

Giuliani and LaGuardia: Pickles and Pasta

By Tom Angotti

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani likes to invoke what he calls the “indomitable spirit” of Fiorello LaGuardia.^[1] But if you go beyond appearances the two New York mayors are as far apart politically as Lenin and the Tsar. Both are feisty personas – bullies, if you will. But LaGuardia bullied the powerful and Giuliani bullies the powerless. Historians may one day conclude that Mayor Giuliani, an aficionado of theatre and opera, did a LaGuardia imitation during his two terms at City Hall. He appears to be as enamored of that role as he is of the Godfather, who he celebrates annually in a sybaritic retreat with his buddies. Rudy erupts in giggles when dressed in drag, so imagine the soulful pleasure he gets from harboring the homeless spirit of the Flower.

Comparing Fiorello and Rudy was Rudy’s idea, not mine. Such comparisons are always dubious, and I intend to show that this is no exception. Mayors are products of the times; they can’t magically transcend history and the politics of the era that breeds them. It is difficult to imagine anyone with Giuliani’s politics as mayor of New York City in the 1930s. And we can only speculate what Fiorello would have done if he were mayor in the 1990s. But let’s look at what happens when we put Giuliani up against LaGuardia.

Populism and Politics

In politics, LaGuardia and Giuliani are as different as *pasta* and *pickles*. Both are populists of a sort, but populism is a vague term that obscures real politics. In general, LaGuardia was a left liberal and sometime radical. Giuliani is a moderate but consistent conservative.

- LaGuardia was a New Dealer before, during and after the New Deal; he believed government should help poor and working people; he and the Democrats expanded social welfare. Giuliani is an advocate of privatization and Republican principles of individual responsibility; he and the Republicans cut welfare.
- LaGuardia was a strong advocate for freedom of expression and assembly, and labor and civil rights. Giuliani has earned the enmity of minority, civil rights and civil liberties groups.
- LaGuardia was a member of the left wing of the American Labor Party and was supported at different times by a wide array of political forces ranging from Communists to Republicans. Giuliani shifted early in his career from Democrat to Republican and never sought or received the support of the left. While LaGuardia was constantly redbaited, who would accuse Giuliani of even *thinking* pink?

Let’s get more specific. Here are the differences between the two mayors on social policy, First Amendment freedoms, race, labor, immigrants and their own life styles.

Social Policy: Activism vs. Cutbacks

Mayor LaGuardia advocated and implemented the New Deal reforms of the 1930s. As a Congressman in the 1920s, he promoted progressive social legislation. While Mayor, he was a close ally of President Franklin Roosevelt. And after leaving office he defended the New Deal when it came under attack during the emerging Cold War. For LaGuardia, relief for the poor, public services and public works projects financed by federal and local

government were the key elements in improving the quality of life for New Yorkers. During his administration, WPA projects put poor people to work and created high quality public spaces and services for average New Yorkers. Mayor Giuliani has aggressively implemented welfare “reform” that removed over 400,000 people from welfare rolls. The Mayor has cut City support for public services that poor neighborhoods rely on – health care, schools, mass transit, parks, and libraries – and even bulldozed some community gardens. His definition of “quality of life” applies to neighborhoods where three-piece suits and Starbucks prevail – the bourgeois dream of never having to encounter a poor person.

First Amendment Freedoms: The Bill of Rights vs. the Nightstick

Mayor LaGuardia faced stiff criticism on many occasions for the restraints he placed on the police in their dealings with demonstrators and striking workers. His strong feelings on the rights of free speech and assembly are revealed in a statement from LaGuardia’s first Police Commissioner John O’Ryan, as quoted in August Hecksher’s biography of the mayor: “The mayor told me he felt very strongly as to the right of assemblage and the right of speech, and that technical deficiencies in permits should not be a reason for breaking up demonstrations.” (O’Ryan soon resigned due to his differences with the mayor on police restraint). Even when LaGuardia’s administration was the target of pickets, he refused to allow police to harass them.

Mayor Giuliani has let his police use every technicality in the book to thwart protest. *The New York Times* (11/19/98) editorialized: “People who hold views unpopular with Mayor Giuliani and has administration routinely have to go to court to win the right to hold marches in New York City.” Federal judges recently found that the Administration routinely delays approval of permits for demonstrations by groups out of favor with City Hall. In October of last year, a peaceful vigil to commemorate the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay man in Wyoming, was attacked by police because the unexpectedly large crowd stepped over the curb from the sidewalk into the street – a technical infraction.

Contrast the Mayor’s swift reaction to this technical violation to his own unpunished contribution to a police riot in 1992. Giuliani’s rhetoric egged on a crowd of cops demonstrating at City Hall against a proposal by former Mayor David Dinkins, the city’s first African American mayor, to create an independent board to review charges of police misconduct. A large section of the demonstrators, including officers who were drunk and shouting racial slurs, illegally blocked and marched over the Brooklyn Bridge, halting traffic for hours – no mere technical violation.

Giuliani’s twisted philosophy on freedom is revealed in his statement that, “Freedom is about authority. Freedom is about the willingness of every single human being to cede to lawful authority a great deal of discretion about what you do and how you do it.” (*New York Newsday* 4/20/98) His definition of freedom applies to government information. The Mayor has been the target of lawsuits by civic organizations, the State Comptroller, and the Public Advocate seeking the release of the kind of information previously available to the public. He routinely muzzles city employees who don’t salute the Giuliani flag. According to newsman Gabe Pressman, “Never

in my nearly five decades on the front lines have there been so many obstacles placed in our path.” (*The New York Times* 5/31/98)

Race: Tolerance vs. Insensitivity

LaGuardia’s reaction to the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 is an indicator of his policies with respect to blacks. In both disturbances, LaGuardia became personally involved, went to Harlem and engaged community leaders in the city’s response. He ordered restraint by police, and in 1943 organized citizen patrols from within the community to supplement the police force there. He was criticized by a Brooklyn grand jury for not sending in more police. After the 1935 uprising, he formed a biracial commission and in the years that followed saw that Harlem got a greater measure of public works (the Harlem River Houses were built, for example), integrated the city hospital staff, and appointed more blacks to positions in city government than ever before. LaGuardia’s administration received a good dose of criticism from Harlem’s leaders along with the praise, but he was always supported at election time.

Mayor Giuliani’s reputation among African Americans is the lowest of any recent New York mayor. He received 5% and 20% of the black vote in the two elections (he actually got fewer black votes the second time around, and fewer white votes as well, because of a big drop in voter turnout). The Mayor is booed from Harlem to Bedford-Stuyvesant for the increase in complaints of police brutality and misconduct. One gets the feeling that Giuliani’s “quality of life” equals a city with poor people and people of color in upstate prisons or anywhere else but New York. Referring to African Americans and Latinos, Giuliani told a *Washington Post* reporter, “they’re alive, aren’t they.” (*Nation* 9/29/97).

Mayor Giuliani sharply criticized Mayor Dinkins for restraining police during the Crown Heights riots and sent an army of police to occupy Harlem during the peaceful “Million Man March” of 1998. According to *NY Times* columnist Bob Herbert, the Mayor “abused the power of his office by turning a large section of Harlem into a police encampment. By doing that he humiliated thousands of perfectly peaceful and law-abiding residents whose only offense was that they are black.... Rudolph Giuliani would never, but *never*, treat an entire neighborhood of white people the way he treated the people in the vicinity of Lenox Avenue” (*NY Times*, 9/7/98)

Labor: Partnership vs. Dealing

LaGuardia was an advocate of strong unions and strong government. In Congress he backed labor laws and was supported by the CIO, a militant labor organization. He defended the right to organize even when he sat across the bargaining table from unions. Before he was mayor he served as *pro bono* counsel to the Garment Workers Union and opposed the jailing of radical unionists Niccolo Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In a 1934 taxi strike, LaGuardia rebuked taxi owners and refused to let the police ban picketing and demonstrations.

Giuliani is an advocate of bland unionism and privatization, which would weaken wage and job protections. He got the support of District Council 37, the main municipal workers union, whose leadership has never been called militant and has now been ousted by its parent federation amid charges of corruption. DC37’s

leadership committed vote fraud to gain approval from members of the sweetheart contract negotiated with Giuliani. The contract tolerated a pay freeze and huge cuts in the municipal labor force through attrition and buyouts. Though Rudy hasn't been successful in selling off any hospitals or other major public works, his authoritarian approach to management discourages strong government and readies it for the kill.

Immigrants: Defending the Marginalized vs. Marginalizing the Unassimilated

Mayor LaGuardia was from a recent immigrant group (Italians) that was marginalized by the Irish-run Tammany Hall. His political rise represented empowerment for the unrepresented new immigrants of southern and eastern Europe. His social welfare policies benefited the poorest New Yorkers, who tended to be recent immigrants. Much is made of LaGuardia's campaign to ban organ grinders and street vendors – mostly immigrants – but often overlooked are the social policies that boosted all poor immigrants. LaGuardia opened the doors of City Hall to the marginalized foreigners while ushering out the mainstreamed foreigners of Tammany Hall. His ability to speak Italian, German, Croatian, French, Spanish and Yiddish no doubt helped.

Mayor Giuliani, however, is from an immigrant group now largely assimilated into the local power elite. He hasn't bowed to the worst of America's anti-immigrant hysteria, but his record is rather spotty. While a Justice Department attorney during the 1980s, Rudy was responsible for deporting poor undocumented Haitians. He claimed, rather incredibly, that they did not face political repression there. As Mayor, Giuliani's intolerance towards striking taxi drivers and food vendors in Manhattan was interpreted as anti-immigrant because most of the workers are recent immigrants.

Life Style: Two Sides of the East Side

The Little Flower spent most of his New York years in comfortable but modest East Harlem quarters with his family. He campaigned hard without the benefit of big contributors. He made a conscious effort to avoid the ostentation of "Gentleman Jimmy Walker," his predecessor in City Hall. Like his good friend East Harlem Congressman Vito Marcantonio, LaGuardia died with practically no assets to pass on.

Rudy Giuliani long ago left his humble Brooklyn abode and is at home in the Upper East Side, arguably the richest neighborhood in the world. This "limousine conservative" has raised more money for his campaigns than any previous mayor, and raked in hefty contributions from developers and businessmen. In the last election, his average campaign contribution was \$1,122 compared to \$147 for his opponent Ruth Messinger. His love for the Yankees is vented from box seats not bleachers, and he's willing to tax the public so the Yanks can have a new stadium with luxury suites for wealthy fans.

What about Fascism?

Mayor Giuliani, citing prejudice against Italian-Americans, is quick to denounce those who call him the Mussolini of Manhattan and Adolph Giuliani. He may be right about some of the criticism. Because LaGuardia and Giuliani are both diminutive in stature and explosive in nature, they both get stereotyped as Mussolinis. Not

everything that's undemocratic is fascist, most fascists aren't Italians, and fascism is no more popular among Italians than other groups. Nor are most Italians necessarily rightward leaning. For every right-winger like Al D'Amato and Rudy Giuliani there's a liberal like Mario Cuomo and Geraldine Ferraro.

Let's look at LaGuardia's record on fascism. He was an early and consistent opponent of Nazism and Italian fascism, a *partigiano* in spirit. Long before it was popular, he denounced Mussolini as a dictator. In the 1930s LaGuardia was supported at different times by socialists and communists because of his anti-fascist and pro-labor credentials. After World War II, LaGuardia opposed support by the U.S. government of high-ranking fascist officials in Germany and Italy who were quick to join the U.S.-led Cold War bandwagon.

But Rudy has a weird relation to that nastiest of political "f—" words. Why is it, we have to wonder, he can't shake the "fascist" epithet? Could it have something to do with his protection of cops accused of brutal tactics and breaches of constitutional freedoms of speech and assembly? Or his tight control over government information? After all, these are hardly traits of open democratic rule. Could it be the similarity of the coalition he has forged with pliable businesses and unions to fascist corporatism?

Or does it have more to do with his racial policies? After all, if there is anything akin to fascism in the American experience it is 200 years of slavery and 100 years of Jim Crow. In any case, fascism is systematic and institutional. It can't be established in one city. The readiness of many to brand Giuliani a fascist stems in part from the equation of fascism with Italians. Despite his vocal anti-fascism, LaGuardia, incredibly, was also branded a fascist.

But Rudolph Giuliani is part of a national party that plays to the undemocratic, fascist tendencies in American politics – racism, restriction of First Amendment rights, and growth of the police and prison-industrial complex. He is hopping around the country looking for Republican support for higher office. This friend of Ken Starr could very well prosecute his cause in the Senate or in a future Republican Cabinet. New York's own Pat Robertson could practice his incivility in a national political arena increasingly dominated by kindred spirits. So it's important we understand the difference between an Italian-American branded a fascist because his personality fits a stereotype, and an Italian-American branded a fascist because he follows anti-democratic, fascist politics. LaGuardia and Giuliani? Do sour pickles go with pasta fazool?

[\[1\]](#) Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of New York City from 1932 to 1944.