



Sandy a super test for Bloomberg, Christie, Cuomo



FILE - In this Nov. 15, 2012 file photo, President Barack Obama, center, is flanked by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, left, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, after the president arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, to visit areas devastated by Superstorm Sandy. Experts in leadership and disaster response give Bloomberg, Cuomo and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie high marks for their performance so far in Superstorm Sandy, a disaster that left more than 100 people dead and presented perhaps the biggest crisis-management test yet for the three Northeastern politicians who have all been rumored to hold presidential ambitions. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster, File)

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NEW YORK (AP) — For New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, leadership often came with an empathetic hug. For New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, it came with an angry tirade at utilities slow to restore power. For New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, it came with cool, businesslike assurance.

Experts in leadership and disaster response interviewed by The Associated Press gave all three chief executives high marks for their performance so far in Superstorm Sandy, a disaster that left more than 100 people dead and presented perhaps the biggest crisis-management test yet for three Northeastern politicians who have all been rumored to hold presidential ambitions.

"Throughout the country, what the American people seek is a kind of authenticity in their public leaders, and these three guys have demonstrated that authenticity throughout this crisis," said Syracuse University political science professor Robert McClure.

Most of those interviewed said Christie stood out for being the most outspoken and ahead of the curve, whether he was ordering gas rationing nearly a week before anyone else, putting his GOP credentials on the line to praise the Obama administration's response or using a televised briefing to comfort children with a simple: "Don't be scared."

He got so much attention that he even poked a bit of fun at himself with a cameo over the weekend on "Saturday Night Live," where he appeared in the familiar blue fleece jacket that he has worn while touring the state following the storm.

All three men took firm command before Sandy arrived. Cuomo closed New York City's subways and tunnels hours before there was a threat of flooding and strategically "pre-positioned resources" days before, a move the federal transportation secretary later praised. Christie struck a get-tough note in ordering people to clear out along the coast, barking, "Don't be stupid" on Twitter. Bloomberg calmly ordered an evacuation of the city's low-lying areas.

And their leadership continued after the storm had passed.

Douglas Brinkley, a Rice University historian who wrote an award-winning book on 2005's Hurricane Katrina and has also written about Presidents Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Theodore Roosevelt and Gerald Ford, said the first rule in a disaster is to rush rescue and relief to the victims to keep the death toll down.

"While Sandy has been tragic, with the amount of rescues that have taken place and the amount of life-saving that has gone down, it has helped keep the death toll not commensurate to the damage," he said. "In Hurricane Katrina, you lost 2,000 people. And a lot of them died because nobody got to them for a week."

Not everything went perfectly. Many of Sandy's victims have complained that the power outages went on for too long, that the gas station lines were infuriating, and that temporary housing against November's cold seemed to be an afterthought.

At times, the crisis threw all three men off balance: Bloomberg reversed himself in the face of a huge backlash and canceled the New York City Marathon, Christie picked a fight with the Atlantic City mayor for sending people to city shelters instead of evacuating them, and Cuomo's attacks on utilities thudded when he took on the Long Island Power Authority, a state utility over which he has some control.

Christie provided the defining moment for a country torn by gridlock and partisanship, boarding a helicopter with President Barack Obama for a tour of the battered Jersey shore. On the first full day after Sandy, six days before the presidential election, the Republican Christie talked up Obama like an old bowling buddy.

When Rush Limbaugh and other conservatives branded him a traitor to the GOP, the brash and sometimes bullying Christie took a politics-be-damned stance: "They haven't been to New Jersey. Come see the destruction. Come see the loss."

"Not being a Christie voter and not particularly appreciating a lot of what he's done as governor, you have to give the guy an A-plus," said Doug Muzzio, political science professor at New York City's Baruch College. "He was totally engaged, and he was engaged in a way that Bloomberg certainly wasn't and even Cuomo wasn't, and that was in a very visceral way. He not only managed, but he led."

In the storm's aftermath, Christie had reassuring words for New Jersey children, saying they should "let the adults in your community take care of you. We'll be there for you." He said he had been hugging distraught adults but got choked up when he met a 9-year-old girl whose home had been destroyed.

"People perceive Christie, accurately, as someone who feels the effects on the shore very personally — this is where he takes his kids in the summer," said Princeton University politics professor Brandice Canes-Wrone.

Cuomo, meanwhile, directed camouflaged troops, stood in the driving rain just outside the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel to see the whitecaps inside, held daily TV briefings, and took NBC's Brian Williams into a flooded commuter train station. The images helped support his request for \$30 billion in federal aid.

Syracuse's McClure said Cuomo and Christie learned from the bungles of storms past and put material and staff in place days before Sandy began lashing the coast Oct. 28.

"These guys took a huge risk at some level because once you start doing all this stuff early — and nothing happens — it's expensive," McClure said. "These guys are smart."

As for Bloomberg, the billionaire businessman has never been seen as the Great Empathizer. At times he comes off as crisp, if not cold. But in the weeks since the storm, Bloomberg has repeatedly gone to badly damaged areas to make announcements and meet people, and he described having coffee in the chilly Rockaways home of some friends who had no power.

"He is not a leader, he does not inspire and he does not consult. He doesn't feel your pain and apparently he doesn't want to," Muzzio said of Bloomberg. "But on a CEO level, at the moment, I think he did a good job. ... It seems they did all that was reasonable to do and more prior to the storm and during it."

Not everyone was cordial to Bloomberg. As he visited a school in a heavily damaged section of Brooklyn, more than a dozen people peppered him with complaints about fuel shortages, power outages and fears of burglaries. Bloomberg told them the city was doing its best.

"The amount of logistical problems that he had were mind-boggling. But it was a combination of his cool leadership and the fact that some of the worst-case scenarios didn't manifest themselves that presented him as an able leader through the crisis," Brinkley said.

"Sometimes we're tough on politicians," he said. "Here, all three showed stellar leadership."