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Fiorello H. LaGuardia*

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WHEN WOODROW WILSON WAS GOVERNOR of New Jersey he received a message telling him that one of the state's senators, a dear friend, had died suddenly. Stunned, he canceled all appointments for the day. Just a few minutes later he received a phone call from a local politician. "Governor," said the caller, "I would like to take the senator's place." "Well," said Wilson, shocked by the man's unseemly haste, "You may quote me as saying that that's perfectly agreeable to me if it's agreeable to the undertaker."¹

For the past forty years New York City mayoral campaigns have featured candidates promising to fill Fiorello LaGuardia's place. But the "Little Flower" lies buried in Woodlawn, and none of the pretenders have been able to resurrect the type of honest, efficient, and passionately fair government that has made what one journalist recently dubbed "Fiorellism" into New York's municipal religion; the metropolis' secular faith that government can be made to do good things for the people rather than the politicians.²

It would be tempting simply to exchange stories about this most colorful and flamboyant of New Yorkers, who as he got up in Congress one day to complain about the price of meat began fidgeting through his pockets, only to remove a puny cut of steak which he waved before his colleagues as he informed them that this pauper's portion was beyond the

means of most of his constituents: "Gentlemen," he said, "we simply must eat. We have formed the habit."³ Or the time he defied an Alcohol Agent to arrest him as he demonstrated to a bevy of reporters how to prepare an intoxicating brew during prohibition. He read the comics over the air, took a sledgehammer to the slot machines, taught housewives how to conserve on fats during war time, and conveyed the magical ability of politics to instruct, care, transform and energize a generation of New Yorkers with bracing visions of possibility.⁴

He came by his Progressive credentials through honest experience. He had lived the life. His parents were poor immigrants who had come to the United States in 1880. Born on lower Manhattan, Fiorello was raised on the wide plains of the American frontier where a tinhorn's death might be explained simply by, "He needed killing." In the expansive West he formed his sense of wide possibility. Here also he witnessed first hand the mistreatment of the Indians and the exploitation of immigrant workers by the railroads.⁵

In 1914 he made his first run for elective office only to be defeated in his bid for a Congressional seat by a Tammany stalwart. He would not lose another Congressional election until 1932. Over these years he became the leader of a corps of urban Progressives who insisted that prosperity drunk America could not substitute a cash register for a heart and keep its moral balance. In 1919 he married Thea Almerighotti in a marriage that brought him great happiness and promised to calm somewhat his bristling Congressional style. A year later Thea gave birth to a baby daughter. But the baby became ill and Thea too was slow to recover. By the end of the year Fiorello knew that his daughter and his wife both had the killing disease of the tenements, tuberculosis. He moved the family out of the city for fresh air and more healthful surroundings, but on May 8, 1921, the baby died. Fiorello had to go alone to bury his infant daughter, and six months later he went back to the cemetery to bury his wife. The soft joy of his life was gone and a journalist wrote, "He was without ambition except to forget."⁶

Some men are defeated by circumstances, others become hardened by tragedy; in a few, adversity molds sensitivity, sympathy and character. Adversity made him common with the people he represented. Other men, he would say, had their families. He had only his politics, and the common people to whom he dedicated it. Streaked by the vulnerability of his losses he broke with his conservative party to fight for a Progressive social agenda.⁷

In 1929, LaGuardia ran against James J. Walker for the mayoralty. He was defeated by the largest margins in New York City's history. His strident charges of corruption and insistence on reform threatened to

make a serious thing of government, while New Yorkers were quite happy with good times and their insouciant Beau James, but by 1933 the devil-may-care world of ragtime prosperity was shattered by the crashing of the stock market and Samuel Seabury's disclosures of systematic municipal corruption.

How, Samuel Seabury asked Tammany loyalist Sherrif Thomas Farley, had he managed to build a savings account of more than \$400,000 on a reported income of \$8,500? Well, said the good natured Mr. Farley, these savings represented funds that came out of his "tin box," his wonderful, magical "tin box." The genial practitioners of honest graft had focused their limited political intelligence and imagination on "seein' my opportunities and takin' them," on sacking the municipality they had been pledged to serve. Little wonder that they had failed to develop a government appropriate to New York's size and complexity. Jimmy Walker's New York was not merely corrupt, it lacked the freshness and vision with which to meet the challenge of modern times.⁸

New York's 322 square miles represented perhaps the most densely packed and intricately divided cityscape in the world. Commerce, industry, and a surging residential population competed with the city's bulging office districts for limited space, all in a relentlessly uncharted fashion. Completion of the fifty-six-storey Chanin Building and the seventy-seven-storey Chrysler in 1929 was followed a year later by the 102-storey Empire State. Built upon private initiative these soaring masterpieces created safety and congestion problems that had profound public effects, but no community imperative guided or limited their development.

Here in this world class city, the only authoritative master plan for metropolitan development was conceived by the privately organized Regional Plan Association of New York, and paid for by the Russell Sage Foundation. Amidst the crises of the times, municipal government demanded creativity, imagination and a large conception of public responsibility; and all New York had was Jimmy Walker and his "tin box brigade." By 1934 hard times prepared them for LaGuardia.

His first administration, all agree, was his best. He came into office as if driven. Every day brought news of some new scourge that had been defeated, some new outrage uncovered and eliminated. The town seemed to be overrun with little fat men in sombreros putting out fires, opening parks, chasing "tin horns and gangsters," and running up to Albany for authority to do more.

LaGuardia inherited a crippled city. A humiliating bankers agreement had placed a consortium of money lenders above its elected officials. More than 230,000 were unemployed; one in six New Yorkers subsisted on relief. And they had no confidence in government. "I am," LaGuardia

lamented soon after his election, “a captain of a broken ship who must patch and repair and struggle continually to keep it afloat.” But keeping New York afloat was the least of his goals. He did not succumb to small enthusiasms; he brought into office an agenda for the comprehensive transformation of city government expressed in five large goals:

- 1) Restoring the city’s fiscal health and winning back its political independence from the bankers’ consortium;
- 2) Developing a humane and fiscally prudent relief program;
- 3) Cleaning out municipal racketeering and corruption;
- 4) Establishing a merit-based civil service for an efficient and modern municipal government; and
- 5) Rebuilding New York into a modern, aesthetically pleasing, efficiently laid out city.

Traditionally mayors had negotiated with governors and aldermen, not with presidents and cabinet secretaries, but LaGuardia understood that the key to many of his plans lay in Washington. He had been a friend of the New Deal in Congress, and public works chief Harold Ickes welcomed his election. “His career in Congress,” Ickes wrote about LaGuardia, “shows that he has real ability and high courage.... He ought to give New York a great administration.” Nonetheless, when the Mayor Elect first came to Washington to discuss federal assistance for his strapped municipality, Ickes sent him home with a blunt message: “Go home and balance your budget, your credit is no good.”⁹

Within the first one hundred days the new Fusion Government which LaGuardia headed pushed through an Economy Bill that trimmed the budget and pared the municipal workforce, established a humane relief policy, launched a wide ranging attack on corruption, and expanded the merit basis of the civil service. With this done, LaGuardia turned to his ambitious program for the federally assisted reconstruction of New York.¹⁰

LaGuardia had assembled groups of engineers, architects and other experts to plan new projects. “I want help from the people who know something,” he told them, “rather than from the politicians.” Even before he was sworn into office, LaGuardia presented Washington with proposals for subways, bridges, airports, slum clearance, street repair, and public housing. Each project was carefully detailed with a firm price tag and a prudent projection for the use of relief labor. And each promised to leave a public monument to the New Deal upon its completion.¹¹

Historian Bernard Fay had remarked in the twenties that New York was the only city wealthy enough to rebuild itself every ten years. It was no longer rich enough, but LaGuardia envisioned a massive building program that would enhance the quality of city life and provide hundreds

of thousands of jobs. It was the thirties, tough times, when most mayors were begging to get a school or a bridge, and he insisted that he wanted to make urban life into a “great living adventure, with playgrounds, parks, museums, libraries, and parkways,” to match the grand aesthetic spirit of the European cities he had known as a youth.¹²

In Chicago, Detroit and San Francisco, federal money went into useless boondoggles or for buying votes. So completely did Massachusetts State Treasurer Charles Hurley control CWA (Civil Works Administration) federal appointments that the press referred to CWA as Charlie’s Workers Administration. Little wonder that Hopkins and Ickes took LaGuardia seriously. Within weeks of his election, LaGuardia brought home an allotment of 200,000 federally funded jobs, twenty percent of the entire federal CWA program. The new city administration initiated four thousand separate projects, ranging from the construction of covered municipal markets and refurbishing of city parks, to developing shelters for the homeless and clearing slums. Just a few weeks into Fusion, national studies described LaGuardia’s management of federal projects as the most honest and effective in the country, and a state report concluded that “New York City is remarkably free from political control or influence.”¹³

LaGuardia understood that the time of the self sufficient, wholly independent city had passed. New York could not pay for relief, social services *and* new parks and bridges. But by making his city into a grand showcase for urban and social initiatives he won the federal support to underwrite his dreams. “He has a confidential relationship with President Roosevelt enjoyed by no Democrat,” reported the *Albany Times Union*. “The doors of the White House open at his radiant approach, and the President is never too busy to sit down and have a chat with him.” Roosevelt himself said of his foxy friend: “Our Mayor is the most appealing man I know. He comes to Washington and tells me a sad story. The tears run down my cheeks and tears run down his cheeks and the first thing I know he has wangled another \$50 million.” The CWA, WPA (Works Progress Administration) and PWA (Public Works Administration) alone spent more than \$1.1 billion on Fusion’s first five years in New York.¹⁴

He clasped his city to Washington in a way that changed the history of American cities forever. New York became a laboratory for federal initiatives and the leader of a coalition of cities that thrust urban needs to the center of the New Deal’s recovery policies. With grant funds pouring in, the City threw new bridges over the waters and dug tunnels under them, erected new reservoirs, sewer systems, parks, highways, schools, hospitals, health centers, swimming pools, and super air terminals. For the first time New York offered its poor public housing, its working class

a unified transit system, and its artists and musicians special training and subsidies. Government too was modernized. The outdated 1898 Charter was replaced by a fresh New Compact that centralized municipal powers, consolidated departments, eliminated unnecessary borough and county offices, and streamlined the workings of the City government.

Max Weber makes a penetrating, I think crucial, distinction in the art of leadership. He speaks of an “ethics of responsibility” and an “ethics of conviction.” The ethics of responsibility demands that a leader teach his people unpleasant truths, explain the limits of knowledge and of human nature, and help them understand the true cost of governmental programs. The ethics of conscience calls for the bully pulpit, exhorting the people to live up to their moral duties. LaGuardia brought these two elements of leadership, the accountant and the preacher, in as close an alignment as any mayor in modern times.¹⁵

In 1941, after having worked closely with his Fire Commissioner for seven years and learning first hand the quality of the man’s courage, he fired him for going easy on inspectors who had accepted gratuities. “No relenting for anyone anytime,” he would say and mean it. Assistant Commissioner of Markets Carl Kimball once arrived late for a ceremony attended by the Mayor. The next day he received a news clip from City Hall. It described a Japanese official who had been tardy for a public function and had committed *harakiri*. “That,” penciled in the Mayor, “is what I call class.”¹⁶

Commissioners were on call twenty-four hours a day. Three o’clock one morning Sanitation Commissioner William Carey picked up his phone to hear the familiar careening soprano. Did Carey have a snow alarm plan, Fiorello wanted to know. “Sure, I’m called as soon as the first flake falls,” said the Commissioner. “Wonderful,” shouted the skeptical Mayor, “stick your head out the window,” and hung up.¹⁷ He thrived on the theatrical gesture, the comics, the funny hats, attending fires and calming the riot torn streets of Harlem. These and hundreds of similar images were his moments of communion with his fellow New Yorkers; photo opportunities with the intent of parable, translating the abstract workings of government into immediate significance for the men, women and children of his city. And to celebrate the new New York, he put on a fair dedicated to the World of Tomorrow.

LaGuardia wanted New Yorkers to be happy, to enjoy a sense of ease and security, to live in decent quarters and raise healthy children. But he also wanted them to be good. He declared unrelenting war on gamblers, closed the burlesques, cleared racy magazines from the newsstands (under his powers of “garbage collection) and endlessly preached the virtues of traditional values. Frustrated by what he considered a hostile press, he

turned to the radio as a means for unfiltered communication with his constituents. Millions of New Yorkers tuned in every Sunday to municipal radio station WNYC to hear the Mayor advise, instruct, cajole and entertain. He told them what to buy, how to raise their children, what to wear, how to save money, what to do in case of a German attack, what to serve on meatless days, how to resolve family disputes. The tone was strikingly intimate and fatherly. In what became the best remembered act of his mayoralty, LaGuardia one Sunday asked his audience to bring the kiddies around and then proceeded to give a dramatic reading of the Dick Tracy comic strip that would have run in the Sunday papers but for a newspaper strike.

It was Walter Lippmann who said that LaGuardia took the human sympathy that had been the abiding strength of Tammany and infused it into the tradition of good government. He brought his city wonderful things, but what he failed to do was to consider sufficiently the impact of these gifts. New York's modern infrastructure was built in unusual times with federal funds, when the Depression and LaGuardia's relationship with President Roosevelt opened new, but limited, possibilities for cooperation between Washington and New York. But they placed a huge burden on the city budget.¹⁸

When World War II put an end to these projects, LaGuardia realized that the City was on a treadmill. It could not pay for maintaining its newly built environment much less plan its continued growth without steady infusions of new support. He prepared detailed plans for a peacetime program of \$1.25 billion in federally funded public improvements for his city. But the federal government was not prepared to spend in good times as it had spent during the Depression. And when the special era that had been cemented by an unusual personal relationship between the Fusion Mayor and the New Deal President passed, the City was left with a style of expensive progressive government to which it had become accustomed, but which it would only now have to get used to supporting largely on its own.

By the time LaGuardia left office, "the whole of the city's machinery," Rexford Tugwell wrote, "was breaking down from sheer lack of funds," and Fiorello was cooking the books in order to avoid presenting the people with the cost of all of his good intentions. Liberal government was expensive and he was not candid about just how expensive.¹⁹

Unrealistic about the City, he was also unrealistic about himself. By the end of his second term he had accomplished much of his agenda in New York and he began to crave a broader importance. There was talk of a cabinet position, the Vice Presidency on the next national ticket, even the Presidency if, as was expected, Roosevelt was to retire. Franklin

Roosevelt's decision to run for a third term foreclosed many of these possibilities. Roosevelt, nonetheless, understood Fiorello's need for a broader stage, and he appointed LaGuardia Director of the Office of Civilian Defense with quasi-cabinet rank. But while LaGuardia wanted new challenges, he could not discipline himself to trade away some of the power he held. He assumed the Directorship, and ran for a third term as mayor at the same time, persuaded that he could do both jobs equally well.

He could not, and the spectacle of a haggard LaGuardia spending three days in Washington on civil defense and dragging himself back to run the City grated on New Yorkers' nerves. He finally agreed to give up OCD but he was a man who needed always some new challenge, and with the nation at war, he wanted to be on the front. He badgered Roosevelt to appoint him to a military position, and there was serious talk of a generalship either in Italy or North Africa. He ordered his uniform and waited, but the call never came. It was his greatest personal disappointment.

This complex, endlessly interesting, fiercely ambitious intemperate man pursued his ambitions with a fierce directness that can be extremely dangerous. His government represented a dangerous style of personal rule hitched to transcendent purpose. Perhaps even in a democracy that sort of leadership is necessary to create the sweeping changes that he forged. This is, of course, the formula for dictators and demagogues, and the thirties were a time when they flourished. Yet it is very much a part of LaGuardia's story that he generally respected the prudent barriers that democracies place in the way of authoritarian leadership.

He built modern New York, provided relief to a depression wracked population in heroic proportions, and fastened upon the City a sense of civic responsibility for the future. "A mayor who cannot look fifty or seventy-five years into the future," he would say, "is not worthy of being in City Hall."

After he left the mayoralty, LaGuardia directed UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in its effort to feed the millions of refugees and the displaced people left after World War II, but he had become ill and within two years Fiorello LaGuardia died of pancreatic cancer on September 21, 1947. After he was buried they opened his Tin Box. It held a total of \$8,000 in war bonds and a mortgaged home in Riverdale. That and his political legacy was what he left behind. "He was as incorruptible as the sun," Harry Truman said of him.

Notes

- * Paper presented at the 1992 annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Chicago.
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 2. Joe Klein, "The Strange Career of Fiorellism," *The New Republic*, November 13, 1989, pp. 24-27.
 3. Lowell Limpus and Burr Leyson, *This Man LaGuardia* (New York, 1938), pp. 211-212.
 4. Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. LaGuardia and the Making of Modern New York* (New York, 1989), p. 113 and *passim*.
 5. Fiorello H. LaGuardia, *The Making of an Insurgent: An Autobiography, 1882-1919* (New York, 1948).
 6. Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. LaGuardia*, pp. 78-79.
 7. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-90.
 8. Herbert Mitgang, *The Man Who Rode the Tiger* (Philadelphia, 1963), pp. 240-241.
 9. Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York, 1965), p. 28; Adolf A. Berle to Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 9, 1934 (FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York); Harold Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes*, vol. 1 (New York, 1953), p. 126.
 10. Leonard Chalmers, "The Crucial Test of LaGuardia's First 100 Days: The Emergency Economy Bill," *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, 57 (1973), 239-240.
 11. *New York World Telegram*, November 29, 1933; *The New York Times*, November 30, 1933.
 12. Bayrd Still, *Mirror for Gotham* (New York, 1956), p. 297; *The New York Times*, November 30, 1933.
 13. Barbara Blumberg, *The New Deal and the Unemployed* (Lewisburg, PA, 1979), p. 32; Joseph Verdicchio, "New Deal Work Relief and New York City" (NYU PhD Dissertation, 1980), pp. 104, 115-117; Roger Biles, *The Big City Boss in Depression and War* (DeKalb, IL, 1984), p. 77; Charles Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression and The New Deal* (New York, 1977), pp. 148-151; *The New York Times*, April 21, 1936.
 14. *Albany Times Union*, June 28, 1935; *The New York Times*, October 29, 1940.
 15. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1946), p. 115.
 16. Kessner, *Fiorello H. LaGuardia*, pp. 279-283.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
 18. *Oakland Daily News*, November 4, 1937.
 19. Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Art of Politics as Practiced by Three Great Americans* (Garden City, 1958), pp. 28-30.