

How Cuomo, Once on Sidelines, Became the Politician of the Moment

With his coronavirus briefings, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has emerged as an authoritative voice in the crisis.

By Jesse McKinley and Shane Goldmacher

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ALBANY, N.Y. — Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo awoke before dawn on Tuesday, emerging after a few hours' sleep to board a helicopter to New York City for the coronavirus briefing that has become a daily ritual for him and for the millions of people now watching.

But this event would be different. The outbreak was moving faster than he had expected, with the number of confirmed cases doubling every three days, and he decided he needed to show people — including the White House — how desperate the situation had become.

“You want a pat on the back for sending 400 ventilators?” the governor said, referring to a recent federal government shipment to New York.

“What am I going to do with 400 ventilators when I need 30,000?” he said later. “You pick the 26,000 people who are going to die because you only sent 400 ventilators.”

The governor repeatedly assailed the federal response as slow, inefficient and inadequate, far more aggressively than he had before.

Mr. Cuomo was once considered a bit player on the national stage, an abrasive presence who made his share of enemies among his Democratic Party peers. He was too much of a pragmatist for his party's progressive wing, too self-focused for party leaders and too brusque for nearly everyone.

But now, he is emerging as the party's most prominent voice in a time of crisis.

His briefings — articulate, consistent and often tinged with empathy — have become must-see television. On Tuesday, his address was carried live on all four networks in New York and a raft of cable news stations, including CNN, MSNBC and even Fox News.

In a sign of the way Mr. Cuomo has become the face of the Democratic Party in this moment, his address even pre-empted an appearance by former Vice President Joseph Biden on ABC's “The View” in New York.

Mr. Cuomo's handling of the crisis has fostered a nationwide following; Mr. Biden called Mr. Cuomo's briefings a “lesson in leadership,” and others have described them as communal therapy sessions. The same blunt and sometimes paternalistic traits that have long rubbed his critics raw have morphed into a source of comfort.

The governor's actions have not always been at the forefront: He waited several days last week, as the count of confirmed cases continued to rise, before instituting an order to close nonessential businesses and ask residents to stay at home, even as Gov. Gavin Newsom of California had already done so.

The question of whether to enact a shelter-in-place edict degenerated into a semantics debate with Mayor Bill de Blasio, resurfacing a petty feud between the two New York Democrats.

Mr. Cuomo also changed course — within the span of a Sunday afternoon — deciding to close New York City's schools' hours after casting doubt on such a plan.

Still, Mr. Cuomo's daily addresses have stood in stark contrast to the sometimes contradictory pronouncements coming from Washington.

Mr. Cuomo's briefings have been filled with facts, directives and sobering trends: On Tuesday, the governor disclosed that the number of positive cases in New York had risen past 25,000, and that the state now projects it will need up to 140,000 hospital beds to house virus patients.

There were also signs that Washington was listening: after Mr. Cuomo spoke on Tuesday, Vice President Mike Pence said 2,000 ventilators were being sent to New York, with a promise of 2,000 more on Wednesday.

Mr. Cuomo's explanation for his popularity is simple. "I'm not doing anything different than I have ever done," the governor said in an interview on Monday. "It's just a bigger audience. And it's a more intense time."

That fire was evident on Tuesday, as he disparaged a remark by Texas's lieutenant governor that older residents might not mind dying to save the economy.

"My mother's not expendable," Mr. Cuomo said, adding, "We're not going to accept a premise that human life is disposable. And we're not going to put a dollar figure on human life."

Since the crisis began to take shape, the governor's aggressive posture has won compliments from admirers ranging from conservative pundits like Sean Hannity, who recently hosted Mr. Cuomo on his radio show, to the progressive comedian Chelsea Handler ("I'm officially attracted to Andrew Cuomo").

Even President Trump has taken notice: His team has scheduled his appearances in the afternoon so as not to interfere with Mr. Cuomo's briefings, including on Tuesday, when the president's town hall event on Fox News began after the governor's briefing ended.

Mr. Trump took issue on Tuesday with the governor's comments about not receiving enough ventilators from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“We are working very, very hard for the people of New York,” the president said. “We are working a lot with him. Then I watch him on this show complaining.”

With House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer practically sequestered in negotiations over economic relief measures and Mr. Biden at home in Wilmington, Del., Mr. Cuomo has effectively offered the Democratic response.

“He represents the kind of leadership we should have in the presidency and don’t,” said Representative Jackie Speier, a California Democrat who said her West Coast constituents are praising Mr. Cuomo. “His stock has gone way up.”

For all of that positive press, the sudden spotlight has shone on Mr. Cuomo at a politically inopportune time: His friend, Mr. Biden, is quickly closing in on the Democratic presidential nomination, something that Mr. Cuomo — like his father, the former Gov. Mario M. Cuomo — had been said to covet.

Mr. Cuomo has consistently insisted he’s happy in Albany, where he has a deep understanding of levers of power. As the first cases appeared in New York, for example, Mr. Cuomo secured \$40 million from the Legislature to fight the virus, as part of a bill that also greatly expanded his authority over disaster management, something he said he knew he would need as the virus began to spread outside of China.

“Anyone who was watching realized it right away,” Mr. Cuomo said, adding, “It was inevitable that what happened in China was going to happen here.”

Since then, the governor has used his executive authority to close schools, shutter Broadway and send the National Guard to support the beleaguered residents of New Rochelle, a suburb just north of New York City that was an early hot spot for the virus.

And while the state’s high caseload has put him on the front lines — and the front page — he may ultimately be judged by the final toll of the crisis, which he has said could last six months or more.

Mr. Cuomo acknowledged that he is on a steep learning curve in dealing with the pandemic, and that mistakes might be made; on the day Mr. Cuomo ordered the closure of nonessential businesses, he said, “I accept full responsibility. If someone is unhappy, somebody wants to blame someone, people complain about someone, blame me.”

Mr. Cuomo’s forthrightness has led to praise from an unlikely and diverse set of commentators: George Conway, the conservative attorney who is also the husband of White House counselor Kellyanne Conway (“He’s doing a terrific job with these presentations”); Nikki Haley, the former United Nations ambassador and a potential future Republican candidate for president (“I look forward to watching Gov. Cuomo’s news conference every day”); and even the leading strategists for his old rivals in New York.

A large measure of Mr. Cuomo's sudden popularity seems to lie in the tonal and material differences between his briefings and those of Mr. Trump's.

"I think the rest of the country is witnessing and appreciating this because of the lack of leadership coming from the White House," Representative Grace Meng, a New York Democrat and vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, said.

Ms. Meng said Democratic lawmakers in Congress are now tuning into Mr. Cuomo daily — and then group texting about what he says. "Every morning they watch Gov. Cuomo and his briefing and discuss it on our text chains," she said.

But unlike most Democrats, Mr. Cuomo has been careful to not criticize Mr. Trump personally for the federal government's response to the virus, while not sparing agencies like FEMA, which he castigated on Tuesday.

In fact, he has praised the president and the vice president by name on several occasions, a calculated strategy that paid earlier dividends: The state's public health laboratory in Albany, Wadsworth Center, was the first to be given approval by the F.D.A. to administer its own coronavirus tests independent of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A military hospital ship is now planning to port at the New York Harbor, and a raft of federal field hospitals will be constructed in and around New York City, now one of the epicenters of the virus in the world.

Mr. Cuomo's approach to Mr. Trump has contrasted with the more confrontational style of Mayor de Blasio, who has frequently blamed Mr. Trump for not acting decisively to attempt to curb the spread of the virus.

While the president seemed displeased with Mr. Cuomo's broadside on Tuesday, he had previously made it clear that he preferred the governor's approach to that of City Hall. "I'm dealing with the governor," Mr. Trump said on Friday. "The governor agrees with me, and I agree with him."

Even on Tuesday, before the president criticized Mr. Cuomo for "complaining," he acknowledged that he had just seen the governor's briefing. "I watched Governor Cuomo and he was very nice," Mr. Trump said.

The governor has a history, of course, of working with Republicans: until 2019, the New York Legislature had largely been split by virtue of the Republicans' long hold on the State Senate, a situation which some progressive groups accused Mr. Cuomo of encouraging, as a way to thwart policies he felt were too liberal or impractical.

The governor also shares other personal touch points with Mr. Trump: They are both from Queens, have known each other for years and have followed in their fathers' footsteps.

Mr. Cuomo's father, who looms large in the current governor's life, also had a moment of national prominence: the famed "Shining City on a Hill" speech in 1984, which seemed poised to propel him to higher office. It did not.

Mr. Cuomo has found a poetic, almost sentimental streak amid the dark news, appearing alongside his daughters at news conferences, and naming a new law, aimed at protecting older residents from infection, for his mother, Matilda.

On Monday, sitting with his daughter, Cara Kennedy-Cuomo, the governor said the crisis had afforded him opportunity to spend more time with her as she has volunteered to help with the state's response, staying with him in the governor's mansion.

"She's going to go do her thing, but this crazy situation is crazy as it is, came with this beautiful gift," Mr. Cuomo said. "So, one door closes, another door opens. Think about that."