

Opinion: Blame New York City for Trump

By Mitchell L. Moss

Only one person born and raised in New York City resident has been elected president of the United States during the past 100 years: Donald J. Trump.

Most successful politicians from New York City – Al Smith, Tom Dewey, Nelson Rockefeller, Rudy Giuliani – failed when they ran for president.

By contrast, Trump never made it in New York City's business, cultural or civic world.

That's why he won.

From the moment of his birth in Queens, Trump was an outsider, the son of an outer borough real estate developer. Trump was not even elite in Queens. He went to the undistinguished Kew-Forest School and then attended the New York Military Academy, rather than the nationally ranked Jamaica High School near his home.

Trump's father, Fred Trump, a real estate developer, lived in what was designed to be a gated, very white, insular enclave: Jamaica Estates, Queens. The Trumps didn't live in either of the two higher-status neighborhoods of Queens: Forest Hills Gardens or Douglaston.

Trump had a bigger handicap in his father's German heritage. Fred Trump, who built middle-income housing in Brooklyn and Queens, had been arrested in 1927 at a KKK protest rally in Queens, according to the *New York Times*. Since World War II, a German heritage has been a liability for prospective politicians in New York. In fact, the current mayor of New

York City, Bill de Blasio, was born Warren Wilhelm, Jr., and was called Bill Wilhelm before he legally changed his name to Bill de Blasio, adopting his mother's maiden name as his own just in time to run for city council.

Trump then missed out on opportunities to expand his exposure to other cultural groups. Although of age for military service during the Vietnam War, he successfully avoided the draft with four deferments—and one medical deferment after colle

As an ambitious young man, Trump made the leap into Manhattan by using his father's political connections and his own negotiating skills to get control of the aging Commodore Hotel next to Grand Central Terminal. With financing from the Hyatt Corporation, and a generous tax abatement from the city and state, Trump Tower was built in the 1980s, at 56th Street and Fifth Avenue, a prime Manhattan location.

But these real estate successes were not followed by integration into the city. He wasn't rich enough to compete with billionaires like Michael Bloomberg, or generous enough to qualify for the boards of cultural institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the city's leading medical centers. Trump never actually owned many properties—he was focused far more on licensing his name, and attaching them to buildings, like a barbarian marking what he had seized.

Trump never became a member of the Real Estate Board of New York, the leading organization of property owners in New York City. And the city's major law firms and real estate consulting firms were reluctant to work for Trump, since he is known for not paying his bills. Most major commercial banks in New York refused to finance his real estate projects, especially once they became aware of his use of bankruptcy laws to protect whatever money he had earned from projects, while hurting investors.

In New York City, Trump, like any interloper, took advantage

of the tools available to him. Specifically, he manipulated the Manhattan-based mass media to create a national identity as a celebrity. But he

never absorbed the values of New Yorkers and the importance of immigration, global trade, higher education and the free press. Trump's presidency is actually based on a rejection of "New York values."

But his career assaulting the political and cultural elites of New York taught him one lesson: Even a bad bully can have a fan club.

News reports now have him marveling that New Yorkers who once wouldn't give him the time of day—like the former Goldman Sachs chieftain Gary Cohn—now work for him.

In light of his history, the Trump campaign promise to "take back America" was more than an empty slogan. It's a genuine reflection of his inability to fit into the cultural and economic arena of New York City where he was never recognized as a person of consequence.

Mitchell L. Moss is Henry Hart Rice professor of urban policy and planning at New York University.