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Bad News Bill: Bill de Blasio's Good Fortune and Bad Luck

Written by [Steven M. Cohen](#) on November 1, 2013. Posted in [Features](#), [Opinion](#).

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If the polls are to be believed, on Jan. 1, 2014, Bill de Blasio will be sworn in as mayor of New York City. If nothing calamitous happens between now and then, de Blasio may find himself in an unusual position for a newly elected executive: No major crisis awaits him. And that may prove to be his most vexing problem.

Taking office absent a crisis has not been the norm for elected officials over the last few years. When Mayor Michael Bloomberg began his first term on Jan. 1, 2002, the shadow of the 9/11 attacks hovered over the inauguration, and the new mayor spoke with clarity of purpose about keeping New Yorkers safe, restoring the city's confidence and rebuilding lower Manhattan. When Andrew Cuomo was sworn in as governor on Jan. 1, 2011, New York State faced a budget deficit exceeding \$10 billion, and the governor was saddled with a state Legislature that had been decried as the most dysfunctional in the nation. His mandate could not have been any simpler: Prove that state government was capable of functioning, that the budget could be balanced on

time and that Albany could be something other than a punch line. When Barack Obama took the presidential oath of office, he faced the mortgage meltdown and the near collapse of the financial system. He called for nothing less than laying a new economic foundation on which to build.

All three executives have been defined by their handling of the crises they confronted upon taking office. Mayor Bloomberg and Gov. Cuomo proved the value of the Winston Churchill adage: Never let a good crisis go to waste. Arguably, President Obama did less than



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might be expected and suffers the consequences to this day.

This brings us to Bill de Blasio and his good luck and bad fortune—or maybe it's good fortune and bad luck.

By just about any measure, New York City is in good shape. The murder rate this year is likely to fall below 300. Twenty years ago the murder rate hovered around 2,000. Robberies and other crimes of violence are at historic lows. While the economy may not be humming, things are not dire. The unemployment rate is below 9 percent and trending down, and city revenue collections are on the upswing.

All this helps to explain the social issues that dominated the Democratic primary and catapulted de Blasio to victory. It would be hard to imagine the electorate getting agitated about an aggressive stop-and-frisk policy if the murder rate topped 2,000, or if the average voter had to deal with random gunfire as a daily event, or if car burglaries were so common that drivers routinely placed signs in their windows reading "No radio." Similarly, a robust debate about income inequality and income redistribution would have seemed fanciful if unemployment were on the rise and an economic recovery, even of modest proportions, were nowhere to be seen. Under those circumstances, the issue would simply have been jobs.

Come his inauguration, Mayor de Blasio will confront the issues he identified during his campaign—issues that do not lend themselves to bold executive action. For example, it is all well and good to deplore income disparity, but good luck finding a way to alter it as mayor. Further, de Blasio is unlikely to persuade Albany to pass a tax increase necessary to implement a universal pre-K plan. And the new mayor faces an exceedingly tough, potentially budget-busting negotiation with the public employee unions. All these issues, if not managed deftly, will polarize the city and make successful governing a vestige of a bygone era. Without a crisis the new mayor will *not* be forced to confront a looming problem requiring dynamic leadership; he will *not* have an opportunity to step away from the rhetoric of his campaign to confront the harsh realities of governing; he will *not* be able to explain to his die-hard supporters that the times require consensus and compromise.

By the time Mayor de Blasio reaches the end of his first 100 days, he may realize that governing is a paradox. Good times may be hard times for a new mayor, and a crisis may prove to be your best friend. Too bad things look so good.

Steven M. Cohen served as secretary to Gov. Andrew Cuomo. He is currently a partner with the law firm Zuckerman Spaeder and the executive vice president and chief administrative officer of MacAndrews & Forbes.



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Actually, the new mayor will face a crisis: unresolved union contracts. How they are resolved will define the administration. If they force tax increases or deficits, for no discernible new benefit to the public, the new mayor will be off on the wrong foot.

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