Why the Worst Rise to the Top in Politics

The coronavirus pandemic has hit the state of New York especially hard. Almost 33,000 New Yorkers have [died from the virus](#), more total deaths than any other state in the country. And New York ranks as the [second-worst state for deaths](#) when adjusted for population. The Empire State alone accounts for [one in five coronavirus deaths](#) in the U.S. despite having only around six percent of the nation's population.

Why did New York fare so poorly?

Well, the coronavirus is far more lethal for older people. How well a state has mitigated the death count closely corresponds with how well they protected elderly, vulnerable populations. In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo mandated that nursing homes accept patients who had tested positive for COVID-19 even if it means exposing their residents to the virus.

Yes, you read that right.

It shouldn't come as a shock, then, that at least [6,600 of the state's deaths](#) happened in nursing homes. And this is almost certainly an undercount, as the *Associated Press* says it could be more [like 11,000](#) when you adjust for the odd way in which New York defined its deaths. (The AP [described](#) New York's death toll as "cloaked in secrecy" and even Democratic state legislators have accused the state of trying to cover up the number of nursing home deaths).

Of course this is what would happen if you force institutions housing the elderly to accept carriers of a virus that is highly lethal for older people. Other states such as Florida [did the opposite.](#) By barring COVID-19 positive patients from nursing homes, they escaped thousands of deaths.

Worse, Cuomo has [refused to allow](#) an independent investigation into his handling of the nursing home debacle despite bipartisan calls for oversight.

From start to finish, Cuomo botched the COVID-19 response woefully. *National Review*'s Kyle Smith [summarized](#) the governor's mistakes "breathtakingly bad moves" that "in retrospect amounted to catastrophe."

"Cuomo failed to call for, and even actively discouraged, informal social-distancing measures in early March," Smith [wrote](#). And don't forget "his March 25 edict to long-term care facilities that they must accept infected patients, which caused a mass deadly outbreak among helpless, trapped, elderly New Yorkers."

Of course, at first glance, Cuomo deserves some grace. The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in modern American history, and the governor was hardly the only policymaker who fell flat on his face in response to the novel crisis. Yet Cuomo didn't just woefully botch his handling of COVID-19. He actively brags about his supposed "success" and has even attempted to capitalize on it personally.

After all, the same governor who sent nursing homes into death spirals with his foolish government mandates promoted posters that *celebrated* New York's COVID-19 response, and, of course, celebrated Cuomo himself. So, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that he is a political opportunist with few scruples reining him in.

> *IMAGE: [@NYGovCuomo](#) releases a "New York Tough" political poster that reminds me of what you'd see in the New Deal chapter of a history textbook or, appropriately, on the New York State U.S. History Regents. [pic.twitter.com/lN8EmKL3wo](#)*
>
> *— Andrew Donovan (@AndrewDonovan) [July 13, 2020](#)*

CNN anchor Jake Tapper blasted the governor's "victory tour" and shameful poster in a powerful on-air takedown: "There are no illustrations of the more than 32,000 dead New Yorkers, the highest death toll by far of any state."

> *NY Gov Cuomo seems to go on victory lap despite highest death toll in U.S. [@drsanjaygupta](#) reports [pic.twitter.com/SQodVimCWk](#)*
>
> *— The Lead CNN (@TheLeadCNN) [July 14, 2020](#)*

The level of arrogance required for a politician to engage in such a tone-deaf display is stunning.

But it gets worse.

Apparently, Cuomo had time to write an entire book while handling the COVID-19 crisis. Even if it was ghost-written, Cuomo still must have had an eye on capitalizing on the crisis for self-promotion all along.

The governor's [new book](#) is titled *American Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic* and is set for an Oct. 13 release. Cuomo has so far [refused to disclose](#) the financial details of his book deal. He won't reveal how much money he will make, beyond promising vaguely that some of the money will go to charity.

> *We went through hell, but we have learned so much.*
>
> *New York went from one of the highest [#COVID19](#) rates to one of the lowest. [https://t.co/poeUH1g6Ze](#)*
>
> *— Andrew Cuomo (@andrewcuomo) [August 18, 2020](#)*

Critics, understandably, blasted the governor's book deal as selfish and obtuse.

"[Governor Cuomo] should be writing condolence cards to families who's loved ones died thanks to his deadly nursing home mandate instead of writing a book about his so called leadership," Fox News meteorologist Janice Dean, who [lost her in-laws to COVID-19 in a New York nursing home](#), [wrote in a tweet](#).

"People are mourning the loss of loved ones, yet [Cuomo is] putting out a book declaring himself a bold, great leader," New York GOP Chairman Nick Langworthy [said](#) in response to the book's roll-out.

> *[.@NYGovCuomo](#) should be writing condolence cards to families who's loved ones died thanks to his deadly nursing home mandate instead of writing a book about his so called leadership.*
>
> *— Janice Dean (@JaniceDean) [August 20, 2020](#)*

Faced with such blatant mismanagement and callous arrogance amid a national crisis, it would be fair for observers to conclude that Andrew Cuomo is among the worst politicians in America. Yet we must also note that this isn't a coincidence. New York didn't simply draw the short straw and happen to get stuck with a bad governor. It's also no coincidence that one of the country's worst politicians is "failing upward" in his career, from his skyrocketing public profile to his (likely lucrative) book deal.

New York has one of the largest governments of any states in the country. From sky-high taxes to soda bans, it has overwhelmingly voted for statist policies. And, as economist Friedrich A. Hayek famously noted in a chapter of *The Road to Serfdom* titled "[Why the Worst Get on Top](#)," positions of power in big-government systems inevitably attract a society's worst and most immoral individuals.

"[Hayek] argued with great insightfulness that 'the unscrupulous and uninhibited are likely to be more successful' in any society in which government is seen as the answer to most problems," FEE President Emeritus Lawrence W. Reed [explained](). "They are precisely the kind of people who elevate power over persuasion, force over cooperation. Government, possessing by definition a legal and political monopoly of the use of force, attracts them just as surely as dung draws flies."

Hayek himself [wrote](), "The probability of the people in power being individuals who would dislike the possession and exercise of power is on a level with the probability that an extremely tenderhearted person would get the job of whipping-master in a slave plantation."

Cuomo's rise and New York's COVID-19 saga prove Hayek right and leaves us with a clear lesson: So long as we entrust massive amounts of power to the government, we will continue to unintentionally place our fate in the hands of the worst among us. However, by leaving more of our problems to be solved by the private sector and civil society, we can ensure that true innovators and moral leaders are the ones leading us forward.

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