governor,

commanding the lectern at the 1984 Democratic convention, stilling a sea of delegates with his oratory. The second is of two chartered airplanes on the tarmac at the Albany airport in December 1991, waiting to fly him to New Hampshire to pay the $1,000 filing fee that would put his name on the state's Democratic primary ballot for president.

Mr. Cuomo, whose tortuous deliberations over whether to seek the White House had led pundits to call him "Hamlet on the Hudson," put the decision off until 90 minutes before the 5 p.m. filing deadline. Then he emerged from the Executive Mansion to announce to a news conference at the Capitol that he would not run. The demands of negotiating a stalled state budget, he said, prevented him entering the race.

"It seems to me I cannot turn my attention to New Hampshire while this threat hangs over the head of the New Yorkers that I've sworn to put first," he said.

That explanation failed to persuade even his closest friends, and in the years to come they would recall the two planes sitting forlornly on the tarmac as symbols of the governor's unrealized promise.

First Love Was Baseball

Mario Matthew Cuomo was born in Queens on June 15, 1932, the fourth child of Andrea and Immaculata Cuomo. His parents, penniless and unable to speak English, had come to the United States from the province of Salerno, south of Naples, settling at first in Jersey City.

Mario grew up in the Queens neighborhood of South Jamaica, where the family had moved and opened a grocery store. Mario worked in the store and on Saturdays served as the "Shabbos goy" for an Orthodox synagogue up the street, providing services as a non-Jew that the faithful were not allowed to do for themselves on the Sabbath. South Jamaica — an "Italian-black-German-Irish-Polish neighborhood," as Mr. Cuomo described it — provided him with a career's worth of anecdotes.

It was baseball, not politics, that first engaged him, and he proved as aggressive in one as in the other. After graduating from St. John's Preparatory School in Brooklyn in 1949, he played on the freshman baseball team at St. John's University.

A strapping six feet tall, 190 pounds at age 19, he signed a contract to play center field for the Class D Brunswick Pirates in Georgia in 1952, reportedly receiving a $2,000 signing bonus, sizable for that time. Mr. Cuomo “plays hard” and “will run over you if you get in his way,” a Pirates scout wrote.

His baseball career was short-lived. Knocked in the head with a 3-and-2 fastball that summer, he was left blind for a week and forced to give up the game — leaving with a .244 batting average.

Mr. Cuomo went back to St. John’s and graduated in 1953, having majored in Latin American studies, English and philosophy. By then he had settled on a law career and married Matilda N. Raffa, a fellow student. On a scholarship he enrolled in St. John’s Law School; while he studied there, his wife, who survives him, supported them as a teacher.

Besides her and Andrew Cuomo, Mr. Cuomo is survived by four other children, Dr. Margaret I. Cuomo, Maria Cuomo Cole, Madeline Cuomo O’Donohue and Christopher Cuomo, a journalist at CNN; and 14 grandchildren.

Mr. Cuomo’s first job in the law was as the confidential assistant to Judge Adrian P. Burke of the New York State Court of Appeals, which Mr. Cuomo would reshape 30 years later by appointing all seven members, including Judith S. Kaye, the first woman to serve as chief judge.

His job with Judge Burke and his law school success — he graduated at the head of his class — led Mr. Cuomo to assume that in entering private practice he would have his pick of New York’s leading law firms. Instead, one after another rejected him, in his view because he was Italian-American. “I obviously am the original ethnic from Queens: my hands, my face, my voice, my inflections,” he said. One lawyer with whom he spoke suggested that he change his name to Mark Conrad, he said. The experience fed a lifelong disdain for anybody who struck Mr. Cuomo as elitist.

He joined a Brooklyn law firm, Corner, Weisbrod, Froeb & Charles, in 1963 and entered public life the next year, when he took up the case of junkyard dealers whose property had been condemned; the planner Robert Moses wanted the land, 67 acres, to expand the site of the 1964 World’s Fair. Mr. Cuomo won a suit prohibiting the use of state funds for the project, and three years later the city

decided against seizing the property for parkland.

That victory brought him to the attention of 69 families facing eviction from their homes in a blue-collar Italian-American neighborhood in Corona, Queens, where the city wanted to build a school. Mr. Cuomo pressed the city and the courts into a compromise — a smaller school — that preserved 55 of the homes. And in 1972 Mayor John V. Lindsay recruited him to mediate a far more volatile city-neighborhood dispute, in Forest Hills, Queens, where middle-class families were trying to block construction of low-income public housing. Mr. Cuomo forged a compromise that cut the project in half.

Entering Elective Politics

His successes impressed state Democratic leaders, and in 1974 Mr. Cuomo, at 42, entered elective politics as the party's choice for lieutenant governor. He was challenged in a primary, however, by Mary Anne Krupsak, a state senator from upstate, who defeated him and was elected as the running mate of Hugh L. Carey, a Democratic congressman from Brooklyn.

Mr. Carey, a fellow St. John's alumnus, named Mr. Cuomo secretary of state, a relatively low-profile job in which Mr. Cuomo settled a rent strike at Co-op City in the Bronx and mediated a land dispute involving a Mohawk reservation.

It was Mr. Carey who urged Mr. Cuomo to run for mayor of New York in 1977. Accepting the challenge with some trepidation, he found himself in a primary brawl with six brash New York politicians, among them Mr. Koch and Bella S. Abzug. In the first round Mr. Cuomo came within a percentage point of the winner, Mr. Koch, and the two headed into a runoff.

It was a harsh campaign. In one instance placards appeared in middle-class neighborhoods proclaiming, "Vote for Cuomo, Not the Homo." (Mr. Koch declined to answer questions about his sexual orientation.)

Mr. Cuomo and his son Andrew, a campaign adviser, denied having anything to do with the placards, though Mr. Koch said he never fully believed it. At the same time, Mr. Koch was hammering Mr. Cuomo for his opposition to the death penalty. Mr. Cuomo replied that mayors had no vote on the issue and that in any case he supported a life sentence without parole for capital offenses. Mr. Koch won the runoff handily.

Mr. Cuomo, on the Liberal Party line as well, was pressed to step aside in the general election. He refused, and lost to Mr. Koch for the third time. But he had learned a lesson. “I swore when it was over, to myself and everyone else, that I would never do that again,” he said. “I will never run a race that I don’t have my whole heart in.”

Despite friction between Mr. Cuomo and Governor Carey, the two needed each other in 1978, when Lieutenant Governor Krupsak withdrew from the Carey re-election ticket and announced she would challenge the governor for the Democratic nomination, portraying him as incompetent. Mr. Carey asked Mr. Cuomo to be his running mate, and they won easily, in both the primary and the general election.

Mr. Cuomo’s chance for the governor’s mansion came when Mr. Carey announced he would not seek a third term, in 1982. Declaring his candidacy, Mr. Cuomo once again found himself in a race with Mr. Koch. Though the mayor was the party favorite, Mr. Cuomo won enough votes at the Democratic convention in Syracuse to force a primary.

Mr. Koch’s candidacy was undermined from the start by the publication of an interview in Playboy magazine in which he disparaged life upstate and in the suburbs as “sterile” and lamented the prospect of living in the “small town” of Albany.

Mr. Cuomo proceeded to overwhelm Mr. Koch with muscular campaigning and a command of New York politics resulting in part from his years in Albany building a support network of state party leaders, local officials and union organizers.

But he did not win over Mr. Carey, whose relationship with Mr. Cuomo remained strained. The governor endorsed Mr. Koch. But it did not matter in the end: Mr. Cuomo defeated Mr. Koch by almost 100,000 votes.

In the general election, amid a national recession, Mr. Cuomo tied his Republican opponent, the businessman Lewis E. Lehrman, to President Reagan’s economic policies and pounded him in debates, noting that Mr. Lehrman was rich enough to finance much of his campaign. At one point Mr. Cuomo theatrically fixed his gaze on Mr. Lehrman’s wristwatch and remarked, “That’s a very expensive

watch, Lew."

On Nov. 2, 1982, at age 50, Mr. Cuomo became the 52nd man to be elected New York's governor, defeating Mr. Lehrman by about 180,000 votes out of more than five million cast.

Mr. Cuomo was sworn in on Jan. 1, 1983, before 2,600 people in the convention center of the Nelson A. Rockefeller-Empire State Plaza in Albany. (It was the first time since 1929 that the ceremonies were not held in the ornate but far smaller Assembly chamber.)

His inaugural address struck a familiar theme, calling on state government to "be a positive source for good." But for a national audience it also offered a critique of Reagan policies and a liberal vision for the country. Fiscal prudence, Mr. Cuomo asserted, did not prevent government from providing "shelter for the homeless, work for the idle, care for the elderly and infirm, and hope for the destitute."

With his mother seated onstage with him, Mr. Cuomo finished his speech by urging his audience to "pray that we all see New York for the family that it is." Then he glanced up and invoked his father, who died in 1981 at 79, saying, "Pop, wherever you are — and I think I know — for all the ceremony and the big house and the pomp and circumstance, please don't let me forget that."

From the start, Mr. Cuomo was a storm of energy and ideas. Within days, in the role of mediator again, he faced down a prison strike at Ossining — the old Sing Sing — in which 19 guards were held hostage. After 53 hours, the hostages were freed. He went on to veto the death penalty.

But Mr. Cuomo could not satisfy everyone's hopes. He responded to an inherited $1.8 billion deficit by proposing tax increases and deep cuts in the state payroll, stunning the labor unions that had supported him. Many other supporters grew disenchanted.

He seemed inexhaustible, though. Reporters and legislators discovered that he was apt to pick up his own phone if they called his office on a Friday evening. "I'm sleeping less and less," he said. "I work all the time. I'm not saying that's a virtue."

He displayed a restless intellect and a love of learning. He liked to cite the French theologian and Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), who wrote that endeavors should be based not on personal ambition, which can be a sin, but

on a desire to contribute to the greater good of mankind and God.

There were other clues to Mr. Cuomo's manner. His precise parsing of an argument suggested indecision or even disingenuousness and sometimes brought him ridicule. Once, while fencing with reporters, he walked himself into the unlikely position of denying that the Mafia existed. "You're telling me that the Mafia is an organization," he said, "and I'm telling you that's a lot of baloney."

In public he might respond to criticism with expressions of indignation and frustration; in private, with rage, often directed at legislators and reporters, often expressed in obscenity-laden early-morning telephone calls. The problem, he said in an interview at the time, was that people were not paying close enough attention to his words.

Taking On Reagan

By 1984, a presidential election year, there was a different view of Mr. Cuomo outside New York. An eloquent spokesman for liberal politics, he stood out in a relatively barren field of Democrats with national stature. And behind the scenes, two close advisers, his son Andrew and Tim Russert, who went on to host "Meet the Press," saw an opportunity. They successfully lobbied the party to invite Mr. Cuomo to deliver the keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco.

On the night of July 16, as the lights at the Moscone Center were dimmed — a bit of stage management orchestrated by the two advisers — Mr. Cuomo seized his moment, depicting President Reagan as having turned his back on struggling Americans.

"A shining city is perhaps all the president sees from the portico of the White House and the veranda of his ranch, where everyone seems to be doing well," Mr. Cuomo said. "But there's another part to the shining city. In this part of the city there are more poor than ever, more families in trouble, more and more people who need help but can't find it."

He became the story of the convention, overshadowing the nominee, Mr. Mondale, and an instant prospective candidate for president in 1988 should Mr. Mondale fail, as he was widely expected to do (and did).

In the excitement of the evening, many Democrats failed to notice that the

object of this attention had left for the airport, for a flight back to Albany. Mr. Cuomo liked to sleep in his own bed.

That fall, with Mr. Mondale on his way to a crushing defeat, Mr. Cuomo volunteered that if he decided to seek the presidency in 1988, he would not seek a second term as governor in 1986. The declaration reflected how much interest there was in the governor at the time. It was also perceived as undercutting Mr. Mondale in the last weeks of his campaign, which many Democrats assumed was Mr. Cuomo's intention.

By then Mr. Cuomo, who kept a full-time pollster on his staff, had realized that every time there was speculation about his presidential ambitions, his popularity at home soared. Preparing for his own re-election campaign in 1986, he kept his hand in national politics, traveling across the nation and preparing for overseas travel.

His re-election campaign should have been a triumph; instead it was by all appearances an unhappy passage. Until the final week he had declined to debate his overmatched Republican opponent, Andrew P. O'Rourke, the Westchester County executive, and had been irate at suggestions that such behavior was unsportsmanlike. He won a record 65 percent of the vote, but rather than celebrating, he retreated to his office in a quarrelsome mood. A few weeks later, he said to a reporter for The New York Times: "You set out to hurt me, and you succeeded. I hope you sleep well." The next morning, he called the reporter back at home, offering an apology from "an old man with a bad back."

The election behind him, Mr. Cuomo announced a new schedule of national travel, encouraging renewed speculation about his interest in the White House. So it came as a surprise one evening in February 1987 when Mr. Cuomo, making his regular appearance on a radio call-in show, declared that he would not run.

Power Declines at Home

Mr. Cuomo turned his attention to Albany. He and the Legislature agreed to a new ethics code governing state and local government officials and state employees. He proclaimed 1988 the beginning of the decade of the child, 1989 the year to fight drug abuse and 1990, when he was up for re-election again, the year of the environment.

But after Vice President George Bush, the Republican nominee for president,

defeated Gov. Michael S. Dukakis, the Democrat, in 1988, speculation about Mr. Cuomo inevitably grew again.

But he was no longer the formidable figure in New York he had been. His popularity ratings had dropped. State legislators, who had never been fond of him, were emboldened to challenge him. He pinned the blame for this erosion of support on the way the news media had covered his response to all the talk about a presidential run.

"You've done everything but call me a liar," he told The Washington Post, speaking generally of the press. "You said that I was cute. You said that I misplayed the game. You said that I was really waiting for another scenario. Well, the net result of that is it costs me credibility, because you spent all those months saying I was conning people."

Recession, too, was looming and state revenues were declining. Still, in 1990, he won a third term. His Republican opponent, Pierre A. Rinfret, a financial consultant and economics adviser to presidents, had not been taken seriously even by his own party.

It was a convincing but unsatisfying victory: Mr. Cuomo had done better against Mr. O'Rourke four years before.

When he returned to Albany to deliver his ninth State of the State address, Mr. Cuomo suggested diminished ambitions for his next term. "This is a wonderful year for raw truth," he said. "We don't have any money."

But he had one more presidential flirtation left in him: in October 1991, while on a trip to Chicago, he said he was "looking at" a run. Many of his supporters had grown weary of such talk, some viewing it as a ruse to reinvigorate his sagging political image. And that December, with the planes waiting on the runway, he announced again that he would not be a candidate for president.

It always bothered him, Mr. Cuomo said years later, that no one had taken him at his word. He would have run, he said in an interview for this obituary, had Republicans simply agreed to his request to pass a budget.

"I somehow got this reputation of diddling and dithering," Mr. Cuomo said. "I don't remember dithering at all."

Stunned by Pataki

Mr. Cuomo's remaining years in Albany were a series of grim footnotes as he struggled to keep the government afloat in worsening times. Mr. Clinton was on the verge of naming him to the Supreme Court when he asked that his name be withdrawn; Mr. Cuomo later said that he had never wanted the job.

When the 1994 election season began, he seemed unaware of how much his popularity had eroded. He was stunned, he said, that someone like Mr. Pataki could pose a serious challenge to someone with his credentials. Mr. Pataki defeated him by five percentage points.

Mr. Cuomo returned to Manhattan to work for the law firm of Willkie Farr & Gallagher, write books and give speeches. He grew wealthy and, he said, happy. He was always attuned to how he was perceived by the public, and when invited to sum up his own life for this obituary, he characteristically turned to self-deprecating humor.

"People asked me what I want as an epitaph," Mr. Cuomo said. He then reprised a line he had used many years earlier traveling across upstate New York, a fresh public figure displaying astonishing talent and obvious potential.

"He tried," Mr. Cuomo said.

Correction: January 3, 2015

An obituary on Friday about former Gov. Mario M. Cuomo of New York erroneously attributed a distinction to him. He was the second — not first — Italian-American to be elected governor of New York. (Al Smith, who was part Italian-American, was the first.) The obituary also referred incorrectly to Mr. Cuomo's tenure. His years in office were exceeded in length by George Clinton's as well as by Nelson A. Rockefeller's, not just by Mr. Rockefeller's. And the obituary misstated the year in which two airplanes waited to fly Mr. Cuomo to New Hampshire so that he might place his name on the state's Democratic primary ballot for president, though he never did. It was December 1991, not 1992.

Correction: January 12, 2015

An obituary on Jan. 2 about former Gov. Mario M. Cuomo of New York misidentified the location of St. John's Preparatory School in 1949, when Mr. Cuomo graduated. It was in Brooklyn, not Queens. (That school closed in 1972; there is now a St. John's Preparatory School in Astoria, Queens.)

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