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Even the very best prosecutors are politicians. That's not a pejorative. It's just a fact.

Hard-charging, glib, telegenic and media-savvy, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York Preet Bharara is confronting what he believes is an Albany culture of deceit and corruption. While uncovering venal behavior in government is not only laudable but crucial in a democracy, his critics are saying his news conferences and sound bites are more about building his brand for future office than focusing on the strength of his prosecutions.

He denies any thoughts about life beyond his current job.

History suggests this may not be quite accurate, especially if you sit in Preet's office.

Publicity, politics and corruption go way back in New York. An unsuccessful candidate for governor, Judge Samuel Seabury, led the investigative effort that drove corrupt New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker out of power in 1930s. During that same time, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District post became a springboard for political advancement. Thomas Dewey was the office's first personality to craft the image of a genuinely tough, take-no-prisoners crime-fighter before he went on to seek higher office. He tackled the formerly untouchable bootlegger



U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York Preet Bharara

Waxy Gordon and then confronted notorious gangsters Lucky Luciano and Dutch Schultz. He was so prominent that he became the model for the radio show "Gang Busters," and Humphrey Bogart played a tough-talking district attorney modeled after Dewey.

The prosecutor went on to enter and win the race for New York governor, becoming one of the most progressive leaders ever to hold that seat before two unsuccessful efforts to become U.S. president. While his accomplishments as New York's chief executive were considerable, his prosecutorial behavior was on display when his critics in the Assembly were reputed to have found themselves under investigation by the state tax department.

The highly regarded Robert Morgenthau also served as U.S. attorney for the Southern District before his unsuccessful run for governor in the 1960s. Reappointed to the job after his defeat at the polls, he used it as a springboard to run for Manhattan district attorney, where his long-running tenure became the stuff of legend. Even at

the age of 85 – which would be the last time he stood for election – he won with 90 percent of the vote, continuing to go after white-collar criminals as well as the more traditional mob targets.

Rudy Giuliani became the U.S. attorney for the Southern District in 1983, and promptly targeted drug traffickers and Mafia families, reinforcing the image of a hard-charging prosecutor that mirrored the efforts of his predecessors. And like those who came before him in that historic office, he successfully used it as a platform to seek elective office, twice winning the job of New York City mayor. And like Dewey, he too looked beyond New York and sought the job of president.

So when Prosecutor Bharara declines to discuss any potential political future, it is virtually impossible not to look at the history of his office, the personalities who have inhabited it and the efforts to find favor with the voters who read of their exploits. What is making some observers uncomfortable is not that Bharara is probing the backrooms of Albany, but that he seems to have a media strategy that is somewhere between "The Daily Show" and "The Pentagon Papers."

In his pursuit of law and order, he needs to consider how Morgenthau used stony silence as one of the most effective means of communicating his competence, focus and dedication to the task at hand. He needs to prevent press leaks that seem more designed to intimidate than advance the cause of justice. And he needs to appreciate that no one with even the slightest understanding of political history believes anyone who sits in the Southern District of the U.S. attorney's office when they say they have no future aspirations for public office. The challenge is how to protect the integrity of the prosecutor's office while politics takes its natural course.

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