

## **Fiorello H. La Guardia, A Model Mayor?**

2017

From 1934 to 1945, Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia transformed New York through determined leadership and tireless resolve, forging a relationship with the federal government that rejuvenated the city during the Great Depression. For his ability to marshal political and financial resources to realize bold ideas, he is widely considered to be New York's best mayor. He supported projects that helped modernize the city's infrastructure and landscape, including bridges, tunnels, reservoirs, parks, sewers, highways, airports, and housing. Never before or since did American cities have such a dedicated, dramatic, dynamic champion.

Born of mixed Jewish and Catholic parentage, but raised as an Episcopalian, La Guardia has been called "the most remarkable hybrid in the history of New York City." His lifelong reform agenda evolved from his experiences growing up on an Arizona army base where his immigrant father was a bandleader. His black Stetson hat evidenced La Guardia's affinity for the West. But the West taught him sober lessons about the government's neglect of Native Americans and the exploitation of workers by railroad companies. Newspaper accounts of corrupt New York City politics instilled in him a deep hatred of Tammany that, he admitted, became "almost an obsession." La Guardia's contempt for corruption in any form was confirmed when his father died after eating bad meat sold to the Army by dishonest merchants during the War of 1898.

La Guardia's early career shaped his views on public policy. In 1900, at age 18, he began working for the American Consulate in Hungary where he learned six languages and improved the medical inspection system for immigrants. After leaving Europe for New York in 1906, he was an interpreter at Ellis Island and in night court. But, he said, "I never managed to become callous to the mental anguish, the disappointment and the despair I witnessed almost daily." These experiences confirmed his compassion for the powerless and motivated him to obtain a law degree from New York University, attending at night while working during the day.

La Guardia dedicated his legal practice to helping immigrants who valued him as a true "people's attorney." Working with them exposed La Guardia to issues of inequality and made him an advocate for workers. Soon he decided that he "wanted to make law and not merely to construe it." However, getting started in politics proved difficult for an anti-Tammany Republican in a Tammany-run, Democratic town. Undaunted, he started canvassing his lower Manhattan district in a secondhand Ford, ringing doorbells and speaking Italian and Yiddish.

After serving as Deputy Attorney General for New York State, his doggedness won him the Republican nomination for Congress in 1914 and 1916. After losing the first election, La Guardia won the second only because his supporters carefully monitored the ballot counting to prevent fraud. Struggling against the entrenched party system made him, as he put it, "an incurable insurgent." In Congress, La Guardia asserted himself as a defender of

immigrants and called for aid to poor people suffering from high food prices and low wages during wartime.

In 1917, he took a one-year leave from Congress to serve in the armed forces as a pilot and interpreter, attaining the rank of major. Upon his return, La Guardia was reelected to Congress in 1918, but left again in 1919 to serve as President of the New York City Board of Aldermen. The year 1921 brought personal and professional disaster, when he not only lost his wife and infant daughter to tuberculosis, but also failed to get the mayoral nomination.

Nonetheless, he bounced back and was reelected to Congress, this time from East Harlem, a working class Italian and Jewish neighborhood that he represented from 1922 to 1932. The prosperous Roaring Twenties were difficult years for a progressive with a social justice agenda. As a result, most of his proposals were rejected, but his voice was heard nationwide as he fought for minimum wages, maximum hours, workmen's compensation, old-age pensions, rent control, free speech, the right to strike, and higher taxes on the rich. He opposed child labor, income taxes on the poor, national origin immigration quotas, and prohibition. His greatest congressional accomplishment was the 1932 Norris-La Guardia Act, which protected workers' rights to unionize and strike.

Having lost his mayoral bid in 1929 and his Congressional seat in 1932, La Guardia's political future looked bleak. But opportunities emerged for him during the Great Depression. His concern for the poor made him seem increasingly empathetic, and his proposals for their welfare appeared ever more sensible. Moreover, his long-time opposition to Tammany proved politically useful when Judge Samuel Seabury, a prominent upper class reformer, investigated Democrat Jimmy Walker's mayoralty and uncovered extensive corruption in municipal government. The scandals forced Walker to resign and elevated La Guardia's status as a champion of good government.

While Tammany Democrats viewed him as the enemy, Republicans thought he was too unpredictable, too abrasive, too rumped, and too Italian. Consequently, Seabury had to pressure the Republicans and the weak Fusion party to consider La Guardia. They resisted and offered the nomination to anyone else they could think of, including Seabury himself. Finally, by a process of elimination, both the Fusion and the Republican parties reluctantly nominated La Guardia.

The 1933 mayoral campaign was so intense that it spurred exceptionally high voter registration. Two Democrats ran against La Guardia, but he campaigned vigorously and fielded New York's first ethnically balanced ticket. Vito Marcantonio, La Guardia's protégé and a future congressman, organized grassroots Italian American support, including poll watchers. Along with upper class reformers and middle class Jews, Italian Americans were essential to La Guardia's victory, abandoning Tammany to vote for one of their own. His victory was a political coming of age for New York's new immigrants.

As Mayor, La Guardia promised efficient, non-partisan government, famously declaring, "there is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets." Above all, La Guardia

committed himself to a “vital, new type of government... for the benefit of all the people... an administration tender hearted toward the weak and unfortunate and hardhearted toward the wrongdoer and the grafter.” He envisioned an expansive government dedicated to economic and social justice.

La Guardia immediately distinguished himself from Jimmy Walker, the “nightclub Mayor,” who epitomized the high life of the Jazz Age. Although La Guardia opposed prohibition as a form of anti-immigrant persecution and governmental oppression, he also opposed the loosening of traditional social norms that accompanied it. Consequently, as old-fashioned moralist intent upon “cleaning up” New York, he closed gay bars and banned drag queens from Times Square. Within the context of the times, the inconsistency escaped him.

Walker’s administration had incurred significant municipal debt. La Guardia cut his own salary in half in order to set an example for reducing the city payroll, reorganizing the city bureaucracy, levying business taxes, plus overcoming his personal opposition to a sales tax. The result was a balanced budget by 1934, which enabled him to apply for federal funds.

La Guardia’s greatest challenges during the Great Depression were an unprecedented level of unemployment and a deteriorating infrastructure. Though the city had a long history of effectively addressing municipal problems, the economic crisis of the 1930s was too much to deal with, forcing La Guardia to turn to Washington for assistance. In doing so, he changed the nature of the relationship between the federal government and cities. La Guardia cultivated special relationships with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom he knew as former Governor of New York, and with Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who ran key New Deal programs. Consequently, New York City received a huge infusion of money for capital improvements that provided desperately needed jobs. The funds were translated into new sewage treatment plants, an extended subway, enclosed retail markets, docks, bridges, parks, playgrounds, parkways, public housing, schools, swimming pools, hospitals, and health stations. Orchestrated by master builder Robert Moses, this was the most extensive construction program any American city had ever undertaken. New York in effect became the New Deal city, a laboratory for national reform and an incubator of a modern form of political liberalism.

La Guardia’s leadership style was hands-on and personal, temperamental and abrasive. He supervised everything and cared about everybody, perhaps to a fault. When he wasn’t rushing to fires, conducting orchestras, giving advice over the radio, or writing letters to children, he was berating his commissioners, firing incompetent city workers, taking over court cases, smashing slot machines, and chastising reporters. He may have abused his powers when he prevented the police from stopping violence caused by striking taxi drivers or when he had the water turned off to the city’s major laundries in order to help striking laundry workers.

La Guardia’s explosive personality revealed a sense of self-righteousness and an insatiable need for attention. As he admitted, “I am an inconsiderate, arbitrary, authoritative, difficult,

complicated, intolerant and somewhat theatrical person.” Yet, his dramatic style reflected a desire to inspire public interest in and win support for his fight against crime, corruption, and the callous disregard for human suffering. In this sense, he was an “autocratic democrat.”

La Guardia was the first reform mayor to be reelected – not just once but twice, for a total of three terms. Although he aspired to higher office, his dreams for New York never diminished. Under his leadership, New York built 92 new schools, hosted the 1939 World’s Fair, and established first health insurance plan (HIP) for public service workers. It acquired the nation’s most modern airport and its largest consolidated transit system. Most remarkably, he managed to get the 1938 state constitution amended to accept “the aid, care and support of the needy” as a public obligation. New York remains the only state to embrace this commitment.

La Guardia never conquered crime, vice or gambling, but he did establish the High School of Music and Art, free concerts and the City Center, all of which made culture more available to more people. While blocking the imposition of tuition at the municipal colleges, he built new campuses in Brooklyn and Queens. He made sure that the cost of milk, utilities, and the subway were kept low. In addition to promoting the desegregation of baseball, he opened up municipal jobs to African Americans, Jews and Italians. True to his nickname, the city blossomed under the Little Flower.

Like most liberals at the time, La Guardia focused more on issues of class than on race. Decades of neglect and discrimination worsened the plight for the city’s black population, small but growing, and largely concentrated in Harlem. Racial riots in Harlem in 1935 and 1943 exposed the problems and revealed the limitations of New Deal liberalism, which proved, as poet Langston Hughes predicted, that sooner or later “a dream deferred” would “explode.” The riots occurred within the black community and reflected anger and resentment toward white society. After the first riot, La Guardia did more to promote racial equality than any previous mayor, but he also faltered and failed to forestall the second riot.

The 1935 riot had both immediate and deep-rooted causes. The Depression exacerbated the problems of high unemployment, low wages, and overcrowding in Harlem. Churches and civic organizations tried to meet the need. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. organized these efforts for the Abyssinian Baptist Church and led protests against job discrimination. Thus, the situation was already volatile when a Puerto Rican boy was caught stealing a penknife in a store on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. When inaccurate rumors spread that the white storeowner had beaten him, repressed anger erupted into a riot that caused three deaths and extensive property damage.

La Guardia commissioned a report on conditions in Harlem, which detailed the economic causes of the riot and highlighted the problem of police brutality. He refused to release the scathing report. However, he did steer substantial resources to Harlem, including public housing, schools, a health center, and a woman’s pavilion at Harlem Hospital. Moreover,

he integrated hiring in municipal hospitals and the civil service. He also appointed the city's first African American judges as well as other blacks to upper-level city jobs.

It was not enough. As the Great Depression continued and New Deal jobs went mainly to whites, Harlem's misery increased and protests multiplied, especially Powell's "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" marches. When he became New York's first African American city councilman in 1942, Powell became La Guardia's greatest critic. He got the City Council to unanimously oppose using Hunter College and Walton High School to train women for an all-white naval corps, an activity approved by La Guardia. Powell also protested when La Guardia condoned closing Harlem's integrated Savoy Ballroom for harboring prostitutes when less reputable segregated downtown nightclubs remained open.

Racial division in the city deepened in 1943 when the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company received approval to build a segregated middle-income housing project with public support called Stuyvesant Town. Engineered by Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, with the reluctant backing of La Guardia, Stuyvesant Town was an early example of slum clearance and massive in size. It replaced 18 blocks of the Lower East Side called the "Gas House District." Stuyvesant Town was initially intended for returning veterans and their families, but only if they were white. The policy caused widespread controversy and led to a number of lawsuits.

All of these local factors were compounded by race riots during the spring of 1943 in Alabama, California, New Jersey, and Texas. After 34 people were killed in a Detroit race riot in June, La Guardia appealed for calm. But in August in Harlem a white policeman superficially wounded a black soldier defending a black woman from arrest. Rumors spread that the black soldier had been killed defending his mother. Harlem erupted again. For eleven hours, thousands of people raged through the streets. Six died with another 185 wounded and millions of dollars in property damaged.

La Guardia rushed uptown and mobilized the police, doctors, and nurses. He closed bars and imposed a curfew. The mayor promised to meet Harlem's immediate needs, "particularly milk for the children." Although initially blaming the riot on hoodlums, La Guardia showed an understanding of the real causes. He gave radio addresses to reduce racial tension and recommended that schools use racially progressive curriculum materials. He officially opposed discriminatory rental policies like those used at Stuyvesant Town and, the City Council adopted the nation's first anti-discriminatory housing policy in 1944. La Guardia not only attended an Interracial Unity Conference at Hunter College, but also reopened the Savoy Ballroom. Addressing slum conditions, La Guardia planned several new public housing projects while moving to control rents and food prices. Finally, he established a biracial committee on race relations.

World War II presented many other challenges. La Guardia did not get the commission he wanted to serve in the war, but he agreed to run the federal Office of Civil Defense in 1941 while still mayor. He was so carried away with war fervor that he joined the post-Pearl Harbor anti-Japanese hysteria. He supported the Japanese internment camps and requested that Japanese Americans not be relocated to New York City when freed. Disregarding the

facts that many of them were citizens and none had committed any crimes, he insisted that they were “alien enemies!” and ordered the police department to monitor them. He did not do likewise for Italian Americans or German Americans.

After leaving the mayoralty in 1945, La Guardia became director-general of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, through which he hoped to alleviate suffering in the post-war world. Tragically, he never got that chance because he died from pancreatic cancer in 1947. At age 64, the lively little man in the big hat was gone, but his example and his spirit lived on. La Guardia's legacy, said Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, was having “translated the complicated conduct of [New York] City's vast government into warm significance for every man, woman and child.” Although La Guardia was not perfect, his commitment to “government with a soul” remains a noble goal that still challenges us today.

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