

The Book Case

Fasten Your Seatbelt: Here Comes Cuomo

**Diaries of Mario M. Cuomo:
The Campaign for Governor**

By Mario M. Cuomo
New York: Random House
468 pp. \$19.95

Reviewed by William Kauffman

"The brightest star in his party," coos the doyenne of chichi liberalism, Mary McGrory. "The most humane, most sympathetic New York Governor since Al Smith," swoons Albany savant and Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Kennedy. The "hottest property" on the Democratic block, concede right-wing columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.

The man who sets these political hearts palpitating was written off as a loser by political insiders two short years ago. A run-of-the-mill paleo-liberal given to gratingly self-righteous and pedantic oratory. A hapless lieutenant governor who'd lost the only two contested races he'd ever run (the 1974 Democratic primary for lieutenant governor and the 1977 New York City mayoralty election) and who'd piloted Jimmy Carter's 1980 statewide campaign to disastrous losses in the primary and the general election. And a man engaged in a quixotic battle for the 1982 Democratic gubernatorial nomination against the redoubtable mayor and avatar of middle-class Gothamites, Ed Koch.

But Mario Cuomo had a *shtick*, and he won. He beat Ed Koch in the Democratic race with a stirring come-from-behind victory, then edged out supply-side drugstore magnate Lewis Lehrman in November. Democrats, desperate to retake the White House once the curtain closes on the Reagan reign, immediately recognized Cuomo as a candidate straight from central casting. Ethnic, Catholic, ugly-cuddly basset hound face, an orthodox liberal who seems like a regular guy, denizen of our second-largest state—perfect. You got a sneak preview when he delivered the keynote address at this year's Democratic convention in San Francisco. The full-length feature will probably be released in your state in '88.

Now none of this would be remarkable were Cuomo your basic garden-variety hack. After all, somebody has to be the Democratic nominee for president. But Mario Cuomo is different. The themes he has used to great effect in New York might revivify the Democratic dinosaur. And if they provide him with the key to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, prepare for four years of unyielding hostility to individual liberties. Better fasten your seatbelt, too. More on that later.

The heart and mind of the New York governor are currently on display in *Diaries of Mario M. Cuomo: The Campaign for Governor*. As the title suggests, the book is largely devoted to the voluminous and usually soporific diary Cuomo kept from late 1980 until his in-



Gov. Mario Cuomo: He conducts statecraft as though New York were his living room and its residents his prepubescent children.

auguration on January 1, 1983. When we first meet the protagonist he is Everyman. His boss, Gov. Hugh Carey, neither likes nor trusts him (he sees Cuomo as a potential rival), and his neglected wife spends much of her time whining about his measly lieutenant governor's salary.

Though he frets that the long hours he puts in laboring for the people of the Empire State have damaged his home life, the lure of what he calls the "beautiful profession" is too strong. Soon our hero is battling Ed Koch, Lew Lehrman, and the forces of reaction. Most of this is dull potatoes indeed, although the diligent reader may ferret out hints that Mario is motivated by more than mere powerlust. Savor this gem: "The political power one wins is good for the good it can do. The acceptance is good for the political power it gives. The joy of win-

ning is the joy of having an opportunity to do the good."

Between lucubrations, Mario the Good spends scores of pages doling out fulsome praise for everyone from goofy Sen. Alan Cranston ("bright, progressive, pleasant") to the lowliest Brooklyn ward heeler. Virtually every man, woman, child, and household pet Cuomo came into contact with during his campaign is eulogized. A grateful winner? Perhaps. But also a savvy politician who'll need these people again in 1986, a reelection he hopes will put his name on everybody's short list two years hence.

Not to spoil the ending, but Mario wins. He describes his coalition as "labor, business, homeowners, minorities, the disabled, those who work and those who want to work but can't." (New York's Aleut population is omitted—I believe it's a publisher's error.) But don't mistake this for the usual Democratic promise-the-saps-everything triumph. For Cuomo's campaign had a theme, a *motif* that invested every nostrum he advanced and every speech he gave with a dignity rare in politics. Mario spoke of the family.

His own family is, by all accounts, exemplary. Momma and Papa Cuomo were Neapolitan immigrants who entered this country penniless and illiterate and, with equal parts of love, thrift, and hard work, built a respectable grocery business in Queens. Their children were raised in the Catholic Church, whence Mario apparently acquired a missionary zeal to do good for others. Indeed, he believes Christianity demands its votaries "try to do good things for other people...insistently." An eminently worthy *raison d'être*—for a private citizen.

Alas, Cuomo conducts statecraft as though New York were his living room and its residents his prepubescent children. He fused his militant do-goodism with his reverence for the kinfolk to produce the most arresting political metaphor of the decade—the Family of New York. Just as the Cuomos shared their burdens and blessings, so must New Yorkers begin "feeling one another's pain, sharing one another's blessings, reasonably, equitably, honestly, fairly." If such sharing strengthens the family, asks Mario, "why shouldn't that be true for politics as well?"

Of course, the difference is that

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transfers of wealth within a family are voluntary and are motivated by love and generosity rather than by the fear of arrest and imprisonment. Moreover, we make the transfers directly and assist only those whom we deem worthy of assistance. Few families employ welfare bureaucrats to skim 40 percent off the top.

But if Cuomo is blind to the glaring flaws in the metaphor, so are the many New Yorkers entranced by the Good Governor. He won statewide approval for a \$1.25-billion infrastructure bond issue to pay off his brothers in the building and construction trades unions, then satisfied environmental faddists by signing a bottle bill requiring a five-cent deposit on beer and soft drink containers. He allied himself with the neo-prohibitionists in an effort to raise New York's drinking age to 21 (before the federals commanded it anyway), and Naderites across the land are still applauding New York for being the first state to make buckling one's seat belt mandatory. Almost always, the family metaphor is invoked.

His diaries suggest Mario the Good would govern the nation as he has the state, dismissing individualist objections to his coercive schemes as the selfish babblings of misguided children. The economy would be regulated by a benevolent father who considers Felix Rohatyn his economic guru and who, when confronted with a deserted steel mill in Lackawanna, New York, that was laid low by high taxes, excessive wages, and imbecilic management, solemnizes that "all around us there are evidences that we have failed as a society to do all the good things we could have done." The national defense would be in the hands of a fellow who supports the nuclear freeze "to reaffirm the simple truth that peace is better than war because life is better than death." And you'd better believe that if the kids aren't public-spirited enough to volunteer to keep that peace, Dad'll send 'em to the neatest summer camp you could ever imagine.

A man who really believes that "ever since Adam and Eve, human nature has needed to be coaxed into doing the right thing" is to be pitied. A candidate for president who believes that is to be feared.

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Free-Trade Romance

Come to Me, Megan

By Ellen Garwood

Alexandria, Va.: Cameron Press
184 pp. \$14.95/\$8.95

Reviewed by Laurence Beilenson

Seventeen-year-old Megan Delane, the daughter of a merchant prince in the cotton business, is a suffering wall-flower at a country club dance in the strange-to-her city of New Orleans on Christmas Eve, 1919. From this beginning, the novel fades back to Megan's girlhood in "Gaitree," Oklahoma, goes forward through her education at a college in the North, and ends with her engagement.

From the elegance of Galatoire's restaurant to the miserable poverty of the *batture* (sandbar) dwellers, the New Orleans scenes roll by in vivid colors, smells, and sounds. And France, too, vividly emerges as Megan's friend, Pierre, describes to her his France: "Along the Loire, white fairy castles on hills...loom in gentle rises over a valley of green mist. Even the bridges crossing the river are poems...."

It is not, however, New Orleans or France, but the people of the small town of Gaitree who take the reader into the author's captivating world of romance. "It's a pioneer town in the heart of this continent," Megan tells Pierre after she has left Gaitree. "There's a zing in the air. A zest, a spirit of challenge to everyone to prove his best." No less real because Megan's imagination invests the town with a spirit of derring-do, Gaitree has all the vices as well as the virtues.

The author's fictional Gaitree is Oklahoma City during its developing years when it had not yet thrown off its Indian affinity. The original Americans still exerted a strong influence on its culture. The town is not one of the old ones that took root in the early 19th century, as did many of the river towns of Arkansas and Mississippi. Founded by the '89ers when Indian territory was opened to white settlers, Gaitree nonetheless embraces the broad culture of the South.

The story centers on Megan's family. Her father, the cotton merchant, Phil Delane, is obviously the famous Will Clayton, who in fact and in the novel championed free trade and the southern farmer, who was held down by the limits placed on free trade.

The cardinal anomaly of international

free trade is that it has never been tried, at least for long. Governments always have intervened—not ostensibly against trade, to be sure, but against its freedom and thus indeed against trade. Phil Delane suffers from no illusions about the real-life obstacles to making his dream come true. He says about his hopes: "I'd like to sell directly to the European spinners someday. Create a direct line of transit, with as few intermediaries as possible. Save cost. Handle the farmer's cotton as cheaply as we can, so as to encourage production, develop the country—help clothe the poor, everywhere. With freer trade, even frictions that cause war can be stopped." Then in sober fact he discusses the round bale of cotton, more compact than the square bale, "and you could get more of them into the holds of the European steamers." But "the train freight to eastern ports [is], unfairly, no less expensive than for the square bale which [is] so much bulkier and heavier."

Delane goes on: "Still, what can you expect? Ever since the Civil War the North has controlled freight rates. The same thing with tariffs on foreign goods. The agricultural South and Southwest—in fact, the whole country, the world—

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