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He Was the Best and Worst of Mayors



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WHO KNEW? When a coatless Rudy Giuliani took the oath of office as New York's 107th mayor on a frigid January day in 1994, he didn't exactly imbue City Hall Park with the blinding specter of Olympian greatness.

He gave a leaden speech loaded with hoary promises — for stronger law enforcement, for heightened job creation, for schools that work and for more effective social services. As his 7-year-old son stood next to the lectern, mugging and beating the mayor to his punchlines, Giuliani plowed ahead with a clunky refrain: "It should be so and it will be so!"

Oh, sure, I thought: It will be so when criminals decide on their own to stop committing crime, when the teachers' union decides to liberalize its work rules, when the homeless decide to find work and when an infamous old city bureaucracy decides to operate like a Fortune 500 company.

Giuliani, the man inspired even less confidence than Giuliani the orator. He appeared to lack the expansive vision of a Fiorello LaGuardia, or the suave elan of a John Lindsay, or the irrepressible wit of an Ed Koch — mayoral legends all.

With his gaunt features — once described as medieval — and his didactic ways, he had all the charm of an irascible schoolmaster. He was best known for a fierce ambition, a hair-trigger temper and a boundless arrogance. He looked to me like a white-backlash hardliner and little else.

I mean, here was a political amateur who had managed to get elected with just five percent of the black vote. In a city that's about 27 percent black and 27 percent Hispanic — riven with chronic racial and ethnic fissures — I had him pegged as Archie Bunker come to life. He was the guy panicky white voters had turned to after David Dinkins — the city's first black mayor — wound up bungling the job. I was expecting a wretched new era of bad speeches and little else.

Eight years later, Giuliani is preparing to leave office after an incredibly successful run. He did his job with the ice-cold heart of a prosecutor. He bullied and cajoled and howled and intimidated until he finally got most of the reforms he wanted.

And now he is hailed as America's mayor in the national media. He wins standing ovations every time he enters a room.

Crime is down to levels last seen in the early 1960s. And don't let anybody kid you — much of that triumph is because Giuliani made the New York Police Department more effective. He was the first mayor to hold the cops responsible for keeping crime rates down.

The rest of the bureaucracy also works better today than anyone might have imagined. When was the last time you heard of chronic troubles on Rikers Island? Or in the Health and Hospitals Corp.? What ever happened to the almost daily ration of horror stories out of the municipal child welfare agency? Who said New York is ungovernable?

Thanks to Giuliani, the befuddled City College of New York and other components of the City University system are starting to recover some of their long-dormant academic values. At the same time, Giuliani helped tame a welfare behemoth that was costing New York taxpayers far more than they could afford. (His not-so-unreasonable message went like this: If you want help from the city, you must give the city something in return.)

In the end, he cleaned up the stale policies of the urban liberals, observed Lindsay biographer Vincent Cannato in an interview this week.

"Giuliani puts order over everything else," said Cannato. "Lindsay put social justice first."

If you have a problem with Giuliani's sense of priorities, bear in mind that no matter how pure a mayor's motives might be, social justice is simply impossible in an environment of advanced civic disorder. We must have order first.

Yet it's not quite accurate to call Giuliani the anti-Lindsay. While his ideology may be the exact opposite of what Lindsay preached, he did borrow one important technique from the late mayor. When terrorists leveled the Twin Towers on Sept. 11, Giuliani — he of the sulfurous temperament — took to the streets for days on end. He was like the city's pastor. As Lindsay learned to calm New York by strolling the sidewalks of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, Giuliani reassured the city and the nation for weeks on end with his calm 24-hour presence.

But, yes, he also made some grievous mistakes. His penury toward city schools in the early days of his administration was unforgivable. So was his penchant for making scapegoats of schools chancellors and running them out of town. It's safe to say that the schools aren't much better now than they were the day Giuliani took office. Education is one issue he whiffed completely.

Another one is race.

Astonishingly, he seems to have no more ties to the city's black neighborhoods now than he had when he ran for office in 1993. His efforts to meet with established black leaders such as Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields have come only sporadically — and then usually in the face of a crisis. He has few blacks in his inner circle.

I know more than a few African-Americans who write Giuliani off as a simple racist — case closed. Meanwhile, his knee-jerk and gratuitous defense of errant police officers has earned the mayor broad enmity in the city's black and Latino neighborhoods.

It all adds up to a paradox: Although the mayor's many reforms leave an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers better off than before, the city is still deeply divided — usually along racial lines — about his legacy. His success is oddly marred.

Did he have to do it this way? No. In the old days, City Hall had a bad habit of trying to buy off racial demagogues. To his credit, Giuliani put a stop to that. But it's one thing to refuse a meeting with the likes of the Rev. Al Sharpton. It's quite another thing to shut out people like Fields. Giuliani failed to draw crucial distinctions.

"He was not a politician," says Fred Siegel of the Progressive Policy Institute, a strong Giuliani admirer. "He governed as a guy with an agenda — not as a politician."

That sounds about right. In an age when most elected officials are poll-driven, carefully scripted, smiley-face robots, Giuliani's go-to-hell, bully-boy approach to governance is well worth studying. But imitators must beware of the downside.

In Giuliani's case, he often let his strongest asset — his us-against-them absolutism — turn into his ughest drawback. Blacks never did care for him — not after he knocked Dinkins out of Gracie Mansion in 1993. But most politicians in a similar situation would have set about to convert them after the election was over. Giuliani wound up ignoring them — to his detriment and to the city's detriment.

But let's get real. I don't think anyone can turn into a Giuliani through study. On his good days, the man could seem half crazy. On his bad days, you just wanted to run and hide. He was the best mayor the city has seen since LaGuardia, except on those days when he was perhaps the worst.

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