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Corruption investigations probe aides for both Cuomos

Longtime staffers see stark contrast in the two governors' leadership styles

By Paul Grondahl Updated 7:53 am, Monday, May 9, 2016



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With a portrait of his father and former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo on a screen, Gov. Andrew Cuomo delivers his State of the State address and executive budget proposal at the Empire State Plaza Convention ... [more](#)

Albany

All around this town, there is an Old Guard of former staffers who served under the late Gov. **Mario M. Cuomo** — hailed as a paragon of public service and possessed of unassailable ethics — as well as his son, Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

And they are outraged and disheartened by federal and state investigations into alleged political corruption that have cast a harsh light on some of "the Cuomo alumni," as they're known.

Those who served both the father and the son characterized the fallout from the recently announced probes into potential bid-rigging, improper lobbying and undisclosed conflicts of interest as both stunning and yet not altogether unexpected, given the

starkly contrasting style of governance between the two Cuomos.

"I can't say it surprises me," said one former aide who spoke only on the condition of anonymity. "Andrew did not like to be told that the legal administrative process had to be respected and followed. He has gotten a lot done after other governors tried and failed, but there are dangers and costs to circumventing the process."

It was an observation that did not please the administration: "The only thing more baffling than this quote is the fact that the [Times Union](#) would grant a source anonymity solely so they could spout personal attacks without any merit or facts to back them up," said spokesman [Rich Azzopardi](#).

The unnamed aide's fear of retribution from Gov. Andrew Cuomo was a common theme among former aides who declined to be identified for this story, but who voiced strong opinions nonetheless.

"We're all sick over this," said [John Egan](#), the state's master builder, who spent five decades in public service under both Republican and Democratic governors. He built the Harriman Campus, Empire State Plaza and dozens of other major state projects. As former commissioner of the state [Office of General Services](#), he observed both Cuomos at close range.

"We're all pulling out our hair," said Egan, who meets regularly with retired state officials and whose recent lunch conversations have been dominated by the brewing scandals. "State service used to be something to be proud of. It was about integrity. We did it the right way. Mario Cuomo harped on the rules and everybody understood the right way to do things. Everyone competed on a level playing field. That system of competitive bidding and fairness seems to have broken down."

He paused and added: "At least we could sleep well."

Political insiders suggested the cloud of multiple investigations swirling about the second floor of the [State Capitol](#), Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration and his inner circle represents a playing out of a complex, often contradictory relationship between father and son that was at once devoted and competitive, affectionate and combative.

Mario Cuomo was the cerebral governor, who treated the work of state government as a grave morality play. He frequently quoted philosophers [Teilhard de Chardin](#), [Thomas Aquinas](#) and Sir [Thomas More](#), and cloistered himself in the Executive Mansion each night, writing his diaries and crafting elegant speeches that have been cited among the finest in recent political history.

Andrew Cuomo, his elder son, is a tough-talking, broad-shouldered Queens kid who drove a tow truck and tore apart his mother's vacuum cleaner to repair it as an adolescent. As a student at Albany Law School, he could be seen during breaks from classes in the parking lot under the hood of his Corvette, hands greasy, tweaking the V-8 beast. He played rugby, organized an intramural basketball team called the Gonads at Albany Law and was smitten with muscle cars.

The father moved the levers of state government at a glacial pace, weighing in with a marathon series of high-minded, in-depth discussions worthy of a Talmudic scholar that earned him the moniker of "Hamlet on the Hudson." His critics called him indecisive without a strong legacy of accomplishments — mostly talk, with little result.

The three-term governor died on Jan. 1, 2015, at 82.

"The son did a complete 180 from his father. He hated the legislative process and did not follow it," said a former aide. He added that Gov. Andrew Cuomo gradually drove out most of his father's holdovers, career public servants whom the son scorned as "do-nothing bureaucrats."

These old-time political hands, state pensioners in their twilight years now, watched with growing disdain as the son, who cut his political teeth in his early 20s as his father's \$1-a-year aide with an all-access backstage pass to state government, rewrote his father's playbook and earned a reputation, they say, as a ram-it-through autocrat with a wide bullying streak.

"The environment was so different back then and everyone knew the governor's strict rules," said [R. Wayne Diesel](#), a state budget director under Mario Cuomo. "He would not let staff people attend or contribute to his political engagements. He demanded that senior staff stay out of the campaign."

But there were some who served under both Cuomos and who built their political chops more in the mold of the son rather than

the father.

"The young bucks," they were called in the father's administration of the 1980s and early '90s. They soon fell into the orbit of the governor's hard-charging son, their contemporary and a no-nonsense guy who cast himself as a doer who rolled his eyes at the endless negotiations and parsing of details by his father's circle of advisers.

Now, they find themselves in the crosshairs of U.S. Attorney for the Southern District Preet Bharara, who has undertaken an epic cleanup of political corruption in Albany and who has already taken down the powerfully entrenched Assembly Speaker [Sheldon Silver](#) and Senate Majority Leader [Dean Skelos](#).

Among those Bharara has his sights trained on are [Todd Howe](#), 55, a well-connected lobbyist in both the nation and state capital who worked in the administrations of both Cuomos and who was an Andrew Cuomo confidant over the course of three decades. Howe, who grew up in Troy, had served as president of [WOH Government Solutions](#), the Washington, D.C., lobbying subsidiary of the region's largest law firm, [Whiteman Osterman & Hanna of Albany](#). After 14 years of employment there, Howe was abruptly fired by the law firm last week after news of the investigations broke.

"I can confirm Todd is no longer associated with Government Solutions," [Michael Whiteman](#), founder and partner of the law firm, said Saturday. "We are cooperating with the investigations and we've been asked to refrain from talking about the situation so we don't interfere. We're complying with their suggestion."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo was equally swift in severing ties with Howe, his longtime loyalist. On May 2, [Alphonso David](#), the governor's counsel, sent a memo to all executive agencies that ordered them to cease immediately all "lobbying communications" with Howe his staff or anyone associated with WOH Government Solutions "in light of ongoing investigations." The directive covered phone calls, emails, written correspondence or in-person meetings in any "attempt to influence" pending or proposed legislation or regulation, David wrote.

These corrective measures came before a [New York Times](#) story published Saturday laid out a litany of financial improprieties against Howe. [The Times](#) reported Howe's financial scandals included failure to pay back a home equity loan, three home foreclosure cases, lawsuits filed by home contractors for non-payment and a bank-theft case involving \$45,000 in phantom funds to which he pleaded guilty in 2010 and was sentenced to one year of probation.

It was a stunning fall from grace for Howe, who started as a 24-year-old advance man to Gov. Mario Cuomo in 1984. With GQ goo looks, he was a quiet force in blue blazer, chinos, striped red tie and brown penny loafers, rarely more than two steps off the governor's hip at public events. In 1991, he was promoted to director of scheduling and was given a \$7,500-a-year raise by the governor despite a pay freeze for state workers.

Howe traveled frequently with Cuomo and both were aboard a state-owned Grumman Gulfstream G-1 airplane when a faulty air conditioner caught fire, the cabin filled with smoke and the pilot made an emergency landing at night while returning to Albany from New Orleans, where Cuomo spoke to the Council of Jewish Federations. On Dec. 20, 1991, Howe awoke at his Loudonville home at 4:30 a.m., drove to his Albany office and scrambled to arrange two chartered planes to be ready that afternoon on the tarmac at the Albany County Airport to fly to Concord, N.H. — one for the press corps and the other for Cuomo, his staffers and family members. It was Cuomo's last chance to launch a run for president against incumbent George Bush in 1992. Cuomo did not enter the presidential race and the planes remained grounded, but Howe's stock rose.

Working together at the statehouse, Howe had forged a bond with Cuomo's son and he followed Andrew Cuomo to Washington, where he worked as a policy and strategic adviser at the Department of Housing and Urban Development when Cuomo was HUD secretary under President Bill Clinton.

Howe later returned to Albany and was a senior vice president of an Albany public relations firm, Sawchuk Brown Associates, formerly owned by his sister, Pamela Howe Sawchuk Brown. She declined comment and referred questions to her brother's attorney, [Richard Morvillo](#), who has offices in New York and Washington.

In email, Morvillo said Howe's past "mistakes ... in handling his financial affairs are irrelevant and sensationalized" by media reports. He wrote the media has "presumed unfairly that Mr. Todd crossed the line without evidence supporting that speculation. Mr. Todd and his prior firm were sensitive to those differences, and Mr. Todd received expert advice to ensure that the activities in

which he engaged for clients was appropriate. He looks forward to clearing his name in whatever manner may be necessary."

Also drawing investigators' attention is **Joseph Percoco**, 46, senior vice president of the Madison Square Garden Company, who until January served as Gov. Andrew Cuomo's executive deputy secretary. Like Howe, he also started on Gov. Mario Cuomo's advance team, in 1991. He was known as the loud one who cursed a lot and had a great sense of humor.

He and Andrew Cuomo hit it off and became very close. Cuomo praised Percoco in a 2014 speech as "my father's third son and my brother." He has long been considered the younger Cuomo's political muscle and counselor and one observer called him "the conscience of the second floor." On May 2, Cuomo said Percoco "is a good man and I would be shocked if he did anything wrong. But let's get the facts and then we can all make a decision."

Percoco did not return calls to the Times Union, but his attorney, Barry Bohrer, said in a statement: "Mr. Percoco was a dedicated and effective public servant, who is proud of the service that he rendered to the people of the state of New York. He believed that he was acting appropriately at all times."

Longtime Cuomo family friend **William O'Shaughnessy**, editorial director of WVOX Radio in New Rochelle, Westchester County, called Percoco "a very good guy who always had Andrew's best interests at heart."

He described Howe as a quiet fixer who "stays out of the line of fire, does his job and has been a great public servant."

O'Shaughnessy completed a biography of Mario Cuomo, due out this fall by Fordham University Press (Andrew Cuomo's alma mater). He conceded he considers the Cuomos "a wonderful family whom I view through rose-colored glasses."

The investigation by Bharara focuses on Gov. Andrew Cuomo's highly touted "Buffalo Billion" economic development program. Howe is a registered lobbyist of a major Buffalo Billion developer, Syracuse-based COR Development, and Percoco is being investigated for making between \$70,000 and \$125,000 from two development companies, **Clough, Harbour & Associates of Albany and COR Development**, both of whom received state contracts on upstate economic development projects. The probes are also looking into SUNY Polytechnic Institute CEO Alain Kaloyeros, a key player in Gov. Andrew Cuomo's upstate high-tech development initiative, and potential bid-rigging on a dormitory project near SUNY Poly's Albany campus.

None of the men being investigated have been charged with a crime.

Cuomo also told reporters on May 2 he has respect and gratitude for "the Cuomo alumni" who served both his father and his administration. "I am blessed, frankly, that I've had a number of people work with me over the years and they believe in what we're doing and they're always there to help, you know?" the governor said. "That's actually a beautiful thing. They believe in the cause."

Now, at a least a couple of the Cuomo alumni are under the microscope of multiple political corruption investigations.

"We have to let the investigations play out," said Jack McEneny, a former state Assemblyman and historian who has written frequently about Albany political history. "The jury's still out."

Or, as Bharara is wont to say in his favorite ominous Albany phrase, "Stay tuned."

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