

Cuomo Walks

by Susan Reefer

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"Have you ever walked out of a movie?"

I was asked this seemingly innocuous question once, as part of a course in political strategy. The idea was to illustrate a powerful law in political campaigns: The Law of Sunk Investments.

Walking out of a movie, a bad movie, a movie that is so awful that you know you would be better off at home balancing your checkbook, may seem like a no-brainer. But it turns out that most people have a hard time giving up on their investment: the price of the ticket, the time already spent getting to the theater and finding a seat and sitting through the first half. And then, there is the emotional turmoil: letting go of the idea that you were going to have fun tonight, that the movie will somehow redeem itself in the end and turn out to be something worth seeing.

The Law of Sunk Investments states that however much time or money or energy you have expended, it can't justify spending even one more cent or one more minute or one more ounce of effort, if what you are doing just isn't working.

Andrew Cuomo realized this truth, and on September 3, 2002, dropped out of the Democratic primary race for governor.

It came as a shock, despite the fact that Cuomo was facing a double-digit deficit in his efforts to overtake his primary opponent, State Comptroller H. Carl McCall. There was much talk about a poll released the same day that Cuomo made his announcement, but the truth is, the survey results could not possibly have come as a surprise to either camp. Both Cuomo and McCall would have known their numbers based on their own internal polling.

It came as a surprise, not because anyone necessarily expected Cuomo to come from behind and win the primary, but because of the nature of campaigning. You enter a campaign knowing that one of two things will happen. You will win, or you will lose. You prefer winning. If you lose, it will be because you tried to win, tried everything within your power, but ultimately came up short. It is the adversarial nature of electoral politics, and it is a system that we believe produces the best candidates. Deciding a week before the two-way primary election that you

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don't want your votes to be counted after all is not unheard of, but it is unusual.

It means giving up on the goal that has kept you going for months, putting aside the money that has been spent, dismissing the effort that has been made by campaign staff and volunteers, and letting go of the hard-won support you have earned. It means walking away from a year of your life, and disappointing all of those family members and supporters and donors and staff who are counting on you to win.

At a press conference, Cuomo explained his reasons for ending his campaign a week early. He said his advisors told him he would have to go on the air with negative advertising to give him any chance of winning. Whatever these advisors actually told him, this would have been sound political advice. His only chance of winning would have been to attack McCall with consistent negative messages, and under the circumstances, this is what I would have expected to see during the last ten days of campaigning.

His reluctance to engage in this negative campaigning was the reason he gave for deciding to concede the race. This had the double benefit of sounding good, and in all likelihood, being the truth. Knowing he would have to create a firestorm of controversy just to give himself a shot at the nomination, and damage both himself and his opponent in the process, without a guarantee that he would ultimately win, he most likely decided the risk was too great. Knowing he had no other options, he decided to abandon a losing effort. He made a strategic decision to give up his dream of being the next governor but maintain his political integrity, and live to fight another day.

Whatever personal struggles Andrew Cuomo may have had before coming to this decision, there is little doubt that external pressures were active as well. The fingerprints of the New York Democratic Party machine could be seen everywhere in the days leading up to the announcement.

Every political party is ultimately going to support the nominee, but even before the nominee is chosen, public or private efforts will be made to close ranks and mobilize support around one candidate. Party leaders were anxious to avoid a messy primary like the mayoral run-off between Mark Green and Freddie Ferrer last fall. None-too-subtle hints were handed down: Senator Hillary Clinton who had claimed neutrality in the contest "happened" to march next to Carl McCall in a parade before key constituents the weekend before.

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The Dean of the New York Democratic Congressional delegation, Charles Rangel, spoke for Andrew Cuomo at his press conference. His grandfatherly tone and kind words were genuinely touching, but there was a subtext to his remarks: he was thanking Cuomo for taking a hit for the good of the party, for letting this one go, for being a team player. The speculation was that someone had exercised some party discipline, and Cuomo had acquiesced.

The result of this surprising turn of events is that Carl McCall now has a straight shot at the Democratic nomination. He can hold valuable resources in reserve for the general election; he can take it easy, rest, prepare, and represent a unified Democratic front in the November election. And all of this is good news. But there is a down side. No one wants to win by default, even if the outcome is all but pre-determined. The coverage he would have received and the "bump" in support he might have anticipated upon winning the primary are no longer expected.

And there's something else, something that's hard to define but a genuine phenomenon in electoral politics. The minute a candidate drops out of a campaign, he experiences an immediate image makeover. According to the new wisdom, Cuomo isn't an opponent anymore, he's a statesman of New York politics who had the grace to selflessly bow out of the race for the good of the state and the Democratic Party. Now he's one of the Good Guys. McCall doesn't get the satisfaction of beating Cuomo, he has to settle for shaking hands and accepting his support with humility and gratitude. It puts McCall squarely in the role of Powerful Political Insider, a role he has tried hard to avoid.

McCall likes to describe himself as the underdog, and why not? Everyone loves an underdog. Even when he was twenty points in the lead, he insisted he was the underdog. He's not the underdog in the primary anymore, now he's the presumptive nominee. And now that he's the nominee, he's running in the general election against two-term governor George Pataki.

That makes him the legitimate underdog at least for now, and this time, we can be sure that both candidates will be sticking around to see how the story ends.

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