

The Ghost of LaGuardia Versus the Shadow of Dewey

ROBERT BENDINER

NEW YORK's mayoralty campaign, it is probably safe to say, has roused the city to a pitch of indifference unmatched since the last six-day bicycle race. Apart from party professionals and hopeful job seekers, people may favor this or that contender for the tenancy of Gracie Mansion, but there is in their choices neither the ring of conviction nor the joy of battle. Campaign funds are low, volunteer workers are generally scarce, and thin crowds, listening to thinner speeches, have little trouble keeping their enthusiasm well this side of passion.

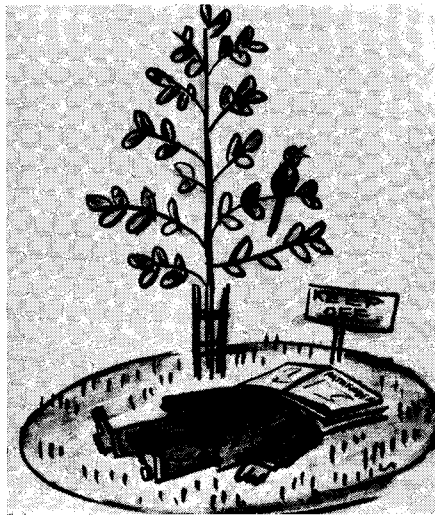
The first proof of the city's lack of fanaticism on the subject came in September, when the vote of sixteen per cent of New York's enrolled Democrats proved enough to give Robert Wagner, Jr., a two-to-one victory over his arch-rival, the Honorable Vincent R. Impellitteri. Three-quarters of the party's two million enrolled voters found more absorbing matters to attract them on Primary Day than checking off a preference at the polls. Registration figures show that this same apathy, the dread disease of politics, has infected the ranks of Republicans and Liberals as well.

Road-Company Cast

No amount of exhorting by civic leaders is likely to draw the citizens out of their lethargy, moreover, for the plain truth is that the campaign has offered them little in the way of conviction, personality, or imagination. Indeed, there is a dull, mechanical, and tired quality about the whole affair that suggests nothing so much as a second-rate stock company going through the motions of a stale and outmoded drama.

Consider first the cast. In the role

of LaGuardia we have Rudolph Halley, an estimable man, no doubt, but one who suffers by comparison with the original. Where Fiorello had volcanic energy, the showmanship of a Barnum, and color enough for ten candidates, Rudy has the brisk efficiency of a youthful and ambitious lawyer. Where the Little Flower inspired either devotion or passionate hatred, Halley inspires either cool admiration or a suspicion that he is nothing more than a young man on the make. Where LaGuardia came to the mayoralty



after years of fiercely independent whirlwind politics on the side of the underdog, Halley approaches it almost fresh from the highly lucrative practice of corporation law, interrupted only by his brief fling as a television prosecutor protected by the majesty of the United States Senate.

If Halley is still a wan reflection of the Great Dynamo, his opponents are even paler reflections of classic prototypes in the politics of New

York. Bob Wagner is regarded by all who know him as a sober, honest, convinced apostle of the New Deal. But, linked with a line of distinguished New York Democrats who combined liberalism with organization politics—Smith, Roosevelt, Lehman, and Wagner the Elder—he too is a victim of the comparison he invites. A “nice guy,” people say, but plodding, inspiring neither quotation nor dancing in the streets.

As the orthodox Democrat—in spite of a nominal independence based on feud rather than principle—Impellitteri has been a shadowy figure throughout his three years in City Hall, neither his sins nor his virtues having registered appreciably with the public. Those who have business with the Mayor generally find him amiable and courteous, but strangely out of touch with the city's problems. His technique is to pass such irritations along to his aides, a few of whom are competent, and then forget them once and for all. Typical of his airy approach was the attempt he made last year to save money and bother by turning over to the state the city's whole magnificent system of free colleges, a source of pride to New Yorkers for more than a century. When Councilman Stanley Isaacs, a Republican, reminded his colleagues that this would probably mean tuition fees of \$400 or so and would give his party a crushing campaign issue, the idea was dropped as casually as it had been proposed. As a mayor, the Citizens Union finds Mr. Impellitteri “totally inadequate.”

Perhaps alone among the candidates, Harold Riegelman, the Republican, lives up to the tradition of his predecessors. Except for a few mavericks like LaGuardia and New-

bold Morris, it is for the most part a gray tradition of sober unknowns who emerge in August, lose in November, and are comfortably bedded down in their respectable businesses again by the end of the year. Who remembers Waterman, Pound, Goldstein?

The Liberal Dilemma

If there is more to this year's quartet of major candidates than appears in their records, it has assuredly not emerged in a campaign compounded of pointless insults and hollow promises, with anything like a real issue rarely peeping above the surface. As nearly as the pained observer can make out, the real battle lines take on something like the following pattern:

The contest between Halley and Wagner is the main show. Only if they knock each other out has Riegelman a chance to climb in over their prostrate forms. Beneath the surface this fight revolves around the old dilemma of independent liberals concerning the Democratic Party: Should they support it locally in spite of its Sutherlands and Roes, for the sake of what it can achieve on the state and national level? Or should they at all costs retain their independence and freedom of movement?

The Wagner argument is that his election will strengthen the New Deal-Fair Deal wing of the party; that if Wagner wins, that wing will dominate the state organization in 1954 and play a key role at the Democratic Convention in 1956. It is for this reason, and not out of sentimental regard for his name, that Wagner has received the blessing of such New Deal luminaries as Truman, Stevenson, Lehman, Harriman, and Roosevelt, Jr. At the same time, Wagnerites contend that only by working from within can liberals and good-government devotees hope to clean the riffraff out of the party and rebuild it to their own desire, as they have done on a small scale in Philadelphia.

TO THIS LINE of thought, acceptable three years ago, the Liberal Party has turned extremely cool, to the degree that David Dubinsky, a New Dealer of unquestioned status, has unhappily fallen out with Mr. Tru-

man. The Liberals see no possibility of a Democratic housecleaning unless and until it is forced on the party bosses from the outside. They have no confidence that Wagner can rise above his ties with Tammany to achieve the feat. Halley points out that Wagner would not govern the city with Harrimans and Roosevelts, but with a ticket headed by Larry Gerosa, a Bronx contractor of limited political reputation. There is no doubt that Halley's ticket, headed by such men as Eugene Canudo and Chase Mellen, Jr., is of much higher caliber.

Not much of this debate is carried on in the open. It is thought rather



too esoteric for public consumption. In open skirmishing, Wagner asserts, with some evidence, that Halley himself had made soundings for the Democratic nomination and had in any case invited Wagner to run with him on a Liberal-Democratic coalition ticket.

To the state cio convention Wagner made the further point that "Until [Halley's] debut before the television cameras two years ago, he had no record of ever having heard of liberalism, of labor, of schools, and, in fairness, I must say they had never heard of him."

A Few Brickbats

In this strange four-way battle the skirmishing between Wagner and Halley is outdone in ferocity only by the exchanges both have had with the candidates of the Right. The Mayor set the pace early in his primary race with Wagner, when he revealed that Communism was "a menace right here in the campaign." Just how, His Honor didn't specify, but it is probably tied up with his expressed belief that both Halley and Wagner

are "just this side of socialism." His crushing defeat by Wagner he generally attributes to Liberal "infiltration" of the Democratic primary, but at an Italian street festival in honor of Saints Cosmas and Damian he blamed Communists, which at least suggests that Liberals and Communists are pretty much interchangeable in his mind.

It is no great credit to Wagner that he, in turn, propounded the laborious theory that the Communists were backing Impellitteri in the interest of weak government. The proof was that they were attacking the Mayor, hoping in this backhand way to win support for him.

BUT FOR a campaign of really consistent inanity, the prize would seem to belong to the conservative Mr. Riegelman. There is something about a political scrap that seems to bring out the demagogue in Republican lawyers of substance and repute. In this regard Riegelman seems to be following the precedent that John Foster Dulles set when he tried to beat Herbert Lehman for the Senate by proving that he was not too snobbish to do a little common rabble rousing.

Riegelman's line of attack—probably the only exotic touch in the campaign—is that those "leftist Siamese twins," Wagner and Halley, are willing puppets, "dangling from the vest-pockets" of two "labor czars" who are engaged in a sinister plot to take over the city. To quote a bit of the gibberish directly, it seems that David Dubinsky, president of the International Ladies Garment Workers, "now aspires through his stooge, Mr. Halley, to be the unquestioned boss of all the people of New York." At the same time, Mike Quill, who heads the Transport Workers Union, is "playing for the power to paralyze New York City, the capital and nerve center of the world," for which purpose he must have the pliant Wagner in City Hall.

One or the other of these dreadful schemes is sure-fire if only the plotters can shake off our hero, Harold Riegelman, a dashing real-estate lobbyist of sixty-one, and his "good government team." Let either Wagner or Halley win, and the loot will fall into the laps of the villains—transportation to Quill, the police and in-



spectional services to Dubinsky. This is the same Dubinsky, by the way, whom Republicans praise without let or hindrance in those years when their party runs a coalition ticket with the Liberals.

And Lots of Promises

Even though this same infantile stuff, in a somewhat modified form, is being offered in the Republican candidate's behalf by Governor Thomas E. Dewey, it is apparently not considered enough to sweep a grown electorate off its feet. Voters, it is believed, want some idea of what a prospective mayor plans to do when he gets to City Hall. In this department all contenders are striving to outdo each other with promises. But Mr. Riegelman's gift list has a dreamlike quality that sets it apart.

What the Republican contender calls his platform includes such items as the following: "safe, decent homes—sufficient to shelter all our people"; "schools where young America can be taught in uncrowded classrooms by teachers unhampered by a politically dominated Board of Education"; "subways where we can ride with some shred of self-respect and dignity; and not like uneasy cattle being transported in jolting, crowded pens"; and "the good salt air of this seaside city, unpolluted by disease-laden smoke, dusty and noxious gases."

All this and more would be ushered in by upright city officials with the courage to "reduce the intolerable burden of unjust taxes." For Mr. Riegelman plans to trim the budget so effectively that by the time his term expires, the city will be running for \$70 million less a year than it pays today. What is more, his social program, including low-cost

housing, would be achieved with the aid of a Republican City Council President, Henry Latham, who in Congress has habitually opposed "do-good" legislation in general and public housing in particular. The program would be enacted, moreover, without recourse to the principles of the welfare state, which Mr. Riegelman at frequent intervals shudderingly repudiates.

IN THE ART of promising, Candidates Wagner and Halley are not far behind their Republican rival. Like him, they pledge clean, safe streets and parks, more and better schools, a thriving waterfront free of racketeers, a crackdown on crime and corruption, along with more money for civil servants and recapture of the transit system from the Transit Authority. But they do not promise to deliver at quite the low prices offered by Riegelman. In fact, Wagner sees no chance of saving any money at present, and not more than \$21 million a year even in the future. By efficiency and by throwing "political bums" off the payroll, Halley thinks the job can be done for \$50 million less than it costs under the hapless Impellitteri. He and Wagner suggest making up the deficit by raising the real-estate tax to two and a half per cent, with Halley throwing in "concessions to the owners of small homes and moderate priced cooperative apartments."

The Secret Mayor

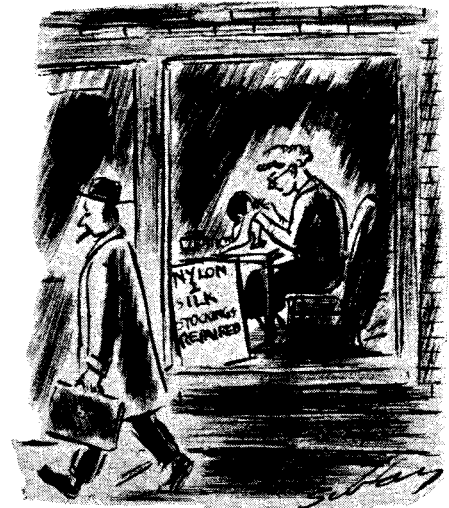
In the light of all these promises, why the city-wide shrug of indifference? Simply because they are not and cannot be taken seriously. New Yorkers have heard them all before, and it is beginning to dawn on them that even with the best of intentions, the candidates cannot make good on their pledges. For the truth is that the biggest city in the world, with a budget larger than that of any of the forty-eight states, is not governed from City Hall but from Albany. With all its economic power, its cultural attainments, its vast metropolitan complexity, the city is not deemed competent to manage its own affairs. Its real mayor is Governor Dewey; its real councilmen are state assemblymen from specks on the map like Osceola, Cranberry Lake, and Shinnecock

Hills. Its "home rule" charter is a pleasant fiction.

Take any of the promises at random. Could Mayor Halley really raise the real-estate tax? Of course not. The legislature has graciously consented to let the people vote on whether they want it raised from two to two and a half per cent, but it has already been decided at Albany that the city would get only half the increase in any case. And even if Mr. Halley could increase the levy, the state constitution would forbid the kind of "concessions" he has promised.

Mr. Riegelman may be carried away by dreams of dignity in the subways, but when he wakes up, he will recall that the subways have already been turned over to an independent Transit Authority, with New Yorkers given only the privilege of riding them and financing their capital expenditures. Mr. Wagner may earnestly wish to build more hospitals, rehabilitate the waterfront, and otherwise improve the life of New Yorkers. But without the power either to tax as the city government sees fit or to collect a fair share of state aid from Albany, his promises must evaporate at the first meeting on the budget.

New York's problem is the problem of every metropolitan area in the country. Better off than most big cities, it is nevertheless subservient to a rural state legislature in which its representation is held down by law. With eight million of the state's fifteen million people, it has less than half of the state's legislators. Since for obvious party



reasons even this minority delegation rarely votes en bloc, it is clear that the city can hardly expect to pull its weight at the Capitol.

Halley and Wagner are of course aware of the magnitude of the problem. No one could be around City Hall for a month and not be aware of it. Both charge that Impellitteri allowed Dewey to take him captive after a little shadow boxing. But what they would do in the same position is still vague. Wagner has pointed out how the city has been systematically mulcted of taxes that rightfully belong to it—especially on pari-mutuels, cigarettes, and gasoline. And Halley has pledged himself to “battle the Republican legislature and the Governor until the fight is won.” But neither has treated the relationship with Albany as the central issue it really is.

As a Republican, Mr. Riegelman slyly suggests that “the state will be far more disposed to be liberal to a city in whose administration it has confidence.” And as though to drive the point home, Governor Dewey has handed down the lordly judgment that none of Riegelman’s three rivals “has enough capacity or knowledge to run a peanut stand.” Riegelman apparently can count on crumbs from Albany, but Halley or Wagner would have to sit up and beg for them.

IT WOULD be extreme, of course, to argue that the mayoralty of New York has been stripped of all meaning, but there is no doubt that with demands on the city greater than ever before, much of its financial ability to meet them is gone. In the pre-LaGuardia days the social services expected were few and the standards of municipal government in most cities was unimpressive. LaGuardia himself was enormously helped by friendly Governors and by streams of Federal funds that no longer gush forth. But above all, Fiorello knew how to dramatize an issue, and to make noise until he got what he wanted.

Wagner and Halley have a first-class issue in Home Rule—Shadow or Substance? But New Yorkers won’t get excited about it until another LaGuardia comes along to put it across. He just doesn’t seem to have turned up in this campaign.



RIAS: The Voice East Germany Believes

EDMUND TAYLOR

RIAS, the U.S.-sponsored “Radio In the American Sector” of Berlin, is a curious mixture of the mysterious and the folksy. There is a beckoning hint of the ambiguous banality cherished by devotees of Eric Ambler in its austere, rather dilapidated, modernistic studios in a heavily bombed middle-class quarter of the city. Sometimes the hint becomes explicit. Leaving the building on a foggy night, for example, you are reminded by the doorman, without any special emphasis, to check the license plate of the taxi he has just ordered for you, and you sense that the shabby, furtive man with the pulled-down hat whom you pass on the way out may be either a top leader of the East German underground or a Communist spy posing as one.

On the other hand, the man is just as likely to be a returning war prisoner from Siberia who hopes that RIAS can locate his parents, a German hot-jazz addict who wants to discuss a request number, or the

secretary of a local boosters’ club that wants the RIAS band to play at a benefit. One minute you find yourself in the world of Eric Ambler and the next in that of Sinclair Lewis—and frequently the two worlds overlap. RIAS has successfully transplanted from Main Street a slightly Germanized version of the American civic-service tradition, and the station’s employees are almost as proud of its role as a community institution in west Berlin as they are of its record in fanning resistance behind the Iron Curtain.

PERHAPS because of this duality of function, RIAS men wear their cloaks and daggers with unusual nonchalance. I once asked a member of the station’s staff what they did when they had reason to believe one of their visitors from the East was a Communist spy.

“Well, if he’s doing something serious, like trying to photograph other visitors, we call the police,” the RIAS man answered. “Other-