

## NEW YORK CITY AND THE NEW DEAL

### Session One | The Old New Deal

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The scenario is not altogether unfamiliar to us. Americans in the late 1920s began to dream of having achieved a plateau of permanent prosperity and material comfort only to find their dreams dashed as the 1930s Depression confronted the United States with an economic catastrophe of surpassing proportions. New York City was thrown into fiscal turmoil as Depression introduced New Yorkers to bank failures, industrial meltdown, curbside apple sellers, breadlines-- what Heywood Brown called the "worm that walks like a man" -- and a fog of hopelessness. So deep was the gloom, the sense of worse times impending, that working people applied for assistance *in anticipation* of unemployment. "I wish there were war again," a jobless worker told Louis Adamic. And natives from the Cameroons sent a contribution of \$3.77 to feed "the starving" of New York.<sup>1</sup>

The city budget fell into deep arrears. Jimmy Walker's insouciant minimalist government had been a hoot in the twenties when New Yorkers rejoiced in their stylish, playboy mayor. But bad times demanded more than a style of governing pitched to *laissez faire*, good times, and low taxes. The mayor was forced to go hat in hand to the bankers, who in return for staving off bankruptcy demanded control over Gotham's municipal pocketbook, taking first dibs on all tax receipts. Clearly the city was going to be able pay back its loans; left unclear, however, was how the city would be able to continue to operate.<sup>2</sup>

City governments are not remade in good times. It is hard to make the case for reform when jobs abound and the people feel confident and secure. In 1929, months before the crash, Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia ran for Mayor after a career as an outspoken critic of unregulated profit motive-economics and pinchpenny social policy. He lost by the largest margins in the City's history. LaGuardia's insistence on reform threatened to make a serious thing of government, and in 1929 New Yorkers still preferred Beau James and good times.<sup>3</sup>

In that year New York's 300 plus square miles represented perhaps the most densely packed and complexly divided landscape in the world. Commerce, industry, and a surging residential population kept expanding the city in titanic proportions. The 56 story Chanin Building and the 77 story Chrysler, both completed in 1929, prepared the midtown skyline for the 102 story Empire State. These soaring office towers had profoundly public effects, but their developers were assigned no larger responsibility for the congestion and safety issues raised by colossal construction, than meeting minimal zoning requirements.

Undisciplined construction was just one symbol of New York's unguided growth, of a metropolis lacking the municipal will and intelligence to direct its own development. What planning did take place came from the privately funded Regional Plan Association of New York.<sup>4</sup> Between 1929 and 1931 the

RPA published a ten volume "Plan for the New York Region and Its Environs," outlining a comprehensive policy to protect harbors, zone industrial use, organize regional transportation, and expand New York's recreational and cultural spaces. With the city perilously close to fiscal collapse such expansion seemed audacious beyond belief. Moreover, such a task demanded a sure political hand and a generous conception of public responsibility, and all New York had was Jimmy Walker and his band of thieving Aldermen.

The crashing stock market shattered the devil-may-care world of ragtime prosperity, and Samuel Seabury's shocking disclosures of systematic municipal corruption revealed just how thoroughly the bosses had undermined the city. Tammany's band of bungling grafters had sacked the municipality they had been pledged to serve. Now New York was ready for the progressive Fusion mayoralty of Fiorello La Guardia.<sup>5</sup>

La Guardia inherited a crippled, humbled city. Bankers controlled its budget, the unemployed numbered upwards of 230,000; one in six New Yorkers subsisted on relief. "I am," La Guardia 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. Refusing to succumb to small enthusiasms, he insisted on a broad agenda for promoting a humane, efficiently governed and modernized metropolis. But when the newly elected mayor came to Washington seeking funds, Interior Secretary Harold Ickes told him: "Go home and balance your budget, your credit is no good."<sup>9</sup>

Over the next one hundred days La Guardia won the admiration of Ickes and the entire administration. Creating his own New Deal, he pushed through an Economy Bill, placing the city on the road to financial stability, established a humane relief policy, launched a wide ranging attack on corruption, and expanded the merit basis of the civil service.

Then La Guardia turned to his ambitious program for molding a modern new infrastructure appropriate to the needs of a world class metropolis. La Guardia brought a capacious urban vision to City Hall. He understood city's need to accommodate the growing needs of its population. He had thought deeply about the trade-offs that such growth required: making choices between freedom and safety, between cost and necessity, and ultimately between what makes city life more secure and what allows it soar with unscripted possibility. A city plan, he understood, must design for the future without trampling the legitimate expectations of those who lived in the present. Planning of this sort would involve more government than had ever been imagined, but it also promised to surmount the irregular and corrupt public initiatives that had sullied previous efforts at comprehensive city development.

But he also understood that the age of the self sufficient, wholly independent city had passed. New York could not pay for relief, social services *and* new parks and bridges. The money had to come from the federal experiments in pump priming and social welfare assistance. He assembled engineers, architects and building experts, telling them: "I want help from the people who know something rather than from the politicians." And from this prolific idea shop came new proposals for subways, bridges and airports, for slum clearance and street repair, and for public housing. Each project was carefully detailed with a realistic price tag and plan for the generous use of relief labor.<sup>10</sup>

In Chicago, Detroit and San Francisco federal projects were twisted into useless boondogles. So completely did Massachusetts State Treasurer Charles Hurely control Boston's CWA, that the press referred to CWA as Charlie's Workers Administration. La Guardia's administration was different. He had thought seriously about the city and his administrators brought to the task of reform a sense of urgency. When Travis Whitney, working at a furious pace to find work for tens of thousands of jobless, collapsed at his desk, an admiring Heywood Broun wrote simply: "Killed in action."<sup>11</sup> Here was a city in which the New Deal could place its confidence to showcase its urban and social initiatives.

Within weeks, LaGuardia brought home an allotment of 200,000 federally funded jobs, 20 per cent of the entire CWA program. These workers were assigned to 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.<sup>12</sup>

It was the thirties, tough depressed times, when most mayors were begging their governors for increases in their relief budgets, and here was La Guardia unfolding a program for a colossal new infrastructure paid for by the president. He assigned to Robert Moses the primary responsibility for building.<sup>14</sup> In a single year, the hardbitten taskmaster, famed as New York's master builder, poured 26 million federal dollars into the city parks, increasing their number by a third.<sup>15</sup> He also completed the plans for a complex of four bridges linking together Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens, as well as two East River islands. Years before the federal government had shut down funding for this \$50 million dollar Triborough project when it fell into Tammany's hands, but Moses got it started again, adding new parkways, the East River Drive, and new recreation areas on Ward's and Randall's islands. By the end of La Guardia's first administration the New Deal had funneled more than \$1 billion into NYC.<sup>17</sup>

[None of the thousands of federal projects promised broader results than the movement to clear the slums and replace them with subsidized housing. To say today that New York was a pioneer in public housing recalls little of the boldness and passion that went into this program and how high were the hopes that this reform would improve the quality of life in the city. Subsidized housing would not only provide affordable worker housing but it would provide them with sunlight and fresh air and reduce crime, uplift the poor and wipe out disease. While the federally underwritten program never lived up to these hopes, First Houses, Williamsburg Houses and Harlem Houses did place more than 1,200 poor families in new accommodations, sparking a nationwide federal housing initiative.]<sup>18</sup>

Walter Lippmann once said that LaGuardia took the human sympathy that had been the abiding strength of Tammany and infused it into the tradition of good government. This uncommon combination of personal and governmental skills, what Max Weber has called the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction, he used to convert bad times into New York's golden age of renewal. It was not just that he managed relief, slashed crime, eliminated corruption and installed a non-partisan civil service, he also got the city out from under the thumb of the state, and with Washington's help, erected a new urban infrastructure, thrusting his city's needs to the center of the New Deal recovery policies.

Newbold Morris one sat next to La Guardia at a Radio City musical performance. "See," he pointed toward the organist, "that's how our city must be run... You must keep both hands on the

keyboard and both feet on the pedals and never let go." In 1941, after having worked closely with his fire commissioner for seven years and witnessing 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 said. 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 committed hara kiri after being tardy for a public function. "That," penciled in the mayor, is what I call class."

He thrived on the theatrical gesture, reading the comics, donning 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, 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.

He had a broad sympathy for New York's marginal populations and shared the hurt and pain of common New Yorkers. It was Yale University that commended him for taking democracy from the politicians and restoring it to the people. He knew no friend when the public interest was to be served. He wanted New Yorkers to be happy, to enjoy a sense of ease and security, to live in decent quarters and raise healthy children and he was not diffident about instructing them to be good as well. He declared unrelenting war on gamblers, closed the burlesques, cleared adult magazines from the newsstands (under his powers of "garbage collection") and endlessly preached the virtues of traditional values. He attracted to city government some of the best men and women of his time. And he imparted to them his love for the city and its people. New York he liked to say was a city of "huge spaces that are too small and of millions of people who are really big."

New York's New Deal was framed in the Depression, but it refused to limit itself to a program for emergency recovery. It represented a bold agenda for reform, for a new relationship between the city and its citizens, between the city and its future. But what La Guardia failed to do was to consider sufficiently the shifting foundations of federal policy. New York's new infrastructure testified to its mayor's ability to bargain, and bargain better than any other mayor, on behalf of his city. But the new projects were built in unusual times and La Guardia failed to think hard enough about what Washington had in mind for the post-Depression era.<sup>27</sup> He readied detailed plans for a post war program of \$1.25 billion in federally funded public improvements but even he understood that those days were over. In the end 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.<sup>28</sup> Progressive government was expensive and La Guardia was not candid about how expensive it was. He was forced to rely on fiscal tricks to balance the budget and when he left office he left behind a growing deficit. That and his inability to give the tradition of non partisan progressive government a firm basis for the future represent his largest failures.

But this must not obscure the achievement of these years. In the midst of a Depression New York City transformed itself. Before, the city had been a congeries of antiquated boroughs, divided into political fiefdoms, a city haphazardly administered, with skimpy social and health services, decaying parks, rusting bridges; a city in thrall to graft. La Guardia's New Deal 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 air ports. For the first time, New York offered its poor public housing, its working class a unified transit system, and special training and subsidies for its artists and musicians. To a depression wracked population this progressive government provided relief in heroic proportions, and fastened upon the city a sense of civic responsibility for the future. "A mayor who cannot look 50 or 75 years into the future," he would say "is not worthy of being in city hall."

1. Edward R. Ellis, Epic of New York City (N.Y.: Coward McCann, 1966), 524; Gene Fowler, Beau James: The Life and Times of Jimmy Walker (N.Y.: Viking, 1949), 256-259; George Walsh, Gentleman Jimmy Walker: Mayor of the Jazz Age (N.Y.: Praeger, 1974) 210, 214; Robert A. Caro, The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York (N.Y.: Vintage, 1974), 323; Lillian Brandt, An Impressionistic View of the Winter of 1930-31 in New York City (N.Y.: Welfare Council of NYC, 1932), 6-8; New York Times, November 28, 1930; Irving Bernstein, The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 293-295.
2. Fusion Handbook (N.Y.: LaGuardia Campaign Headquarters, 1933), 26; New York Times, June 12, September 1, 29, October 4, November 16, 1933, January 25, 1934; Leonard Chalmers, "The Crucial Test of La Guardia's First One Hundred Days: The Emergency Economy Bill," New York Historical Society Quarterly 57 (1973): 239-40.
3. Lowell Limpus and Burr W. Leyson, This Man LaGuardia (N.Y.: E. P. Dutton, 1938), 291-292, 295; Howard Zinn, LaGuardia in Congress (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1959), 174; Arthur Mann, La Guardia: A Fighter Against His Times, 1882-1933 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1959), 278; Thomas Kessner, Fiorello H. LaGuardia And the Making of Modern New York (N.Y.: McGraw Hill, 1989), 159- 164.
4. *Ibid.*, 199-209; Frederick Shaw, The History of the New York City Legislature (N.Y.: Columbia U. Press, 1954), 78,31. On the Regional Plan see the article by Robert Fishman in this volume.
5. On the Seabury investigation see Herbert Mitgang, The Man who Rode the Tiger: The Life and Times of Judge Samuel Seabury (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1963), 219-243.
6. Kessner, LaGuardia And Modern New York, 209-232.
7. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (N.Y.: Oxford U. Press, 1946), 115.
8. Mark I. Gelfand, A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965 (N.Y.: Oxford U. Press, 1975), 28; Adolf A. Berle, Jr. to Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 9, 1934, FDR Library, Hyde Park.
9. Harold Ickes, The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes, Vol.1 (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 126; Chalmers, "Crucial Test of La Guardia's Economy Bill," 239-40.
10. New York World Telegram, November 29, 1933; New York Times, November 30, 1933.
11. Ellis, Nation in Torment, 500; N.Y. Times, November 23, 1933.
12. Barbara Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View From New York City (Lewisburg: Bucknell U. Press, 1979), 32; Joseph Verdicchio, "New Deal Work Relief and New York City: 1933- 1938," (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1980), 104, 115- 117; Roger Biles, Big City Boss in Depression and War (DeKalb: Northern Illinois U. Press, 1984), 77; Charles Trout, Boston, the Great Depression and the New Deal (N.Y.: Oxford U. Press, 1977), 148-151; N.Y. Times, April 21, 1936.
13. Bernard Fay quoted in Bayrd Still Mirror for Gotham: New York as Seen by Contemporaries from Dutch Days to the Present (N.Y.: New York University Press, 1956), 297; N.Y. Times, November 30, 1933; August Heckscher, When LaGuardia Was Mayor: New York's Legendary Years (N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978), 68.
14. Caro, The Power Broker, 358.
15. Kessner, LaGuardia And Modern New York, 300-309.
16. *Ibid.*, 306-319.
17. Albany Times Union, June 28, 1935; N.Y. Times, October 29, 1940.
18. Peter Marcuse, "Public Housing in the United States in the 1930s: The Case in New York City" (paper delivered before Conference on Public Housing in New York, Columbia U., October 12-14, 1984; Langdon Post, "Memorandum on a Comprehensive Housing Program," January 18, 1935, New York Housing Authority Papers, La Guardia Archives; New York Daily News, November 28, 1933.
19. Langdon Post, "Memorandum on a Comprehensive Housing Program," January 18, 1935; L. Post to FDR January 21, 1935, NYCHA Papers, LaGuardia Archives.
20. Nathan Straus, "Low Cost Housing Here and Abroad, Report to Mayor LaGuardia," NYCHA Papers, LaGuardia Archives.21. N.Y. Times, October 21, 1935.
22. Kessner, LaGuardia And Modern New York, 430-431.
23. Robert Moses to Fiorello La Guardia, August 29, 1938, La Guardia Papers, Box 35, New York Municipal Archives; Moses to Alfred Rheinsein, November 18, 22, 1938, July 1, 7, September 18, 1939, NYCHA Papers, LaGuardia Archives.

24. Caro, Power Broker, 611-612; N.Y. Times, November 24, 25, 1938, June 24, 1939.

25. Kessner, La Guardia And Modern New York, 404-406, 554; Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman, Governing New York City (N.Y.: Russel Sage Foundation, 1960), 372. My view of the relationship between Moses and LaGuardia is in La Guardia And Modern New York, 316-319, 411-415, 428, 452-459; but Caro's own Power Broker is proof enough. After explaining in dramatic fashion that Moses had made LaGuardia understand that he was his equal (this conclusion is rather perversely offered after Moses loses his fight to build a Brooklyn Battery Bridge), Caro cannot prove his assertion of Moses' dominance and is reduced to changing the topic with a little scandal mongering about Moses' relationship with his brother and his wife. Indeed, this leaves a serious gap in the book' narrative account of Moses' career. Despite its more than 1200 pages, Caro can find little evidence of of major accomplishment (except for some evidence of Moses' spite work) for the years between 1938 and 1945, when LaGuardia capped Moses' urge for power. Caro, Power Broker, 577-688.

27. Kessner, LaGuardia And Modern New York, 554-555.

28. Oakland Daily News, November 4, 1937.

29. "New York Opens its Post War Exhibit," The American City (May, 1944): 5; Fiorello LaGuardia, "Vast Public Works Program Essential to Full Time Production," The American City (September, 1945): 101; N.Y. Times, December 20, 1940. See also LaGuardia to FDR, February 9, 1943, LaGuardia Papers, NY Municipal Archives; FDR to LaGuardia, September 23, 1945, FDR Papers, Hyde Park; Henry A. Wallace to LaGuardia, August 16, 1944, Wallace Papers, Hyde Park.

30. Citizens Budget Commission Annual Report (1945): 9; Rexford G. Tugwell, The Art of Politics as Practiced by Three Great Americans: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Luis Munoz Marin, and Fiorello H. LaGuardia (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), 28-30.