

general hopefuls

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Andrew Cuomo, who raised eyebrows during bid for governor, is back with a pledge to fight for NY

Andrew Cuomo cut his teeth in the viciously competitive world of 1980s New York State politics, as the 24-year-old campaign manager who engineered his father's first successful bid for governor.

The son of Mario Cuomo has worn many hats since then: aide to his father, activist for the homeless and federal housing secretary under President Bill Clinton, who some credit with rejuvenating an agency near the brink of collapse.

Less celebrated was Cuomo's 2002 political swan dive as the brash Democratic gubernatorial candidate whose famous name and well-endowed campaign war chest failed to capture his party's support. But four years later, Cuomo has secured the backing of many of the party leaders and union bosses who once spurned him and has emerged as the front-runner in the race to be New York State's next attorney general.

Cuomo's supporters call him ambitious and smart, a hard-working man whose bid for attorney general is driven by his devotion to public service and passion for social justice. Detractors privately call him a self-promoter who is more interested in advancing his political ambitions than in effecting real change.

Cuomo's rival in the primary, Mark Green, accused him of seeking the post only because he couldn't get elected governor. Cuomo brushed aside that contention in a recent interview, saying that he was running to "make a difference in people's lives."

Continuing Spitzer's plan

His plans as attorney general adhere to the blueprint laid out by attorney general and gubernatorial front-runner Eliot Spitzer, who has focused on gun violence and securities fraud and repeatedly sued the federal Environmental Protection Agency over issues such as mercury emissions and carbon dioxide pollution.

"I think a major role for the next attorney general is fighting the fights the federal government has abandoned or failed," said Cuomo, 49, who added he would continue Spitzer's Wall Street and environmental work.

Cuomo said that, if elected, he would tackle Medicaid fraud, expand New York City's gun violence prevention efforts statewide and protect consumers

This is the next in a series of profiles on candidates that will appear as the election approaches.

COMING THIS WEEK:
Gubernatorial candidate
John Faso



GETTY IMAGES PHOTO

Andrew Cuomo has successfully mended fences after an aborted run for governor in 2002.

from abuses by large health care companies. Citing health woes faced by first responders and lower Manhattan residents after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Cuomo also has said he will demand federally funded medical treatment plans and comprehensive testing, and cleanup of potentially contaminated areas by the EPA.

A graduate of Albany Law School, Cuomo spent a year as an assistant in Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau's office after leaving his father's administration in 1984. He left that job for private practice and later started a nonprofit foundation that built transitional housing for the homeless.

Cuomo's Republican opponent, former Westchester Coun-

ty District Attorney Jeanine Pirro, has criticized his lack of prosecutorial experience. But Cuomo said his time heading HUD — an agency with 10,000 employees and more than 300 lawyers — equipped him to wage the kind of broad-based battles he said should be the province of New York's next attorney general.

Amassing lessons

When Clinton appointed Cuomo, waste and mismanagement at the scandal-ridden housing agency had landed it on the General Accounting Office's "high-risk" list. By most accounts, Cuomo's four years in the post improved the agency. He reduced staff, took steps against corruption and focused

attention on issues such as gun violence, the need for affordable housing and the fight against discrimination.

Still, agency audits continued to find programs such as single-family mortgage insurance ripe for fraud and questioned the value of some of Cuomo's programs, including an initiative to revive the Erie Canal corridor in upstate New York. Cuomo admitted that some problems continued on his watch, but said that on the whole he took on "government corruption on a massive scale" and "turned around the culture."

By contrast, he painted Pirro as a parochial former prosecutor with a traditionally Republican outlook. "She speaks like she should be a 63rd DA," Cuomo

said, referring to New York's 62 county prosecutor offices.

Cuomo remained mum on the subject of Pirro's investigation by the U.S. Attorney's office, whose probe into a potential wiretapping case has dominated campaign coverage for two weeks.

Restraint was notably absent during Cuomo's 2002 gubernatorial run, when he famously characterized incumbent George Pataki's post-Sept. 11 role as a mere coat holder to New York City's then-mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. Months later, Cuomo's marriage to another political marquee name — Kerry Kennedy, Robert Kennedy's daughter — publicly dissolved amid media leaks alleging Kennedy had been unfaithful.

Observers said Cuomo has worked to turn around his sometimes abrasive image.

"He made some mistakes and learned from them in a very impressive way," said former state Sen. Manfred Ohrenstein, an attorney who served as the Democratic senate minority leader during the Cuomo administration. Ohrenstein said Cuomo made the rounds at public meetings and dinners, and re-ingratiated himself in the New York political scene, adding, "For the last two to three years he did his homework."

'Philosophical difference'

Since 2002, Cuomo campaigned against the death penalty and for changes to the Rockefeller drug laws. He also found lucrative work as a real estate investment adviser for Island Capital, a company run by a key campaign contributor who also was the target of a HUD probe during Cuomo's tenure, as reported by the Village Voice.

Cuomo has said he wants to clean up Albany's political culture and supports campaign finance reform, including limits on large sums from individual donors. But he has accepted tens of thousands of dollars from individuals and received about \$800,000 from Island Capital head and developer Andrew Farkas and associates of firms tied to him, the Voice reported last month.

"I can only run my campaign in accordance with the laws that apply today," Cuomo said. "Otherwise, I will lose."

And he defended his investment of much of his 2002 gubernatorial war chest into a hedge fund run by a major supporter, an unorthodox move that raised some eyebrows when it was disclosed this month by The New York Times.

Summing up his campaign, Cuomo said the race is really about "a profound philosophical difference" between the two candidates. "That's the question before the voters," Cuomo said. "What do you want the attorney general to be?"

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