City of Ambition:
Franklin Roosevelt, Fiorello La Guardia, and the
Making of New Deal New York

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Abstract

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This dissertation offers a new account of New York City’s politics and government in the 1930s and 1940s. Focusing on the development of the functions and capacities of the municipal state, it examines three sets of interrelated political changes: the triumph of “municipal reform” over the institutions and practices of the Tammany Hall political machine and its outer-borough counterparts; the incorporation of hundreds of thousands of new voters into the electorate and into urban political life more broadly; and the development of an ambitious and capacious public sector—what Joshua Freeman has recently described as a “social democratic polity.” It places these developments within the context of the national New Deal, showing how national officials, responding to the limitations of the American central state, utilized the planning and operational capacities of local governments to meet their own imperatives; and how national initiatives fed back into subnational politics, redrawing the bounds of what was possible in local government as well as altering the strength and orientation of local political organizations. The dissertation thus seeks not only to provide a more robust account of this crucial passage in the political history of America’s largest city, but also to shed new light on the history of the national New Deal—in particular, its relation to the urban social reform movements of the Progressive Era, the long-term effects of short-lived
programs such as work relief and price control, and the roles of federalism and localism in New Deal statecraft.
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List of Abbreviations Used in the Notes

FHL – Fiorello H. La Guardia
FDR – Franklin Delano Roosevelt
CCOHC – Columbia Center for Oral History Collection
FDRL – Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (Hyde Park, New York)
LC – Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress
MRL – New York City Department of Records, Municipal Reference Library
NA – National Archives II (College Park, Maryland)
NYMA – New York Municipal Archives
NYPL – Manuscripts and Archive Division, New York Public Library
OF – Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Papers, Official File
PPF – Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Papers, President’s Personal File
PSF – Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Papers, President’s Secretary’s File
SF – Fiorello H. La Guardia Mayoral Papers, Subject Files
NYHT – New York Herald Tribune
NYP – New York Post
NYT – New York Times
NYWT – New York World-Telegram
TNR – The New Republic
WP – Washington Post
   (New York, 1972)
CR – Congressional Record
AHR – American Historical Review
APSR – American Political Science Review
JAH – Journal of American History
SAPD – Studies in American Political Development

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Like all students of broadly familiar subjects, I owe my primary debt to other scholars who have worked on topics relevant to this study. In some instances I have drawn upon their interpretations (because I agree with them); in others, their work has made it possible for me to provide a deep context to the story I have told here. I am grateful to them all. I should like to say thank you especially to Thomas Kessner, author of what is presently the outstanding biography of Fiorello La Guardia, for his generosity and encouragement when I approached him out of the blue several years ago to ask if he thought this project worthwhile. He assured me that it was, and he pointed me toward some of the puzzles it has attempted to address.

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The published version of this study will contain a fuller – though still definitely inadequate – accounting of my personal debts. On this occasion I would like to recognize especially my paternal grandparents, Eugenia K. and the late Richard L. Williams. I dedicate this dissertation to them, my regret that neither will read it far outweighed by my indelible gratitude and love.
For Eugenia K. Williams and

in memory of the Honorable Richard L. Williams
The large freedom of action and broad scope of function given to local authorities is the distinguishing characteristic of the American system of government. Law is central, . . . and the command of the central legislature in each state; but function and executive power are local.

— Woodrow Wilson, 1889

In another few years, New York will have eight million people. It will do more than one-sixth of the business of all of the United States. As war tears the vitals out of the great cities of Asia and Europe, the countries of the world must look to New York as the center of progress, international culture, and advance. Maybe this ought not to be so; maybe the country ought to be centralized. But I know that is not happening.

You will see that New York has collectivized great masses of its enterprise. I am not arguing whether this is good or bad. I am merely pointing out that it must be so: eight million people crowded together do this automatically. . . .

New York’s relations with Washington will be even closer than New York’s relations with Albany. I don’t know whether this will be a good or a bad; but I know that it will be so.

— Adolf A. Berle, Jr., 1937

These men certainly had tremendous advantages, one working with the other to accomplish similar purposes.

— Reuben Lazarus, 1949

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1 Woodrow Wilson, *The State: Elements of Historical and Practical Politics* (Boston, 1889), 524.

2 Adolf A. Berle, Jr., “New York Today and Tomorrow” [Address over WEVD, Aug. 25, 1937], Berle Papers, Box 141, FDRL.

3 Reminiscences of Reuben Lazarus, CCOHC, 199.
Introduction

This dissertation examines a set of political changes in one American locality, New York City, from the onset of the Great Depression through the end of the Second World War – a period roughly coinciding with the mayoralty of Fiorello La Guardia – as those changes were shaped by policy innovation and political realignment at the national level of the American political system. Scholars of New York City’s political history have generally plotted the elements of this period of change along four axes: they have detailed the triumph of the institutions and practices of municipal reform over the Tammany Hall political machine; the incorporation of hundreds of thousands of new voters, mostly “new ethnics” and African Americans, into the city’s politics; the forging of direct federal-municipal relations and the beginnings of a federal urban policy; and

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the development of a more capacious and ambitious public sector, which some scholars have characterized as “social democracy in one city.”

These developments – the triumph of reform, the incorporation of “new ethnic” voters, the forging of intergovernmental relations, and the growth of the city’s public sector – were historically interconnected; and while they may usefully be separated for analytic purposes, any comprehensive account of political change in interwar New York must find some angle from which to make sense of the relationships between them. This study treats them through the vantage point of state-rebuilding – that is, by charting qualitative changes along several dimensions of “stateness” and examining how those changes reshaped the city’s politics and public life. One of these dimensions involves the content of governance, or the role government plays vis-à-vis its society and economy. A second involves the “complex of institutions and personnel” that make up the state – “the distinctive way[s]” in which it “performed its basic tasks of government.” (In Stephen Skowronek’s classic formulation, these encompass “the organizational orientations of government,” “the procedural routines that tie institutions together within a given organizational scheme,” and “the intellectual talents employed in governing.”) A third pertains to the state’s cultural presence in political and social life: “[t]o what extent have individuals generalized the concept and cognition of state in their perceptions and actions, and to what extent are such cognitions salient?”


5 E.g., Ira Katznelson and Bruce Pietsykowski “Rebuilding the American State: Evidence from the 1940s,” S. A. P. D., Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), 301-302 and passim.

sharp changes along each of these dimensions, together constituting a reconstruction of political authority in the city.\textsuperscript{7}

The study’s title, borrowed and adapted from Alfred Stieglitz’s famous photograph of the lower Manhattan skyline, suggests its principal subject. New York in Depression and war was a city of decidedly public ambitions: if Stieglitz’s skyscrapers captured the ebullient commercialism of the early twentieth century, the New York of the Thirties and Forties was, as one of its native sons has recalled it, a city of “libraries and parks.”\textsuperscript{8} It was also a city of municipal markets and public radio, of neighborhood health clinics and free adult education classes, of model housing, of bridges and tunnels and airports intended to integrate the five boroughs and to link the city to the metropolitan region and the wider world. The La Guardia administration, in short, expanded the city government’s capacity (and to a lesser degree its authority) as an agent of public investment. It invested in fixed capital – in the form of roads, bridges, tunnels, airports, schools, and other public facilities which put in place a physical infrastructure within which commerce in the city could thrive and the interdependent processes of urban enterprise function efficiently. It also expanded the provision of public goods and services, envisioning these programs as means of lifting or mitigating constraints which impeded the happiness of individuals, families, and communities as they went about their lives – constraints such as unemployment, poverty, high prices, poor health, inadequate housing, a shortage of educational and recreational opportunities, and a stifling urban environment. These too were investments in the sense that their advocates expected them

\textsuperscript{7} J. P. Nettl, “The State as a Conceptual Variable,” \textit{World Politics}, Vol. 20, No. 4 (July, 1968), 566.

\textsuperscript{8} Nathan Glazer, \textit{From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture’s Encounter with the American City} (Princeton, 2007), 224.
to produce returns in the form of lower fire, police, and corrections expenditures and a healthier, better educated, and perhaps even happier population.

The two faces of this local public investment state—its “capital investment” face and its “goods and services” face—sprung from different sources. The former grew out of businessmen’s efforts to build property values and facilitate the accumulation of capital; the latter was primarily a product of social reformers’ efforts to render urban society more humane by taming unfettered markets. But they were linked ideologically by the core belief that government should act as the mechanism by which the great productive energies and scientific and technological advantages of the age could be channeled to produce social progress. They were linked operationally by their self-conscious reliance on the public sector as an agent for the production of wealth. In this way, each reflected the distinctive Depression-era impulse to use state bureaucratic authority as a technology of public action.

The dissertation’s subtitle suggests its primary thesis. Though built on Progressive-era ideas, proposals, and in some cases state authorities, Depression-era state-building was rendered possible by concurrent developments at the national level of the American government. Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress, by pursuing creatively their own objectives within the structures of the American federal order, made possible a kind of local governmental power that had previously been impossible. These national actors first pursued the paramount objective of reemployment through national efforts to stabilize financial institutions, by changes in monetary policy,

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and through microeconomic management of industry and agriculture. These efforts facilitated strong economic expansion, but they did not reduce joblessness to a politically acceptable level. Confronting what would now be called a “jobless recovery,” Roosevelt and the Congress built a remarkably extensive public employment program upon the capacities of America’s local governments, traditionally the “producers” in the American federal system, an instance of “strength borrowing” which essentially doubled the resources available to local governments. Later, during the Second World War, the federal government pursued fair employment, war procurement, and price control policies which, though not intergovernmental by design, fed back into urban politics in ways which expanded the possibilities of local governmental action.

We tend to think of American federalism as a zero-sum game: power asserted by the federal government comes at the expense of state and local authority; power devolved to those governments “closest to the people” must be surrendered by Washington. In this reading, the expansion of central-state power during Roosevelt’s presidency wrought a diminishment of “local government’s role” in the American federal polity. But New York’s experience during the New Deal points in precisely the opposite direction: by pairing “federal legal and fiscal resources” with “local operational capacity” the New Deal intergovernmental programs enabled local governmental action rather than displacing it. By injecting resources into local governments as a way of realizing

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11 C.f. Paul Manna, *School’s In: Federalism and the National Education Agenda* (Washington, 2006), whose model of intergovernmental “strength borrowing” accords well with the descriptive account offered in this study.


national objectives, the New Dealers made possible a remarkable burst of capital investment; they also allowed local officials to undertake scores of projects, most of them with origins in the various urban reform initiatives of the Progressive era, which aimed to use the public sector as an instrument for improving the quality of urban life.

These bursts of government activity linked New Yorkers to the local state in new ways. In so doing, they made it possible for the reform-oriented political entrepreneurs who came to power following the election of 1933 to reconstruct political authority in the city. The historian Meg Jacobs’s model of “state-building from the bottom up” is apt:

To explain why some forms of state organization prevail over others not only requires looking at the technocratic expertise that certain policy makers use to deploy their agenda but also requires paying attention to the way in which particular policies mobilize and reconstitute the nation’s citizenry, in other words, how government agencies actually generate support for and administer their programs. Exploring both cultural assumptions and institutional configurations reveals the dialectical relationship between state and society, in which public policies and administrative government shape groups who then reshape the state.14

Certain New Deal programs were created because mobilized workers had pushed for them – the idea that the government should serve as an employer of last resort in periods of mass unemployment got on the national agenda in the 1930s in large measure because generations of urban workers had insisted on it. In other instances, the great expansion of state capabilities during the New Deal helped New Yorkers to envision a new standard

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for public goods and services. But whichever “came first,” this dialectic relation between state activity and popular engagement with the state endowed the project of municipal reform – the use of experts, the expansion of bureaucratic power – with a popular legitimacy that had eluded Progressive-era reformers (while also working to destabilize the modes of state-citizen interaction that had characterized the previous regime, above all the function of the party clubhouse as a hinge institution connecting citizens and communities to the municipal state). It helped to resolve structural difficulties which had rendered it impossible to form a durable reform coalition in New York. And it left a powerful ideological legacy. Having passed through a period in which the state had been, to an unusual degree, the driving force in urban social development, and in which it had been capable of doing things it could not ordinarily do, New Yorkers became more cognizant of the state. For several decades after the end of the Second World War, New Yorkers would reach instinctively for state-driven solutions to social problems.

By the time New Deal intergovernmental transfers dwindled and local officials were presented with the task of extracting resources for themselves, New York’s local public investment programs had developed strong bureaucratic capacities, ties to civil society, and popular legitimacy. La Guardia had demonstrated to the city’s politicians – now forced to win the support of the labor movements and the third parties to form majority coalitions – that votes could be won by expanding public-sector provision. Though New York’s municipal government would never again possess the sheer manpower the New Deal had given it, the political forces spawned during the 1930s, in the context of a singularly favorable local environment and extraordinary postwar
growth, would prove capable of sustaining a robust local social politics – a “homegrown version of social democracy.”

Yet precisely because the New Deal represented a singular moment, it imprinted a profound vulnerability into New York’s local state. When the emergency ended, intergovernmental transfers would ebb and the city would lose the protection national countercyclical spending had provided it. And as national patterns of private and public investment shifted and more and more of the city’s workforce spilled over its political boundaries, Gotham would lose the extraordinary advantage it had once enjoyed in local wealth and productivity. Under these conditions, the city’s politics would become, as one New York State official has put it, a contest between “endless ambitions” and “finite resources.” This tension would constrain the possibilities of post-New Deal politics in the city even as the remarkable growth of the postwar decades sustained the development of the local state. When postwar growth gave way to the wrenching economic restructuring of the 1970s, the legacy of the New Deal would be largely undone.

I bring Roosevelt and La Guardia together in this study primarily because one cannot understand the departures that occurred in New York’s local politics and government during La Guardia’s mayoralty without understanding the larger contours of New Deal reform. But what does the history of New York City have to tell us about the New Deal as a whole? While quite a few American localities received as much federal

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15 Freeman, *Working-Class New York*. Freeman points to the comparative strength of the city’s labor and leftist movements, the relative political weakness of its homeowner class, and the receptivity of its “majority minority” population to “dissent and struggle” and to “ideas and movements outside the mainstream.” Other scholars have noted to the city’s sheer wealth. (Paul Peterson and Margaret Weir, “Is New York a Deviant Case?” in Peterson, *City Limits* [Chicago, 1981], chap. 10.

money as did the Big Apple (in per capita term), a large literature on “little New Deals” finds relatively little in the way of durable change in state activity of the sort chronicled here. And yet we should not simply treat the New York case as an anomaly produced by extraordinary local circumstances, for it draws our attention to two crucial features of the New Deal regime as a whole: first, that it was an intergovernmental project which had rippling effects throughout the American federal system; and second, that this intergovernmental character, both a great strength and a terrible weakness, was in some ways the very core of the New Deal project.

Those scholars who have attended to this dimension of New Deal politics and statecraft have tended to view it as a point of weakness – if not a fatal flaw. The constitutional division of powers and the strong tendency in 1930s Washington to decentralize authority, they have argued, frustrated would-be national state-builders, weakened national programs, and inhibited the development of a more robust and more equitable national state. They made it possible for conservative officials to water down New Deal initiatives, to defend the low-wage Southern economy and the system of racial

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domination which was inextricable from it, and to exclude many Americans from a fuller social citizenship.\footnote{Works that emphasize the constraints federalism and localism placed on central-state building during the interwar period include James T. Patterson, \textit{The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition} (Princeton, 1969); Thomas J. Sugrue, “All Politics Is Local: The Persistence of Localism in Twentieth-Century America,” in Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., \textit{The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History} (Princeton, 2003), esp. 305-307 (see also Jacobs and Zelizer’s introduction); Suzanne Metter, \textit{Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy} (Ithaca, 1998); Gary Gerstle, “A State Both Strong and Weak,” \textit{AHR}, Vol. 115, No. 3 (June, 2010), esp. 781-783; and, more ambiguously, Barry Karl, \textit{The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945} (Chicago, 1983).}

These emphases fit well with the tendency among scholars of the New Deal era, writing in the context of the collapse of the New Deal coalition in the late 1960s and 1970s, the rise of the Reagan coalition in the 1980s, and the persistence of racial and gender inequality throughout, to pay particular attention to the frailty of the liberal project – to stress (as two leading scholars put it) “missed opportunities, unintended consequences, and dangerous but inescapable compromises.”\footnote{Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, “Introduction,” in Fraser and Gerstle, eds., \textit{The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980} (Princeton, 1989), x.} Recently, however, the persistent strength of American conservatism (and, perhaps, the fate of progressive politics amidst the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression) have challenged historians to ask, not why the liberal hour proved ephemeral, but how such a dramatic departure from the \textit{status quo} was possible at all.\footnote{See, e.g., Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” \textit{International Labor and Working-Class History}, No. 74, Vol. 1 (Fall, 2008), 3-26; and Eric Rauchway, \textit{The Great Depression and the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction} (New York, 2008).}

A full treatment of this question goes far beyond the scope of this study. But I hope this dissertation will make clear that the accomplishments of the New Deal cannot be understood without appreciating the ways in which Roosevelt and his administration,
enjoying unusual freedom of action in the absence of a highly-developed national state, responded to and leveraged the particular strengths of the American polity – and that local governments, with their infrastructural capacities and traditional responsibilities within the public welfare and public health domains, rooted in their historical role as the repositories of functional and executive power within the American federal system, represented one of these strengths. In this context, American federalism and American localism represented valuable resources in New Deal state-building efforts, providing means of building political support for new social programs in a vast and diverse country and ways of mitigating opposition to those programs where it could be predicted to arise. Precisely for this reason, federalism operated in some contexts as a barrier and in others as a tool, sometimes constraining governmental innovation but in other instances enabling it.

From this vantage point, New York represents, not an outlier, but rather one end of a remarkable range of outcomes the New Deal helped to produce. Indeed, the New Deal coalition of social democracy and white supremacy – of “Sweden and South Africa” – held together precisely because the New Dealers found governmental strategies which could produce outcomes acceptable to each. American federalism and American localism facilitated one of the most creative national governmental responses to the Great Depression anywhere in the world, and, in so doing, helped to stabilize liberal democracy at its darkest hour – even as they ensured that the New Deal would produce a “divided,” “segmented” social citizenship. Neither New York nor Mississippi was an outlier: it was the essence of the New Deal that it should produce both.

Part I:

Foundations
Twice a year throughout the 1930s, acquaintances of the late John Purroy Mitchel paused to remember the progressive reformer who had governed New York City from 1914 through 1917 – the last reformer to occupy City Hall before Fiorello La Guardia reclaimed it from Tammany Hall in 1933. On Memorial Day, they convened before the John Purroy Mitchel Memorial on Fifth Avenue, facing East 90th Street; on July 19, the anniversary of Mitchel’s birth, they paid their respects at his grave in Woodlawn Cemetery. In 1934, Mayor La Guardia himself, then five months into his roaring first term, laid a wreath at the foot of the memorial; more typically the ceremonies were attended by members of La Guardia’s administration, many of them also veterans of Mitchel’s. Called on to address the gatherings, they seldom failed to cite Mitchel as a forebear of the reform efforts of the 1930s, a trailblazer of the municipal reform project over which La Guardia now presided. Mitchel had “laid the foundations,” said Robert Moses in 1938; “he started the work and what we have accomplished we owe in very large measure to him. Without the Mitchel administration the La Guardia administration would have been impossible.”

In truth, La Guardia’s relationship to Mitchel was a good deal more complicated than such homilies suggested. Mitchel had been lifted to office in 1913 not only by the usual collection of good-government types intent on removing the city’s political machines from power, but also by a diverse coalition of progressive reformers moved by visions of how state power and technical expertise could be deployed to improve the urban environment and raise living standards. La Guardia would eventually be heir not

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1 Quoted in *NYT*, July 20, 1938.
only to Mitchel’s politics of good government and antipartisanship, but also to a body of policy ideas and a broader conception of government which had last crested in the city during the Mitchel years.

But Mitchel had also left succeeding reformers a difficult political legacy. Taking office amid growing unemployment and fiscal crisis and leaving it with the city wracked by inflation, the Mitchel administration had failed to satisfy the expectations placed upon it by reformers and working-class New Yorkers alike; dissatisfied and disillusioned, many New Yorkers had come to believe that Mitchel’s brand of progressive reform served the interests of the wealthy. They had rejected Mitchel and his government by experts in a kind of plebiscite, installing the Brooklyn everyman John F. Hylan in his place. Disavowing experts and reform, picking through the ruins of the Mitchel coalition in an atmosphere of intense class consciousness, Hylan had consolidated a Democratic majority which would prove impregnable for more than a decade.

Fiorello La Guardia, elected president of the city’s Board of Aldermen in 1919, had found that his own policy positions frequently aligned with the antireform Democrat Hylan’s; as late as 1929 he had been known as a Hylanite rather than an ally of Mitchel (with whom he had had no real personal or political relationship). But then the course of New York City’s politics shifted again, suddenly; economic collapse weakened the foundations of the interwar Democratic order, and scandal ensnared one Tammany Hall politico after another. As the possibilities of progressive politics expanded, La Guardia built a connection to the city’s municipal reform tradition and secured a narrow but convincing victory in the 1933 mayoral election. He would take office on New Year’s Day, 1934, knowing that his own political fortune would rest in his ability to resolve
contradictions and surmount barriers that had sealed the fate of progressive reform two decades before.

The story of New Deal New York begins during the period of diverse and in some ways conflicting reform efforts commonly known as the Progressive Era. The political leaders of Depression-era New York, though they did not identify closely with any one movement or faction, absorbed the characteristic assumptions and beliefs of the men and women who led those reform efforts: that society could be improved through concerted human action; that advanced in technology, engineering, and medicine had opened the door to unprecedented social progress; and that it was the task of government to help American society adapt to the new technological age. More important, the reform ferment of the early twentieth century produced significant changes in what government did in urban America, leaving a toolbox of solutions upon which future generations of policymakers would draw and reshaping how Americans envisioned the role of government in urban societies and economies.

One of the most powerful impulses that drove Progressive Era reformers at the turn of the century was an embrace, particularly by a “new middle class” of university-trained and professionally-accredited young people, of expert management as a means of achieving organizational efficiency and regularity. Nowhere was this so evident as in the efforts of a new generation of municipal reformers, who sought to improve city
government by adapting the practices of private business management and social science to public administration. The “efficiency movement,” as its proponents called it, arrived in New York via the Bureau of Municipal Research (BMR), an organization founded in 1906 by a group of young university and doctoral graduates with financial backing from some of the city’s most prominent philanthropists. Within a few years the Bureau had become practically an adjunct to New York’s municipal government and a flagship for a broader movement that took root in many American cities.²

The BMR, and the efficiency movement more broadly, had two overarching goals: first, to create a government that delivered, as their slogan had it, one hundred cents of service for every tax dollar collected; and second, to match the activities of government with social needs. Relying heavily on the model of private business, efficiency reformers called for the reorganization of municipal departments to remove redundancies and bottlenecks and alleviate the overloading and underloading of particular divisions; they called, too, for the implementation of business practices such as budget-making, accounting, and centralized purchasing and such modern managerial techniques as the timesheet, work routines, service records, and efficiency tests.

But the efficiency movement did not focus solely on administrative reform. Its objective was not merely to spend as few tax dollars as possible for a given level of government output, but also to match that output to the actual needs of the community. Efficiency reformers gloried in data, and their preferred method was that of the investigation. The discovery of facts and the assembling of data, in the efficiency

reformers’ model of policymaking, created social knowledge which revealed an undesirable condition and a sense of what factors contributed to it; experts with specialized training could then create and implement solutions. The typical charts produced by New York’s Division of Child Hygiene exemplified this approach: in the left-hand column, they listed the division’s activities before an investigation; in the center, the findings of the investigation; in the right-hand column, new activities undertaken in light of those findings.

For all its attention to the dry details of budgeting, work routines, and personnel systems, the efficiency movement seemed to many progressives to represent little short of a revolution in municipal reform politics. In comparison to nineteenth-century municipal reformers, who generally sought to keep government expenditures as low as possible (and not infrequently decried government spending as confiscation of property), the efficiency movement envisioned a more expansive, more positive role for government. In a modern city, its champions believed, community welfare could not be left to the laws of the market and to philanthropy and “scientific charity.” “[T]he efficiency movement in cities,” the BMR’s founders wrote in 1912, “grew out of recognition of the dependence of community welfare upon government activity. It began . . . in an effort to capture the great forces of city government for harnessing the work of social betterment.”3 Whereas nineteenth-century reformers had been suspicious of the urban immigrant masses and at times nakedly antidemocratic4, the efficiency reformers, though wary in some ways of public passions, made it their avowed purpose to “make democracy work.” Armed with a

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theory of government that sought to address social problems, they believed their task was to educate tenement dwellers to see that good government was in their own interest. The efficiency movement thus provided a language that enabled municipal reform to move beyond mere emphasis on honesty, economy, and rule by “good men”: it provided a program to a new generation of reformers committed to democracy, to scientific progress, and to an expansion of the role of government in urban life.\(^5\)

The efficiency movement’s reconceptualization of the role of government dovetailed with the labors of other reformers – settlement house workers, social workers, technical experts, journalists, leaders of charity and philanthropic organizations, social scientists, liberal clergy, city bureaucrats, and others – more immediately concerned with the human costs of thriving market capitalism in the city. These “social reformers,” as historians have categorized them, were connected at the broadest level by a common interest in big-city “slums” – the working-class, immigrant districts that had been chronicled so powerfully by the photojournalist Jacob Riis (whose stunning work *How the Other Half Lives* had been published in 1890). Unlike earlier generations of reformers, who had tended to ascribe urban poverty to the habits and morals of immigrant tenement dwellers, the social reformers of the Progressive Era believed poverty was essentially circumstantial; they believed justice and social utility required some amelioration of the oppressive and unhealthy inner-city environment, and although they also worked through non-state institutions (such as the settlement houses), they considered it an obligation of the government to assure that citizens not be deprived of

“the ordinary conveniences of living” (as housing reformer Lawrence Veiller put it).\textsuperscript{6}

Their technique of choice was “decommodification”: because central-city neighborhoods were places where markets had conspicuously failed to produce socially acceptable outcomes, social reformers sought to “hold certain elements out of the market’s processes, indeed to roll back those parts of the market whose social costs had proved too high”\textsuperscript{7} – either by enlisting state power to regulate private exchanges or by collective provision of particular goods and services by the government itself.

Not a movement in itself, this group of social reformers, tied together through networks of publications, schools, organizational memberships, and personal associations, provided much of the membership for a series of discrete campaigns for specific projects intended to alleviate the tedium and squalor of the inner city. In New York and elsewhere, social reformers called for more small parks and play areas, and recreational piers, for more effective garbage collection and street cleaning, and for public bathhouses in neighborhoods where tenement apartments did not possess bathing facilities. Settlement house workers pushed responsive professionals within the Health Department to provide the country’s first school nurses and to establish eye and dental clinics, health care centers, and milk stations. Housing reformers helped enact a tenement house law that required new residential buildings to meet higher ventilation standards and to provide private toilets and established a municipal department to conduct inspections.\textsuperscript{8}


\textsuperscript{8} Among many others, see Rodgers, \textit{Atlantic Crossings}, esp. chaps. 4-5; Allen F. Davis, \textit{Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914} (New Brunswick, 1984);
To the left of the social reform cohort – though there was considerable overlap – was the socialist movement, which reached its peak in New York before and during the First World War. The more doctrinally committed socialists looked askance at the social reformers, who they believed dealt in palliatives: the slum, they believed, was endemic to wage-labor capitalism, and any real effort to raise the quality of life among the working class would necessarily entail broad changes in the basic economic structure. But the non-revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party had a reform program of its own – “immediate demands” intended to strengthen the working class so that it could act as an agent for the democratic realization of a cooperative commonwealth. The party’s state and national programs called for reduced working hours and higher wages, the abolition of child labor, and social insurance – workers’ compensation, unemployment insurance, and old-age pensions. Its municipal platforms proposed the construction of municipal apartment houses and the building of more parks and playgrounds in congested neighborhoods; publicly-owned terminal markets to reduce the cost of food; municipalization of public utilities (such as electricity and gas); the creation of municipal bakeries, milk depots, and iceworks; free maternity clinics and hospitals; free municipal nurseries; free medical care, food, and clothing for those who could not afford it; “seaside colonies and summer outings for all poor school children”; and “cultivation of the fine

arts and dissemination of popular science among the adult workers, through the medium of municipal theatres, free concerts, public reading-rooms, and public lectures.\textsuperscript{9}

New York (and other cities) also possessed a distinct political tradition that scholars of city politics have described as “municipal populism”: a kind of urban politics whose practitioners spoke the populist language of opposition to powerful “interests” – private utilities corporations, their Wall Street investors, and the political bosses who, it was claimed, did their bidding.\textsuperscript{10} Municipal populists were driven by the linked issues of exorbitant monopoly profits, boss rule, and the cost of living; they espoused a program of municipal ownership which aimed both to break the link between boss politics and utility monopolies and to bring down the price of (and improve the quality of) life’s necessities – especially “milk, ice, gas, and local transit.”\textsuperscript{11}

In New York, the leading figure in this movement was the “enfant terrible of American journalism,” William Randolph Hearst.\textsuperscript{12} With his inscrutable mix of demagoguery and sincerity, Hearst broke into the New York newspaper market in 1895 and immediately made himself a scourge of the utility companies and their political allies – particularly the “gas trust,” against which he waged a continuing war on multiple fronts, and Tammany Hall, which he accused of aiding the private utility corporations. In 1905, he ran for mayor on an independent Municipal Ownership ticket. His campaign


\textsuperscript{10} Generally, see Finegold, \textit{Experts and Politicians}, 18-22 and passim.

\textsuperscript{11} Quoted in David Nasaw, \textit{The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst} (Boston, 2000), 201.

galvanized labor unions as well as a group his opponent characterized as “the white-collar proletariat, the clerks, small employees, and small shopkeepers”\textsuperscript{13}: the “upper strata of the working class,” less dependent on the institutions of the Democratic machine and relatively well educated (and hence more easily mobilized by policy proposals presented through the medium of the newspaper, including Hearst’s own). Hearst lost narrowly in an election that very likely turned on fraud, but not before his candidacy had publicized new demands and new policy solutions, demonstrating convincingly how a dynamic sector of the electorate could be won over by the means of public policy.\textsuperscript{14}

Taken as a whole, the influence of Progressive-era reform upon the trajectory of New York City’s politics and government was profound. These reform efforts gave the city government new authorities and new capacities. Fiscal practices pushed by the efficiency movement enabled the city to form a more effective partnership with the financial community, which in turn made possible a veritable revolution in debt financing and public investment that encompassed everything from water supply to schoolhouses to new subway lines. Housing reformers had won the authority to mandate minimum standards and had secured the creation of a municipal department to enforce them. Public health advocates had built a highly professionalized department and had constructed a chain of child health clinics across the city. Social reformers had claimed public money for small parks and municipal bathhouses. Many other Progressive-era policy ideas failed of enactment and would remain on the progressive agenda at the time


of the New Deal – often having been adopted and further developed in the interim by the city’s private philanthropic and charity institutions.

But the movements of the Progressive Era also did something more: together, they created a new conception of urban governance. Each of these reform projects sought to inject public considerations into urban societies built of “myriad private decisions,” envisioning public action and collective initiative as ways to improve the quality of urban life and the functioning of the city as a whole. In pursuing these objectives, they began to construct an alternative vision to that of “the thoroughly commercial city” of the 19th century. Those interested in urban government, the Socialist Morris Hillquit wrote in 1913, were no longer apt to view the municipality “first of all a business concern, instituted and maintained for the purpose of administering the corporate property of the city” and safeguarding the private property upon which urban commerce depended; they increasingly emphasized “the social functions of the municipality” and proposed to use local government to implement “measures based on the recognition of the social obligation of the community toward the citizens.” The reformers of the Progressive Era had begun to carve out a new, more robust role for government in America’s urban society.

II

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This swirl of reform projects, in some ways mutually antithetical and in others overlapping, seemed to have its apotheosis in New York with the election in 1913 of Mayor John Purroy Mitchel. A young independent Democrat and efficiency movement devotee, Mitchel had served as president of the Board of Aldermen before being appointed collector of the port of New York by Wilson’s secretary of the Treasury. He was chosen as a “fusion” candidate for mayor by a committee of civic group representatives and Republican party leaders. Hearst was instrumental in securing him the nomination. And while the Socialist Party did not join the fusion cause, a good number of less-than-partisan socialists voted for Mitchel and many others believed, as William English Walling put it, that Mitchel stood for “some of the things advocated by Socialists.”

On the strength of this broad coalition, and in the aftermath of some particularly wicked exploits by the Tammany Hall political machine, Mitchel won election with more than fifty-seven percent of the ballots, carrying the traditional good-government vote but also winning the support of many previous Hearst voters and reaching farther into the working classes than most anti-machine candidates had managed. This result, following four years in which a fusion coalition had controlled the Board of Estimate, constituted an unprecedented display of electoral approval for municipal reform in New York. Mitchel took office with almost impossibly high hopes. “Never had this or any other American city,” two of his partisans later wrote, “chosen

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17 *NYT*, Feb. 25, 1914.
officers with as reasonable expectations of continuing improvement in government and increasing public support.”

It was Mitchel’s misfortune to assume office just as the American economy was entering a recession. Unemployment climbed rapidly in the winter of 1914, throwing out of work “the high-grade workman, the mechanic . . . [and the] clerk” – people who were usually relatively sheltered from the volatility of urban labor markets. While anarchists and the IWW made their protests in the streets, workers’ representatives responded much as they had during the recessions of the 1870s and 1890s: they demanded that the municipal government serve as the employer of last resort. The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) was the first group to approach Mitchel. The city’s women, its representatives reported, were “on the verge of losing hope and are saying, ‘why won’t the city give us work?’” The WTUL demanded “immediate relief for the unemployed women by establishing workrooms and recreational piers.” The Socialist Party, active on the unemployment question, urged city aid rather than philanthropy and suggested that the unemployed be put to work collecting data on the public health.

Mitchel’s Department of Charities responded by creating a Municipal Employment Bureau – an agency which aimed to match the “jobless man with the

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19 *NYT*, Jan. 27, 1915.


21 “Outdoor relief,” meaning government assistance to people living outside of welfare institutions, had been prohibited by a charter reform following the Tweed era corruption scandals; the Board of Estimate instead provided subsidies to private charity organizations such as the Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor. Direct municipal relief would not be permitted until Franklin Roosevelt’s second term as governor.

22 E.g., *New York Call*, Feb. 6, 1914.
manless job” but which soon incurred the wrath of trade unionists, who believed employers were using it to find strikebreakers and cheap immigrant labor – and expanding the Municipal Lodging House, instituting a policy whereby tenants could pay for their beds and food by doing temporary work on government projects.\textsuperscript{23} By the end of 1914, Mitchel had formed a blue-ribbon committee to develop a more extensive unemployment relief program. Headed by U.S. Steel chairman Elbert H. Gary, the committee solicited private donations and used those funds to open work houses. In its short lifetime, the Gary Committee raised about $180,000 and provided work at between fifty and seventy-five cents a day (less than half the average wage of an unskilled unionized worker) to about 13,000 men and women out of an unemployed population that numbered several hundred thousand.\textsuperscript{24}

These measures served only to stimulate further calls for a more robust program of emergency public employment. Left-wing political figures, labor leaders, clergymen, and workers alike pushed Mitchel for a larger and more statist, rights-based program. Progressives such as Amos Pinchot proclaimed that the “community owe[d] an opportunity to work to every man who [was] willing and able to work”\textsuperscript{25}; a Cooper Union meeting sponsored by Frederic Howe’s People’s Institute passed resolutions in favor of higher workshop wages, a charter amendment to permit direct municipal relief, and a

\textsuperscript{23} This phase of the Mitchel administration’s policy response is well documented in the daily press; see esp. \textit{NYT}, Jan. 30, Feb. 1, 11, 25, 1914.


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{NYT}, Jan. 13, 1915.
universal eight-hour day to spread work. “Evidence is accumulating,” Mitchel wrote one of the committee’s members, “that the unemployed feel that nothing of a substantial nature is being accomplished.”

The impact of the recession lingered even as the armaments boom began and reemployment picked up. The recession, together with the onset of the European war, had precipitated a fiscal crisis in the city; New York’s leading dealers in municipal bonds had arranged a loan that allowed the city to meet its obligations but mandated as a condition the adoption of a pay-as-you-go budgeting policy. Thus constrained, Mitchel put the efficiency-reform program to the cause of economy. Tight-fisted spending ensured that there would be no appropriation for an emergency public works program to create work during the recession. It also limited the effectiveness of the regular departments: the Department of Public Health, for instance, lamented in its 1915 annual report that it could not “achieve the high standard to which it aspired because of ‘the lack of a sufficiently liberal social program’” on the part of the Board of Estimate, the city’s appropriating body.

The unemployment crisis had hardly abated when, as a result of the curtailment of European agricultural production and wartime dislocations, the price of food and other

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consumer essentials began to climb rapidly.\textsuperscript{30} Prices rose quickly in late 1915, and by the end of 1916 they were skyrocketing. Another spike in early 1917 impelled housewives on the Lower East Side, in Williamsburg, Brownsville, Harlem, and the Bronx to overturn pushcarts, light produce afire, and implement and enforce a boycott on chicken, fish, and vegetables. As the historian Dana Frank has shown, these “food riots” were, in their essence, not a protest against imminent starvation as was widely supposed – pace Senator Borah’s likening of wartime New York to Revolutionary Paris, only twenty-two of 1472 families interviewed by city investigators claimed to be suffering from “actual privation” – but rather a defense of the protesters’ existing “American” standard of living. “We don’t want oleomargarine,” a cloakmaker’s wife remarked. “I could buy butter once on my husband’s wages – I don’t see why I shouldn’t have the same today.”\textsuperscript{31}

A few days after the protests began, a group of four hundred women marched from Rutgers Square on the Lower East Side to City Hall to demand a positive response from the Mitchel administration. “We are good Americans,” their spokeswoman said in a statement, “and we simply want the Mayor to make the prices go down. If there is a law fixing prices, we want him to enforce it. And if there isn’t, we want him to get one.”\textsuperscript{32}

The Mayor and the Board of Estimate petitioned the state legislature for a grant of emergency authority to buy food, which was not given until the fall. In the interim, Mitchel established a semi-public food supply committee headed by the Wall Street financier and former Bull Moose Party treasurer George W. Perkins which collected


\textsuperscript{31} Quoted in Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food,” 262.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 266.
private donations, made wholesale orders, and distributed the food at cost through established private retailers. The committee purchased inexpensive foods – rice, Brazilian beans, hominy, and smelts – so as not to compete with the private food markets; when the smelts were first distributed, one newspaperman wrote, “Large mobs of East Side women . . . mauled the sellers and returned some of the fish to their native element through open manholes.”\textsuperscript{33} Efforts to help consumers make do with less were likewise roughly greeted: when the Perkins Committee circulated leaflets advising housewives to use rice as a substitute for more expensive foods, skeptics suggested that the Mitchel administration had merely accepted the necessity of “continuously liv[ing] on less.”\textsuperscript{34}

Finding the Mitchel administration incapable or unwilling to ameliorate the conditions which had destabilized their ability to find work or market for their families, many working-class New Yorkers came to believe progressive reform operated in the interests of the wealthy, a conclusion reinforced by Mitchel’s manifest social aspirations, problematic relations with the Catholic Church, and outspoken support for an unpopular war. Worse, as the Boy Mayor’s popular support wore away, his political coalition began to fall apart. Fusion coalitions of the kind that elected Mitchel invariably consisted of disparate elements – antipartisan civic organizations and wholly partisan Republicans, budget-minded property owners and financiers and progressive social reformers, et cetera – and were therefore inherently unstable, placing a burden on the incumbent to refashion his coalition into something new. Mitchel, working in highly challenging circumstances, lacked both the resources and the entrepreneurial skills to do so. The Mayor’s position of

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 277.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{New York Call}, Mar. 9, 1917, quoted in Frieburger, “War Prosperity and Hunger,” 236.
resolute antipartisanship alienated both President Wilson (who moreover found he needed the support of the Tammany congressmen for his domestic program and war measures) and the Republican rank-and-file (who had been forced by the party leadership to accept Mitchel in 1913). Yet perhaps unavoidably, Mitchel antagonized the anti-interventionist Hearst, and the publisher became a loud and devastating critic. Defeated by a rogue candidate in the Republican primary, Mitchel was left with little more than the support of the good-government groups, a few high-profile figures (most notably Theodore Roosevelt), and much of the city’s business and financial elite. He lost his bid for reelection in a four-way race, garnering only twenty-three percent of the vote against forty-seven percent to the Democratic candidate John F. Hylan, twenty-two percent to the Socialist Morris Hillquit, and nearly all the remainder to the Republican William Bennett.

The result unmistakably represented a popular repudiation of municipal reform; and it produced both bewilderment and cynicism among those who had been Mitchel’s supporters. “Mr. Mitchel’s downfall was greeted by a wild outburst of enthusiasm on the East Side,” the New Republic wrote. “It was interpreted as an overthrow of an autocracy of experts. The mass of voters in New York neither understood nor sympathized with the ideals Mr. Mitchel embodied. . . .” The election results shook the progressives’ optimistic faith in their ability to “make democracy work”; old doubts about the possibility of “good government” in America’s huge polyglot cities resurfaced. “The fundamental trouble is social and economic,” the New Republic editorialists wrote. “An overgrown accident of a city like New York lacks the community of consciousness which


36 “The Obstacle to Fusion Success,” TNR, Aug. 17, 1921, 311-312.
is an indispensable condition of the successful education of the majority of its citizens by a minority in favor of expert standards of municipal behavior.”

Mitchel was succeeded by the Brooklyn Democrat John F. Hylan, who had risen to power primarily as a consequence of New York County Democratic chairman Charles Francis Murphy’s decision to ally with Hearst. Commonly regarded as a rank fool, a stooge for Hearst, and a puppet of Murphy (who, to his relief, found that Hylan recognized his obligations to the party organizations far more faithfully than his two Democratic predecessors), Hylan proved adept at exploiting the popular reaction to John Purroy Mitchel’s progressive reform program of government-by-experts. Presenting himself as a majoritarian democrat and man of the people who would give no quarter to the privileged interests he believed had captured the city government during the Mitchel years, he vowed to “fill the outgoing trains” with Mitchel’s efficiency experts. “We have had all the reform we want in this city for some time to come,” he declared.

Yet Hylan himself was a kind of progressive, reflecting especially the municipal populism of his sponsor, Hearst. He became a hero to many working-class people through his outspoken and successful opposition to the pleas of the private corporations that ran New York’s subways to adjust the traditional five-cent fare, stipulated in their

37 Ibid.


contracts, in light of postwar inflation. He began construction of the Bronx Terminal Market, a grand project long advocated by socialists and municipal populists which was intended to reduce the cost of living by improving the infrastructure upon which food distribution in the five boroughs depended. And he threw his support behind a state rent control law to protect tenants amidst a severe postwar housing shortage.\textsuperscript{41} Progressives such as Walter Lippmann chided Hylan for pursuing a “dull, suspicious, hysterical and foolish kind of class war”\textsuperscript{42}; yet when he stood for reelection in 1921, the working people of New York reelected him in a landslide. “Anyone who caught the spirit of the crowds on election night knows how the victors interpreted the event,” the \textit{New Republic} editorialized. “A great popular victory had been won” by men and women “[uneasy] about their jobs or small businesses, preyed upon by profiteers, trodden upon by the big men in business and politics. . . .”\textsuperscript{43} Operating in the context of intense working-class dissatisfaction, a conservative turn in state Republican politics, and the postwar collapse (and suppression) of radical alternatives to the major policies, Hylan had united a working-class vote previously fractured by ethnicity and ideology under the Democratic banner. This local alignment would last until the Great Depression broke it apart.

In 1926, following a split between Hylan (and Hearst) and the Democratic Governor Al Smith\textsuperscript{44}, the mayoralty passed to the dazzling Jimmy Walker, a child of Gaslight Greenwich Village who had risen within New York State politics wholly with


\textsuperscript{42} Walter Lippmann, \textit{Men of Destiny} (New York, 1926), 6.

\textsuperscript{43} “Hylan: A Symbol,” \textit{TNR}, Nov. 23, 1921, 364.

the support of the Tammany Hall machine. Personally, Walker could hardly have been
more different from the doddering Hylan. Though intellectually superficial, he possessed
an extremely sharp political mind: no one, Bronx County Democratic chairman Edward J.
Flynn later wrote, had a greater ability to “absorb knowledge and present it to the
public.”45 Witty, liberal, casual yet competent, he represented what many New Yorkers
loved best about their city at a time when the cosmopolitan ideal New York embodied
was under attack. “The reason for his vast popularity,” the columnist Ed Sullivan wrote,
“was that Jimmy Walker somehow or other seemed to be New York brought to life in one
person.”46

Walker’s mayoralty represented the pinnacle of the interwar Democratic regime.
The cornerstone of that regime was patronage. The metropolis was growing rapidly and
the municipal workforce was expanding concomitantly; the electorate, however, was
growing much more slowly, which meant that a growing share of voters owed their jobs
to the Democratic administration, or knew someone who did.47 Tammany’s was thus a
coalition of direct stakeholders, backed by people dependent upon the party’s continuity
in office. The party clubhouses provided a second institutional means for consolidating
working-class support. Because they could handle matters too small and local to merit
the attention of the municipal state, and because they could work outside the bounds of
legal procedure and finance, the clubhouses gave the Democratic regime a kind of local
knowledge and governmental capacity considerably greater than the local state itself.

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45 Flynn, You’re the Boss, 52.


When a family lost a wage earner or suffered an apartment fire, the district leader could provide relief; when a worker sought a job, the clubhouse could call upon a friendly contractor who needed labor. District clubs provided lawyers to represent tenants in eviction hearings and give legal aid to those who ran afoul of the law. On occasion the district clubs made life difficult for those who violated neighborhood norms of tolerance and respect. The clubhouse became part of the local community, and the district leader and his election district captains were the face of local government to many New Yorkers.48

Walker’s primary spending commitment was to the construction of public works: public construction grew faster than any other sector of city spending during the 1920s. “I don’t care what the budget amounts to in dollars and cents,” Walker remarked. “If we’re going to improve New York we’ve got to pay for it.”49 By the time he stood for reelection, he had promised billions in subway extensions, vehicular tunnels, schools, hospitals, parks, playgrounds, and a comprehensive plan to remake the West Side of Manhattan by covering the New York Central railroad tracks; and he had begun work on the Triborough Bridge.50 In a city which fancied itself the very embodiment of urban modernity, a program of this sort carried major ideological appeal. Walker, his supporters claimed, was building a “wonder city,” one equipped with “every modern improvement to make it worthy of the great people who live here,” a city fit for the

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49 NYT, July 19, 1929.

“richest individuals and corporations” and “the poorest immigrants and toilers” alike.\textsuperscript{51}

But public construction also served to build the party’s support among business and middle-class interests. This was the second decade of the great outer-borough housing boom, and there was money to be made if the city government was willing to aid private resource development by building “roads, sewers, utilities, schools,” and other improvements which would increase the value of realty and draw new residents. The city let contracts to firms which could be relied upon to kick some of the profit back into party coffers, enriching developers, contractors, and officeholders alike.\textsuperscript{52}

Though Walker did extend some of Hylan’s “municipal populist” policies – attempting to enact a city rent control ordinance and successfully defending the five-cent subway fare\textsuperscript{53} – his administration largely turned away from the “social” reform agenda that had been so much a part of the city’s politics in the Progressive Era. Walker’s administration did little to develop the city’s spaces for \textit{public} use: at the end of the Democratic reign, New York ranked last in park acreage among both the ten largest cities in the United States and the ten largest cities in the world.\textsuperscript{54} In some instances, private charity and philanthropy replaced the local state as the most energetic force in urban social provision. Such was the case, for instance, in the area of public health. New York City’s expenditures on public health in the late 1920s ran between $.87 and $.91 per

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{NYT}, Oct. 3, 1929.


capita, as against $1.29 in Chicago and $1.53 in Boston, with Gotham’s private health
and welfare organizations carrying much of the burden for health education, health
screenings, and other such functions.  

Although Walker gave greater credence to expertise than had Hylan, he continued
the Democratic practice of filling the city agencies with loyal party workers who, in
comparison to the trained bureaucrats of the Mitchel years, lacked the expertise and
knowledge to plan and implement expansions of state power. In some instances, this
practice actually made the city bureaucracy more flexible, accountable, and even
efficient, for non-professional bureaucrats tended to look lightly on violations of
procedure and were quick to respond to party leaders, which provided a centralization of
power (and hence of accountability). For these reasons, some social reformers actually
found it easier to work with Democratic administrations: the public health pioneer Sara
Josephine Baker, who directed the Division of Child Hygiene during both Democratic
and reform administrations, believed that the Tammany appointees’ “casual regard for
regulations and bureaucratic procedures” rendered them quicker to act on her requests
(though she noted, too, that the machine politicos had a habit of imploring her to take
their “cast-off sweethearts” into her highly professional agency).  

But the practice of
using the bureaucracy to reward party service also made it more difficult for the
departments to innovate. The fate of the Bronx Terminal Market was a case in point:
initiated during Hylan’s first administration, it remained a white elephant until La
Guardia came to power, primarily because no one in the Department of Public Markets,

55 Michael M. Davis and Mary C. Jarrett, A Health Inventory of New York City: A Study of the Volume
and Distribution of Health Service in the Five Boroughs (New York, 1929), 21-22.

Weights, and Measures knew enough about wholesale marketing to get it into operation.\(^{57}\)

Municipal reform, the historian Clifton Yearley has noted, “really implied that the middle classes were distressed with the way money was being spent.”\(^{58}\) Applied to interwar New York, this formulation is a bit too neat: plenty of middle class people were happy enough with the way Walker’s administration was spending money, and many working-class people (and their middle-class allies) would join the reform cause because they believed machine politics served the middle classes at the expense of laboring people. But the broader point is correct: opposition to the interwar Democratic regime sprung from dissatisfaction with how it used money. The key word was corruption. Through webs of graft, kickbacks, and personal influence, Walker’s regime redistributed money – from taxpayers, contractors, small businessmen, labor unions, and the informal sector to politicians, contractors, city employees, and those who relied on clubhouse beneficence. As such, Tammany corruption represented a gigantic parallel system of quasi-public financing that paid for everything from Christmas turkeys for the denizens of the East Side to additional salary increments for public employees to Charles F. Murphy’s Long Island estate and its private golf course.\(^{59}\) As of 1929, public discussion of Democratic corruption remained relatively muted; a series of scandals – involving


\(^{58}\) Yearley, *The Money Machines*, quoted at 256.

\(^{59}\) For a similar formulation, see Yearley, *The Money Machines.*
sewer construction and the granting of a bus franchise to a company of dubious qualification – had captured headlines, but none inflicted any real damage on Walker.\textsuperscript{60}

Eventually, though, when the hot-house metropolitan growth of the 1920s cooled and recession subjected Walker to a negative-sum political logic, corruption would become the defining characteristic of Walker’s government, providing a wedge to those who wished to pry the interwar Democratic order apart. But before examining the coming of the Great Depression, we turn our attention briefly to the city Walker governed – to its distinguishing characteristics at the end of the 1920s and to the social and cultural changes that were subtly reshaping the landscape within which its politics would be conducted.

III

To look at New York in 1929 was to see, as the scribes of the WPA Writers Project would later put it, “the fortunate giant in his youth.”\textsuperscript{61} Gotham was unquestionably in the ascent, its global position strengthened by America’s transformation from a debtor to a creditor nation during the World War\textsuperscript{62}, its place as a national capital reinforced by the early development of the radio networks and by the

\textsuperscript{60} Walker’s first term is best chronicled in George Walsh, \textit{Gentleman Jimmy Walker, Mayor of the Jazz Age} (New York, 1974), 60-208.


growth of the tourism business.\textsuperscript{63} “[I]mmense and prodigiously busy,”\textsuperscript{64} New York was the nation’s financial capital, its largest manufacturing center, its biggest internal consumer market, its greatest port, and the headquarters of the rapidly growing corporate management and services sectors. And to a degree that may surprise many twenty-first century readers, it was both demographically and politically central. About 5.6 percent of the American population lived in the five boroughs in 1930 (today about the same share lives in the entire New York metropolitan area), and on a clear day one could gaze out from the top of a Manhattan skyscraper upon the residences of one in every ten Americans. And the national party alignment amplified New York’s political importance. For the rest of Roosevelt’s life, neither party would possess a plausible path to the presidency that did not include victory in the Empire State, the largest prize in the electoral college. In New York, as in other large industrial swing states (such as Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania), the Democratic Party would have strategic incentives to build upon their urban majorities by appealing to new-ethnic voters, industrial workers, working-class women, and African Americans, and the GOP would seek to win enough middle-class votes in the metropolitan areas to prevail on the strength of its upstate majorities.

The social and economic diversity of the city was written into its physical profile: “a vast array of skyscrapers, department stores, and hotels juxtaposed with residential quarters both lavish and squalid, warehouses and port facilities, factories and

\textsuperscript{63} Federal Writers’ Project, \textit{New York Panorama}, 153.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 161.
sweatshops.”65 Looking at this jumble of incongruities, one contemporary dubbed interwar New York “the City of Violent Contrasts.”66 Still, in the aggregate, New York in 1929 was an extraordinarily rich and productive city with an unusually broad middle class. That year, the five boroughs, home to 5.6 percent of the national population, contributed 9.5 percent of the value added by manufacture in the United States67; a decade later, when the first federal census of business was conducted, New York City businesses paid their wage earners an average of forty-three percent more than the national average.68 Just under one third of the city’s workers labored in manufacturing and mechanical jobs; the great majority of them worked in small shops that bore little resemblance to the sprawling factories of Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, or Detroit.

Though New York’s manufacturing sector was relatively small (and becoming ever more so), it nevertheless lay at the heart of the city’s economy; upon it rested a large share of the city’s white-collar proletariat and its entrepreneurial class. The sociologist Daniel Bell has aptly described the interwar city as “the New York of the small enterpriser” – a city characterized by “small, fast-moving, risk-taking, and highly competitive [manufacturing] firms” that prospered because they could respond to consumer demand quickly. Because New York shops tended to be small, capital requirements for entry were low and entrepreneurial opportunity high; this, Bell has surmised, “made for an

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extraordinarily large middle class . . . , probably . . . the largest middle class aggregate of any urban center in this country.”

Between 1910 and 1929, the city had grown tremendously – upward, in the form of iconic skyscrapers and apartment buildings in Midtown and Downtown Manhattan, but also outward. Encouraged by the construction of new rapid transit lines and automotive thoroughfares, the massification of the automobile, and tax exemptions on new residential construction, investors ploughed a vast amount of capital into housing construction in the New York market: fully twenty percent of new residential housing begun in America in the 1920s was built within the five boroughs. The New York populace flowed rapidly out of Manhattan onto Long Island and into the Bronx, making the metropolis, for the first time, roughly coextensive with the city’s political boundaries. Row upon row of semidetached houses and modern apartment buildings went up on the outwash plain that stretched south and east from Prospect Park to the Atlantic Ocean, transforming Brooklyn from the “borough of churches and bedrooms” ringing a core of older industrial waterfront neighborhoods into a polyglot metropolis in its own right. Queens, previously a collection of “scattered clustered settlements” grouped around industrial hubs, became an affluent residential borough. Manhattan experienced a net loss of population but was not altogether starved for new residential construction, undergoing a boom in luxury apartment housing on Central Park West, Park Avenue, and along the Hudson and East rivers. In some instances, residential migration was a

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70 Ric Burns and James Sanders, New York: An Illustrated History (New York, 2003), 399-400.

71 Deborah Dash Moore, “Class and Ethnicity in the Creation of New York City Neighborhoods,” in Bender and Schorske, eds., Budapest and New York, 143-144.
surrogate for socioeconomic mobility; working-class peripheral neighborhoods sprang up in each of the three most populous outer boroughs. In others, socioeconomic mobility catalyzed the development of middle-class outer-borough neighborhoods such as Flatbush, Midwood, Eastern Parkway, and the Grand Concourse.\footnote{Generally, see Deborah Dash Moore, “On the Fringes of the City: Jewish Neighborhoods in Three Boroughs,” in Ward and Zunz, The Landscape of Modernity, 254; Evelyn Gonzalez, The Bronx (New York, 2004), chaps. 4-6; Eleanor Schoenebaum, “Emerging Neighborhoods: The Development of Brooklyn’s Fringe Areas, 1850-1930” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1977), chaps. 7-10; Stern, et al., New York 1930, 390-441; Marion R. Casey, “From the East Side to the Seaside: Irish Americans on the Move in New York City,” in Bayor and Meagher, eds., The New York Irish, 396-397.}

New York in 1929 was a city of staggering ethno-national diversity. Seventy-three percent of New Yorkers enumerated in the 1930 census had at least one parent born abroad – a much larger proportion than any other large city save Boston (seventy-one percent). Gotham was home to 43,833 Greeks, 41,927 Latin Americans, 22,501 Spaniards, 24,678 Turks, 47,978 French, 77,497 Canadians, 71,187 Scots, 115,098 Hungarians, and 150,093 Scandinavians. By far the two largest “new immigrant” groups were Eastern European Jews, who made up about twenty-six percent of the population in 1930, and Southern Italians, about fourteen percent. Third and fourth, respectively, were the Germans and the Irish at eight and six percent, though these communities were actually significantly larger than those figures suggest (for the census did not count as “ethnic” the grandchildren of the migrants of the 1840s and 1850s).\footnote{Walter Laidlaw, et al., Population of the City of New York, 1900-1930 (New York, 1932), 268; Joshua Zeitz, White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics (Chapel Hill, 2007), 12-14.}

The interwar years were a period of transition for the city’s ethnic communities – a critical passage in the transition from the “immigrant city” of the fin-de-siècle to the
“ethnic metropolis” of mid-century. The raising of new barriers to entry had curtailed the flow of new immigrants from abroad whilst also making it more difficult for people to shuttle back and forth across the Atlantic. As a result, ties between the city’s neighborhoods and old-country communities had weakened, and the character of ethnic communities in America had begun to change. The percentage of adult New Yorkers who were unnaturalized immigrants declined from about thirty-six percent in 1910 to twenty-two percent in 1930; the percentage of first- and second-generation New Yorkers who were American citizens increased correspondingly. As the size of the first generation shrank, and as the average length of an immigrant’s time in America lengthened, the individual and social effects of transition from one economy and society to another dissipated: illiteracy declined; the median number of school years completed rose.

But “assimilation” did not mean that ethnicity was disappearing or withering away. Rather, this period saw the rise of what historians of urban ethnicity call (with some uneasiness) a “second generation.” The sociologist Nathan Glazer’s description remains apt: “[A]s the groups were transformed by influences in American society, stripped of their original attributes, they were recreated as something new, but still

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74 The idea of a transition from an “immigrant city” to an “ethnic metropolis” is Deborah Dash Moore’s: see Moore, “On the Fringes of the City,” 255.


76 For a brief historiographic review of this concept, see Beth S. Wenger, New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise (New Haven, 1996), 7.
identifiable groups.” The particular strength of second-generation ethnic communities in New York had something to do with the ways in which group behavior had structured the city’s urban growth and economic expansion in the 1910s and 1920s. “Elsewhere, migration within expanding cities produced ethnically mixed class-specific neighborhoods”; in New York, “the general process of suburban development in the growth of the outer city received a special twist: the bonds of ethnicity supported ethnically separate construction industries, catering to . . . ethnically distinct housing market[s].” During the same period, New York’s ethnic communities, long segmented into occupational niches, developed diversified, relatively autonomous ethnic economies. In 1929, many New Yorkers could – and did – shop at ethnic retailers (for instance, there were ten thousand Italian grocery stores in mid-1930s New York doing exclusively Italian trade), deposit savings at coethnic banks, do business with coethnic firms, retain coethnic legal counsel, and visit coethnic doctors and dentists. As second-generation neighborhoods and economies had developed, ethnicity had become embedded in social institutions, practices, and associations spatially situated in the new urban geography of the 1920s. Thus did ethnicity persist even as it was being remade.

One “first-generation” community did develop in New York during the interwar period: Central Harlem, which grew into the largest and most prominent African

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American and Afro-Caribbean community in the nation. After 1914, gaining access to jobs because of the restriction of European immigration, Southern Blacks (primarily from the Eastern seaboard) and immigrants from the islands of the West Indies “flocked to Harlem” in a migration of such dimensions, one minister remarked, that it seemed to be “inspired by Almighty God.”[^81] New York’s so-called “non-white” population grew by sixty-six percent in the 1910s and by 115 percent in the 1920s.[^82] The extraordinary density of people and talent concentrated in interwar Harlem spawned national civil rights and Black nationalist organizations and a vibrant arts movement; it also produced intense pressure on the local housing stock, a saturated job market, high incidence of communicable disease, and other such conditions common to first-generation communities – but exacerbated in this instance by a regime of racial exclusion different in kind from what European immigrants had experienced.[^83]

New York in 1929, then, differed markedly from the prewar city – and more to the point, it differed in ways that could become politically salient. Exceptional wealth and growing property values – still concentrated within the city’s political boundaries – made it possible for the municipal government to extract greater wealth, making possible new public investments and amenities. The closing of the golden door, together with the rapid economic growth and relatively steady employment of the 1920s, had reduced the social stresses associated with the transition of individuals and families from one society,


[^82]: It was an indication of Gotham’s sheer size that the nation’s largest Black community represented less than one-twentieth of the city’s population – a much smaller share than in practically any other Northern industrial city.

economy, and language to another. The changing residential pattern elevated particular issues to greater importance – the construction of a metropolitan transportation infrastructure, for instance. The rise of the outer boroughs also promised to alter the balance of power between Greater New York’s five Democratic county organizations, making intraparty conflict all but inevitable – awaiting, it would turn out, only the destabilizing effect of the Roosevelt revolution. More indeterminate was the development of second-generation ethnic communities and Harlem, the political incorporation of which promised to expand the electoral universe dramatically and to introduce a profoundly new mix of elements into the city’s politics. But social change does not produce specific political outcomes: these changing social and cultural patterns would indeed shape the city’s politics in important ways, but only as they were themselves shaped and articulated by the great economic catastrophe that began in earnest in 1930 and the political response that followed.

IV

Because it began in the durable goods industries that had boomed in the mid-1920s, the Great Depression came later to New York than it did to the industrial cities of the heartland. Though charity officials and the New York Urban League had noticed a rise in unemployment as early as 1927\textsuperscript{84}, it took more than two years before public officials began to pay sustained attention to the problem of joblessness. Even the stock

\textsuperscript{84} Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?”, 39-40;
market’s sudden collapse in October 1929 registered only faintly on the city’s civic and political life; in the heat of that year’s mayoral campaign, neither major-party candidate made any real mention of it. The final months of 1929 saw the first widespread decline in employment, but Roosevelt did not discuss business conditions or unemployment in his January 1930 message to the state legislature. By the spring, however, conditions had deteriorated perceptibly, and breadlines had begun to form in the city.  

The Great Depression struck first and most forcefully at the nation’s manufacturing and construction industries. Tracing the curve of industrial employment in New York through the late 1920s, one sees a series of gradually ascending M-shapes, rising in April and October and falling in the summer and winter months (their peaks and troughs corresponding with the busy and slack seasons in the garment and construction industries). The first deviation from this pattern came in the closing months of 1929: employment peaked in October and then fell off much more sharply than usual during the November and December slack season; it recovered slightly in the first quarter of 1930, and then collapsed, against the seasonal pattern; it rallied in the third quarter before falling again at the year’s end. That winter, the winter of 1930-1931, social workers discovered a group they called the “new poor” – first-time charity recipients who had held what were usually considered good jobs. Prominent among them were “able-bodied men of skill and good standing in well-paid seasonal occupations (the needle trades and the building trades, notably). They were used to periods of idleness, but ordinarily they earn[ed] enough in the good season to carry them through the slack time. Last year

86 Emergency Employment Committee, *What About This Man?* (Nov., 1930), SWLAC-CU.
the preceding good season had been poor and brief, while the slack period was longer and slacker.”

As the crisis deepened the ranks of the “new poor” grew more diverse. Many office workers – “accountants, stock-and-bond salesmen, high-grade clerical workers” and the like, which had been among the fastest-growing occupational categories in Jazz Age New York – lost their jobs or saw their compensation reduced; others were forced into early retirement. By November 1932, white-collar workers constituted more than a quarter of the unemployed in New York. The spreading of the depression into the middle classes, in turn, dealt a hard blow to service-sector workers and their families.

As the months passed, and particularly as people who had achieved a measure of economic security lost their jobs, the recession became a psychological event as well as a social and economic one. Social workers enumerated the effects of unemployment: discouragement, desperation, bewilderment, confusion, loss of initiative, apathy, lethargy, obsessiveness, bitterness, cynicism, resentment, restlessness, irritability, loss of pride, and “constant fear.” Many of those who lost their jobs struggled with these emotions as well as with the immediate challenges of getting bills paid and groceries purchased. One unemployed man, a former bank employee, wrote to a social worker at a private charity organization that had provided him with a work relief job:

You have asked me to let you know how I am getting along. Today I have been able to gather my thoughts sufficiently to write you.


As you know, I was lately reduced to the five days work, in alternate weeks, which still provides food for my family. I am grateful for that. But, since the five days pay has to be spread over a period of fourteen days, there is nothing left to pay rent, or gas. Personally I allow myself a meagre breakfast and then nothing to eat again until the night, just so my children may have three meals a day.

In my search for steady employment, I have answered every possible ad in the papers, tried selling, canvassing, without any result. I have written nearly two hundred letters of application to various companies, banks, finance houses, in fact, everywhere, at any salary, just so it is steady, but without result. Out of the five days pay, I squeezed out for postage. I pound the streets, making cold applications from office door to office door. I am wearing out shoes, and wearing out myself physically and only God knows when or what the end will be. I am almost losing faith in mankind, religion and everything. I try to keep smiling when after a job, which isn’t easy when your heart, soul and mind are torn to pieces and your stomach empty at times. I am doing my utmost to prevent going to pieces and when I think of my unpaid rent, I get frantic thoughts, prejudice, hatred and everything else, but then I must pull myself together for the sake of my family. Night after night I go to bed, my mind in a whirl, wondering if I will ever get a job, get some money to pay rent, etc. Nothing but restless nights and troubled mind. What to do more than I have, I don’t know, but I hope to get a break soon.

Some New Yorkers fell into complete destitution: shantytown encampments housing some two thousand people developed in Central Park, near the garbage dump alongside the Hudson River, and amidst factories and warehouses on the East River and in Red Hook. Jobless men and women took to hawking “everything from pencils to cheap neckties to apples” on Manhattan street corners. Some tenants joined in

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neighborhood action to fight evictions; more relied on the leniency of landlords, who were under informal pressure from City Hall not to evict delinquent tenants and who in turn began referring their tenants to relief agencies. The more fortunate deferred vacations and regular consumer purchases. A large internal migration occurred as families that had moved into affluent neighborhoods in the 1920s retraced their steps – from Queens back to Yorkville, from the West Bronx back to the East Bronx. Eventually savings ran out and real poverty set in. By 1934, according to one estimate, twenty percent of New York public school students suffered from malnutrition. Between 1930 and 1932, many families found that the material resources and the sense of security they had struggled to attain over the previous decades had vanished. “In general,” a 1931 study concluded, “families accustomed to living at the margin dropped below it; families who had never before been dependent were reduced to the level of the usual run of cases under the care of the agencies; foreign-born families who by years of industry and effort raised themselves to a much better position were obliged to drop back to the level at which they started in America, or even lower.”

The city and the nation were submerged by the Depression, and as the effects of individual material deprivation and psychic trauma rippled outward into relations with spouses, children, friends, and communities, the very foundations of everyday life were shaken.

Dire as these conditions were, New York entered the Depression in a relatively advantageous position. Because of the diversity of its economy and the size of its white-

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collar workforce, joblessness was nowhere near as catastrophic in the five boroughs as it was in the industrial cities of the Midwest. Moreover, New York possessed not only great wealth but also well-established and highly professionalized charity organizations, a large population of social work professionals, and dense networks of ethnic and neighborhood social-provision institutions. These characteristics allowed the city to respond to the unemployment crisis more quickly, more generously, more professionally, and more creatively than any other large area of the country. When the Depression struck, churches, ethnic societies, charities, party clubhouses, and neighborhood institutions responded quickly. So did individuals like William Randolph Hearst, whose breadlines and soup kitchens were soon serving 85,000 meals a day. By mid-1930, however, it was evident to city officials and private welfare officials alike that extraordinary measures were required. In October 1930, Walker created an Official Committee for Relief of the Unemployed and Needy which solicited contributions from municipal employees and distributed aid via the police precincts in the form of food baskets, grocery tickets, and rent money. (The Board of Education established a similar system that provided hot lunches in schools to children whose parents were without work.)

What ultimately proved most distinctive about the civic response to the unemployment crisis of the 1930s, first in New York and then in the United States as a whole, was the degree to which it focused on providing work rather than the simple

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94 A 1931 study, differentiated by race and gender, found that 19.4 percent of White men, 25.4 percent of Black men, 11.2 percent of White women, and 28.5 percent of Black women living in Manhattan were unemployed; the corresponding figures for Chicago, were 29.7, 43.5, 19.4, and 58.5. In heavily industrial cities –Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Akron – it was still worse; the figures in Detroit, for instance, were 32.4, 60.2, 17.4, and 75.0. (Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?”, 44.)

necessities of life. Recent studies of the New Deal works programs have tended to ascribe the federal government’s turn to public employment as a product of changes in expert opinion – the conviction of policy thinkers during and after the Great War that public construction could be used as a tool for the management of business cycles on the one hand and the belief of social work professionals in the moral and social superiority of work over “direct relief” on the other.\textsuperscript{96} But the idea that the government should serve as an employer of last resort in times when work was scarce was of popular provenance. Many urban workers believed that the opportunity to earn a reward was a right embedded in social life – for it held the key to self-respect, to public esteem, and to the ability to discharge one’s obligations. For more than a century, New Yorkers, like workers in other cities, had responded to recessions by demanding jobs so that they could pay their debts and sustain their families until businesses began hiring again. “Relief” workers had dug the foundation for City Hall during the recession brought on by Jefferson’s Embargo; they had started work on Central Park in the late 1850s. The city had been forced out of this role by charter reforms following the Tweed Ring scandals of the 1870s. But a coalition of unionists had won state authorization for some modest spending on public construction during the “Great Depression” of the 1890s. And as we have seen, union leaders, social workers, and clergymen had met the recession of 1914-1915 by asking city officials for a public employment program. “Work relief” seemed a natural response to the unemployment crisis of the 1930s, in short, because a long tradition of working-class

demands that the local government serve as the employer of last resort had made it seem so.  

In 1931, after a year of effort, labor leaders convinced the city to appropriate about $10 million to finance emergency public works projects – mostly parks maintenance, street repairs, and the like (but not subway construction and low-cost housing, as the union leaders had hoped).  

And in September, 1930, the city’s established private charity organizations – including the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), the Charity Organization Society, the Children’s Aid Society, and the federations of religious charities – banded together to create an Emergency Employment Committee to coordinate their own emergency relief efforts.  

Known as the Prosser Committee after its head, Bankers’ Trust chairman Seward Prosser, it operated for about ten months before it ran out of money; at that time another, similar group was formed under the chairmanship of Manufacturers Trust Company president Harvey Gibson (this one dubbed the Gibson Committee).  About 600,000 people made donations to the two committees, which was sufficient to provide between twenty-one and twenty-four hours of work for $12 to $15 per week to about 81,000 men and women (a third of those who applied), most of them heads of families, representing “at least 420,000 people.”

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There developed between the city and the private charity organizations a rough division of labor in the administration of relief: the former took responsibility for most of the unemployed blue-collar workers and the latter for white-collar types, professionals, artists, and working women. The city put men to work planting trees and repairing playgrounds in the city parks and patching up streets under the supervision of the borough presidents. The Prosser and Gibson committees, seeking to conserve the particular skills of white-collar and professional workers, developed a number of innovative projects: garment workers sewed clothing for charity; unemployed artists painted murals, restored church statuary, and gave art lessons to children; out-of-work secretaries taught night classes in stenography and clerical work; musicians gave free public performances in the parks. More than one thousand people were furnished to the Port Authority to make a study of freight and vehicle movement in the metropolitan area. Others were loaned to NYU and City College to work on market analyses and translations of foreign works. The Gibson Committee even had a project for cobblers and barbers, who were paid to set up stands in the parks.

In the coming years, the social imagination of the New York social workers who ran the Prosser and Gibson committees, invigorated by the kind of financing only the federal government could provide, would form the basis for the type of white-collar, professional, and arts projects undertaken by the Civil Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration. But with a peak employment of 32,312, these committees, like the city government itself, did not come close to fully meeting the unemployment situation; and by 1931, despite the middling scale of their relief efforts, both the municipal government and the Gibson committee were approaching insolvency.
Eighteen months after the stock market crash, New York, like every other American community, possessed nothing approaching an adequate response to this unemployment crisis. It was at this juncture that New York State Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt moved to create a state relief program.

V

Though he quickly became a leading critic of Hoover’s economic policies, Governor Roosevelt’s initial efforts in New York mirrored the Republican President’s in their emphasis upon voluntary cooperation by business. In the spring of 1931 he created a Commission on Industrial Employment Stabilization to conceive of ways for industry to alleviate seasonal unemployment (which at this stage he considered one of the major factors in the downturn) by spreading work on a voluntary basis, without government coercion. The principal difference between Roosevelt and Hoover in the early months was one of tone. Hoover projected optimism because he thought public confidence the key to recovery; Roosevelt, critical of the optimistic statements emanating from the White House, insisted on facing conditions as they were. “The situation is serious,” he said in March, “and the time has come for us to face this unpleasant fact dispassionately and constructively as a scientist faces a test tube of deadly germs. . . .”

99 Millett, The WPA in New York, 6-7; Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?”, 50.

Roosevelt ascribed the depression to a regular, periodic trough in the business cycle – exacerbated, he believed, because it had coincided with a period of technological displacement. As the depression deepened he came to view it in more basic terms as a failure in the economic system to match production with consumption, and he began to emphasize planning: deliberate efforts to arrange society and economic production so as to make more efficient use of resources. His administration’s one concrete planning initiative entailed the resettlement of the urban masses to rural areas. FDR believed cities were the epicenters of boom-and-bust cycles, “hothouses of growth that feel the chill winds of depression first”101; and he thought they were overpopulated “in the sense that there are too many people in them to maintain a decent living for all.”102 High urban land values, tax levels, and living costs, he claimed, disrupted the channels of economic distribution, contributing to the systemic breakdown in distribution that led to want amidst plenty. “[T]he proper distribution of the products of industry cannot be solved,” he thought, “until we do something to solve the proper distribution of the population who will use the products.”103

Roosevelt envisioned a government-assisted back-to-the-land movement which would solve the problem of “sociological imbalance” while making available to urban families the moral satisfactions he had known as a son of the Hudson Valley aristocracy. Pastoral though it was, this was in a sense a quite modern vision. Roosevelt believed that a host of technological advances – including modern transportation, electrical lighting and refrigeration, the extension and improvement of telephones and the advent of the

102 Ibid., 116.
103 Ibid., 517.
radio, the parcel post, and a host of other advances – had closed the gap in comfort and quality of life between rural and urban living. This, in turn, had made it possible to enjoy the advantages of rural life without sacrificing the material comforts of the city. “There is contact with the earth and nature and the restful privilege of getting away from the pavements and from noise” in the country, he suggested. “There is an opportunity for permanency of abode, a chance to establish a home in the traditional American sense.”

To these moral and social considerations were now added economic ones. Resettlement would carry urban workers away from the “places where it is most inconvenient and expensive for society to help them,” and, with a bit of assistance, establish them in places where they could help themselves. (Though he could not admit it because of the adamant opposition of farmers, already awash in surplus production, he plainly expected the resettled workers to engage in subsistence farming.) And it would place working families where they could live “far more cheaply and with a greater deal of security.” Resettlement appealed in the early years of the Great Depression, then, because it seemed to serve the ends of relief, recovery, and reform simultaneously. In 1930, FDR created a Commission on Rural Homes and charged it with “canvassing means for relocating people in the country.” By May, 1932, he was trying to “place as many families as possible on subsistence farms,” the state providing money for rent, tools, and seed. A fair number of city dwellers wrote Roosevelt in excitement to inquire about the program, but the plan foundered because of its practical difficulty and high initial cost.


Beyond his resettlement schemes, however, Roosevelt’s program for meeting the depression looked much like the one progressives such as Robert Wagner, Robert M. La Follette, and Fiorello La Guardia were pushing in the 72nd Congress. As soon as the recessionary trend had became evident, Roosevelt had moved to increase state public works spending. If Hoover had done the same, Roosevelt suggested in one 1930 campaign speech, the depression might not have become so severe. In a speech to the 1930 Governors’ Conference, he advocated a five-day work week. He also became the nation’s most prominent proponent of unemployment insurance – albeit a cautious one. Claiming experience in the insurance field from his time at the Fidelity & Deposit (much as he claimed experience in the field of agriculture as a Hudson Valley gentleman farmer), he argued that unemployment insurance could be made actuarially sound, envisioning a public-private partnership in which a governmental program would be financed through private life-insurance companies. Roosevelt became a student of European programs, absorbing information given him by Frances Perkins and Paul Douglas, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago who was duly summoned to Albany for further discussion. In January 1931, briefed by Douglas, he spoke about unemployment insurance to a conference of northeastern governors he had convened to discuss state-level and inter-state responses to the unemployment problem. In March, he asked the state legislature to create a commission to study unemployment insurance.

But Roosevelt’s most important actions, at least in the near term, centered in the area of relief for the unemployed. Like the congressional progressives who were pressing Hoover for a national program, Roosevelt believed that the inadequacy of existing relief efforts should be addressed by bringing to bear the spending resources of higher levels of
government. He understood governments as parts of a continuity of social organization, with responsibilities derived from the interdependence of modern society. “The State,” Roosevelt suggested in his message urging creation of a state relief program, was “but the machinery through which . . . mutual aid and protection is achieved.” Its responsibilities had been enlarged as society had “grown to a better understanding of government functions” and had come to recognize that there existed no such thing as a “self-supporting man” – “without the help of thousands of others, every one of us would die, naked and starved.” In an age of mutual interdependence, “Modern society, acting through government” owed a “definite obligation to prevent starvation or the dire want of any of its fellows who try to maintain themselves but cannot . . . not as a matter of charity but as a matter of social duty.”

This essentially Progressive conception of the state raised questions about the role of governments within the American federal system. What functions properly belonged to local governments? To the states? To the national government? What was and was not the function of government? Roosevelt sought to answer these questions by invoking the principle of subsidiarity: social obligations, he suggested, should be discharged at the most local level capable of discharging them. If the family or neighborhood could not meet these obligations, they became a responsibility of community organizations; if these should fail, responsibility passed to the local governments. And if local governments should prove unequal to the task, the states should step in. The state government was thus obligated to enter into what had previously been the field of private charity and local government simply because it had been conclusively demonstrated that local institutions alone could not discharge this social duty: state aid came “by a process of elimination, if
by nothing else.” Extending this principle during the 1932 presidential campaign, Roosevelt suggested that the federal government should act when it became evident that the states and communities could not meet the burden adequately. That point, he believed, had been reached; in January of 1932 he cabled Senator Wagner in support of the La Follette-Costigan relief bill, adding that he believed federal relief should not be permanent policy.  

In early August, 1931, Roosevelt sent a letter to the mayors of each city above 25,000 in population asking them to recommend a state relief program so that he “could make plans for it,” thereby pioneering a technique he would use during the New Deal of using mayors to validate and support his relief policies. When the state legislature convened in August 1931, he sent a message recommending a comprehensive state relief program. By the end of August the legislature had passed Roosevelt’s program, establishing the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) and appropriating $20 million to reimburse local relief agencies forty percent of their expenditures. With this action, New York became the first state in the nation to provide directly for the victims of the Depression. Easily Roosevelt’s greatest achievement as governor of New York, the TERA, in its first year, helped finance work relief for about 48,000 families in New York City and home relief (in the form of food tickets and rent and clothing vouchers) for about 90,000 more.

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VI

Across the world, the historian Daniel Rodgers notes, “political parties unlucky enough to preside over the early phases of the Depression . . . suffered dramatic losses of credibility.”\(^{108}\) In America, the multifarious pressures generated by the economic contraction led to the collapse of one local regime after another. In the municipal elections of 1931 and 1933 incumbents were turned out at an astonishing rate, with some Northern and Midwestern cities going to the Democrats for the first time since the Civil War. Jimmy Walker and the New York Democracy entered the Depression in stronger political position than most incumbents, and for a while they weathered the storm comparatively well. But ultimately New York’s Democratic regime, tossed by the waves of the economic catastrophe, was to crash in spectacular fashion.

The breadth of Walker’s coalition had always depended on the steady growth of the city’s tax base, and thus in turn upon the expansion of the local economy. When the Depression removed this essential condition, Walker was forced into a negative-sum politics that was bound to produce powerful enemies. In 1930 and 1931, declining tax receipts produced a budget shortfall. Walker refused to cut salaries or institute furloughs, instead issuing short-term tax receipt notes; when in turn the anticipated tax revenue failed to materialize, he rolled those short-term notes over into long-term debt. At the end of 1931, the market for municipal bonds collapsed, and the city was left teetering on the edge of insolvency. New York’s financial, business, and real estate communities

\(^{108}\) Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 413.

Amidst this climate of anxiety, corruption, long a central feature of Walker’s administration, moved to the forefront of New York’s civic life. Late in the summer of 1930, Roosevelt, in an effort to preempt what he anticipated to be the Republicans’ principal line of attack in the fall campaign, requested that the Appellate Division of the State Supreme Court begin an investigation into New York City’s magistrate courts, which had come under scrutiny in the wake of a Bar Association inquiry earlier that year. The Court chose as counsel the respected attorney Samuel Seabury, an independent Democrat who was to become the scourge of Tammany Hall and the leading force in the construction of an anti-machine Fusion movement. Descended from a long and distinguished line of Episcopalian ministers, dignified in his bearing, and bombastic in his moral righteousness, Seabury could come off as a caricature of a patrician. In truth, there was more to Seabury than met the eye. Raised in an atmosphere of “genteel poverty” by a family that had experienced the kind of status decline so often associated with famous old families in the late nineteenth century, he had entered politics not as a Mugwump but as a follower of Henry George, the great social theorist, single-tax advocate, and aspirant to the New York mayoralty. Following George’s death, Seabury had become a leading figure in Hearst’s Municipal Ownership League and a populist-turned-Wilson Democrat. A talented politician in his own right, he had gotten himself elected to the State Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals, and in 1916 he had run as
the Democratic candidate for governor. Thereafter he had retired from public life and had turned to corporation law. The investigation of the magistrate courts and eventually of the entire city government was to awaken in him both simmering, long-frustrated political ambitions, and a deep-set belief that machine politics was a curse not merely upon the taxpayers of the city but upon the people as a whole.\textsuperscript{110}

Seabury’s personal biography and appearance – “his great ability, his white hair and his dignity, his reputation”\textsuperscript{111} – enabled him to come across as something more than a spokesman for the propertied and the financial community. As a former politician, he understood the art of publicity better than most civic reformers. And he possessed sufficient ability to run away with the investigation. Beginning with the inquiry into the magistrate courts, Seabury became a kind of anti-corruption entrepreneur. He assembled a team of young and capable attorneys (many of whom would later serve in the La Guardia administration) and began tearing through testimony and bank accounts to document sordid practices within New York’s criminal justice system.\textsuperscript{112}

Tammany’s opponents now seized on Seabury’s investigations as the best available means of overturning the Democratic regime. Roosevelt would soon come to view the reformers as sanctimonious and publicity-mad, but he found it impossible to yield the high ground on the good-government issue. In March of 1931, he enlisted Seabury to investigate allegations of incompetence in the Manhattan district attorney’s


\textsuperscript{111} Reminiscences of Reuben Lazarus, CCOHC, 132-143.

office. A few weeks later, with the Governor’s consent, the state legislature created a Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate the Affairs of the City of New York, with Seabury as its counsel. In the months that followed, evidence of corruption played out in spectacular fashion in hearing rooms and on the front pages of the New York newspapers, drawing ever-greater public attention. Given the crucial power of subpoena, Seabury verified unsavory practices that had previously been all but documented and discovered others that were almost too wild to have been imagined. Among the men he charged were: several district leaders who had amassed half-million dollar fortunes on municipal salaries; a county leader who commanded jobholders and city agencies alike to purchase their automobiles from his son-in-law’s dealership; a district leader whose sinecure job as city marriage clerk had allowed him to collect hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes (“tips”) doled out by bridegrooms; and a well-connected veterinarian who had made nearly a quarter million dollars in a single year fixing applications for building and zoning regulation variances. In February 1932, Roosevelt established precedent by removing from office the man who would become the most famous of the offenders: Manhattan sheriff Thomas Farley, possessor of a “wonderful tin box” which he claimed to be the origin of bank deposits totaling $310,000 in excess of his salary earnings.

Seabury put Jimmy Walker on the stand in May. Walker showed up to the “duel at Foley Square” unprepared and tried to survive by the grace of his wit. Seabury called attention to $300,000 the Mayor had accepted from people who sought to do business with the city and to a safe deposit box jointly owned by Walker and his financial adviser into which the latter (who had subsequently fled to Mexico) “had made deposits totaling
nearly one million dollars.” Walker met Seabury’s questions with “evasion, amnesia, cheap theatrics, and shallow, unbelievable rationalizations,” denying knowledge of the safe deposit box and describing the $300,000 as mere “beneficences” bestowed upon him by generous friends. Walker could not refute Seabury’s charges; but neither could Seabury present more than circumstantial evidence that Walker had been personally guilty of conduct requiring his removal for malfeasance. Still, the Seabury hearings had demonstrated amply that Walker either could not or would not enforce basic standards of honesty and competency within his administration, leaving room for Roosevelt to remove him on the grounds of nonfeasance.  

On August 5, after an exchange of public correspondence, Roosevelt summoned Walker to appear before him in the Executive Chamber in Albany to answer charges. Hearings began on August 11 (the date, coincidentally, of Hoover’s speech accepting the Republican nomination) and lasted for two weeks, with Roosevelt adding evening sessions in order that the ordeal might be concluded before the active phase of the campaign. The hearings served Roosevelt well politically; he prepared diligently and used the occasion to display an intellectual capacity and seriousness of purpose some still doubted he possessed. However, he produced no better case for Walker’s removal than Seabury had, and as the campaign season neared he was torn as to which course to follow. He was abruptly relieved of the burden of decision when Walker, personally exhausted and under pressure from Al Smith to resign “for the good of the party,” stepped down from the mayoralty on September 1, 1932.  

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113 Mann, *La Guardia Comes to Power*, 61.

The mayoralty passed to the president of the Board of Aldermen, a pious and competent Bronx Democrat named Joseph (“Holy Joe”) McKee. Though he became popular as an interim mayor, displaying a diligence and probity absent in the Walker years), Tammany refused to slate McKee as the nominee in the emergency election to fill Walker’s seat in 1932; with Roosevelt apparently on his way to the White House, the Tammany chieftains feared Flynn’s power was on the rise and wanted a Manhattanite in City Hall. Flynn, unwilling to risk dividing the party with Roosevelt and Herbert Lehman up for election, swallowed his objections and went along with Tammany’s choice, a surrogate court judge named John O’Brien.\footnote{Flynn, \textit{You’re the Boss}, 129-130.} Notwithstanding an unprecedented number of write-in votes for McKee (the result of a campaign by the \textit{World-Telegram} and the largest Socialist vote in the city’s history, O’Brien was elected overwhelmingly, by more or less the same voters who pulled the lever for Roosevelt.

By the time O’Brien took office, New York’s creditors had essentially seized control of its spending policy. The fear of default finally shook Tammany free from its unwillingness to cut municipal salaries – smaller paychecks were better than no paychecks – and in early 1933 the Board of Estimate voted through a retrenchment program aimed partly at satisfying the bankers and partly at staving off a reform challenge in the fall municipal elections. That summer, O’Brien proposed to widen the city’s revenue base by adding a slew of new taxes; interested groups mobilized to defeat each one, leaving only a higher water rate and a tax on cab fare, which in turn were soon
invalidated by the courts. O’Brien was to bear the burden of this unpopular effort for the rest of his short political career.116

Finally, in September of 1933, Governor Herbert Lehman brokered an agreement between the city government and five of the largest investment banks which imposed strict conditions on the city in exchange for additional loans to meet current expenditures and relief costs. By agreeing to segregate tax receipts into a fund for repaying tax-receipt notes, the city made repayment of debts its foremost priority; it likewise satisfied the real estate community by imposing a four-year cap on the property tax rate. In exchange, the bankers’ consortium agreed to provide more operating loans and a $70 million serial bond issue expressly for unemployment relief. The Democratic regime of the 1920s was now dead; it had been replaced, temporarily, by a crisis regime whose policies were dominated by the city’s creditors and property owners and whose social imagination ranged not much further than an appreciation of the social upheaval that might ensue should relief be shut off entirely.117

VII

Roosevelt, victorious in the November election in a landslide, assumed the presidency on March 4, 1933. The following months would witness one of the most


remarkable bursts of lawmaking in American history. Suggesting in his inaugural address the necessity of “broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency,” Roosevelt acted unilaterally to shore up public support in the American banking system. Thereafter major legislation poured forth from the Democratic Congress in an unyielding torrent: the Emergency Banking Act on March 9, the Economy Act on March 13, the Federal Emergency Relief Act, the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and the Tennessee Valley Authority Act in mid-May, the Securities Act of 1933 (creating the Securities Exchange Commission) on May 27, and finally the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 (establishing the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) and the National Industrial Recovery Act on June 16.

Beginning with the Hundred Days and stretching through Roosevelt’s first term, the American national government would muster a capacity for large-scale innovation it had not displayed since the Civil War, and would match, perhaps, only in the mid-1960s. Several developments had converged to make this extraordinary passage possible. First, the Democratic Party, which had for a generation been more inclined than its counterpart to champion vigorous federal initiatives of the sort the New Dealers would put into operation, had attained tremendous majorities in both houses of Congress – owing partly to the Depression and partly to the massive entry of first- and second-generation Americans into the electorate. (The Democratic Party had largely represented the interests of farmers and miners, but the continued growth of the metropolitan areas, the

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reapportionment of Congress following the 1930 Census, and not least the rise of an urban Democracy in the late 1920s and early 1930s helped to ensure that the interests of urban workers would be represented in Congress.\footnote{Gail Radford, Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era (Chicago, 1996), 90; John H. Mollenkopf, The Contested City (Princeton, 1983), 52-59.} Second, the relative underdevelopment of the national state had given Roosevelt and the New Dealers an unusual freedom to be creative, as they felt little pressure to utilize preexisting national institutions to meet the unemployment crisis, rendering their choices relatively unconstrained by well-organized interests within the national bureaucracy.\footnote{Margaret Weir and Theda Skocpol, “State Structures and the Possibilities of a ‘Keynesian’ Response to the Great Depression in Sweden, Britain, and the United States,” in Peter Evans, et al., eds., Bringing the State Back In (New York, 1985), 121-123, 127-129, and passim.} (The weakness of national state capacities also constrained New Deal policymaking, as we shall see shortly.) Third, the national crisis had transformed the office of the presidency into a powerful tool for active governance. Roosevelt had brought to culmination patterns of development in the American presidency that had been underway since the early twentieth century, combining the functions of chief executive, prime minister, party leader, and mass leader.\footnote{See esp. Jeffrey Tulis, The Rhetorical Presidency (Princeton, 1987); Sidney M. Milkis, The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since the New Deal (New York, 1993), 26-31; Fred Greenstein, “Continuity and Change in the Modern Presidency,” in Anthony King, ed., The New American Political System (Washington, 1979), 47-50. Roosevelt himself, following the examples of TR and Wilson, envisioned the presidency “not as an administrative job, primarily, but as a place of high political leadership. . . . He [believed] he must look personally to [the people’s] needs and desires – and keep in his own hands the power of decision on vital matters.” (Thomas Greer, What Roosevelt Thought: The Social and Political Ideas of Franklin D. Roosevelt [East Lansing, 1958], 92-93 [emphasis in the original].)} (“The Chief Executive became the chief lawmaker,” the political scientist E. Pendleton Herring wrote after the session had ended; “The President had become a prime minister. . . . It was at the level of the presidential office that the hierarchy of party, the confusion of legislative blocs, and the administrative authorities
were given some measure of integration in meeting national problems.\textsuperscript{124} The fourth and final factor was sheer lucky timing: the Depression’s nadir coincided almost exactly with Roosevelt’s ascent to the presidency, leaving the Republican Party thoroughly discredited and the Democrats extremely well positioned to claim credit for the economic recovery.

VIII

From the turn of the century there had been three paths to City Hall. Most of New York’s mayors had been independent Democrats, selected by the party leaders because they commanded wide public respect or influential backing – attributes that would help keep City Hall in Democratic hands and shore up the machine candidates down ticket. Beginning with Walker, it had become possible for life-long organization Democrats to work their way to City Hall by serving effectively in lower offices. And twice since consolidation, in 1901 and again in 1913, anti-machine elements had formed temporary coalitions to oust the Democrats from office. As a rule, such “fusion” candidacies were preceded by fusion movements, in which “extraordinary conglomeration[s] of incompatibles united by a common hatred of Tammany”\textsuperscript{125} – the Republican Party, dissident Democrats, the financial, business, and property-owner communities, good-


government organizations and civic watchdog groups, editors, social workers, universities, clergy, the Bar Association, women’s groups – sought out a candidate acceptable to a broad range of anti-machine elements.\textsuperscript{126}

In December 1932, Republican state chairman Kingsland Macy, an insurgent Long Islander who was seeking to build a power base in the city from which to challenge the upstate Old Guard, had appointed a committee to seek fusion with other anti-Tammany groups. A new political party, the City Party (later renamed the City Fusion Party) was formed. And a self-appointed committee consisting of a conservative Republican ex-governor, a member of the state chamber of commerce, a representative of a good-government civic group, and the head of still another third party began approaching potential fusion candidates – who, one by one, took themselves out of consideration.\textsuperscript{127}

The fusion standard would ultimately be claimed by Fiorello H. La Guardia, the former president of the Board of Aldermen and until March of 1933, East Harlem’s representative in the U.S. Congress. Though he became a proud party irregular in later years, La Guardia had risen in politics through the Republican Party, serving an apprenticeship in a lower Manhattan clubhouse before leveraging his ethnicity – the first major Italian American politician in New York City, he also possessed ties to the Jewish labor movement – to secure the party’s nomination for Congress in 1914 (when he lost) and 1916 (when heavy Republican turnout helped him win). In the summer of 1917 he


\textsuperscript{127} Judith Stein, “The Birth of Liberal Republicanism in New York State, 1932-1938” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1968), 45; Garrett, \textit{The La Guardia Years}, 95-98.
had left Congress to join the U.S. Army Air Service, eventually attaining the rank of major and garnering notice as America’s “flying congressman”; he had returned briefly to Congress before serving two years as President of the Board of Alderman, a job which had provided him with a detailed knowledge of city politics. By the end of his tenure, he had become a forthright proponent of many of the “social reform” policy ideas that had been put on the urban agenda in the previous decades. In 1923 he had returned to Congress, now forming a close relationship with Midwestern progressive Republicans such as Robert M. La Follette and George Norris who sought above all to use government as a tool to promote a broader distribution of purchasing power. He had secured the Republican nomination for mayor in 1929, had built his campaign around the efficiency-movement program and some early indications of official corruption, and had lost to Walker by the largest margin in the city’s history. Following the economic collapse he had become a leading progressive voice in Congress, pushing for national public works, relief, and unemployment insurance programs, guiding Norris’s anti-injunction bill through the House, and leading the opposition to Hoover’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the sales tax which the administration had included in its revenue bill.128

La Guardia’s underwhelming record as a mayoral candidate and his proud radicalism in Congress rendered him an unlikely fusion nominee. Yet he did possess some advantages, and he made use of them with characteristic ingenuity and doggedness. He knew the efficiency program and he had perfected the rhetoric of anti-bossism, which enabled him to talk to reform-minded Republicans who might otherwise have been

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skeptical of him; as the year progressed, he made several well-received appearances before well-born audiences, demonstrating a sobriety that surprised many in the crowd. He also had a personal following no other potential candidate possessed. His political manager Vito Marcantonio launched a petition-writing campaign in Italian neighborhoods and sent them “by the wheelbarrow” to Judge Seabury. And he threatened to challenge the fusionists’ candidate in the Republican primary. “He would send for me every once in a while and say, . . . ‘Well, who’s your latest mayor?’,” the chairman of the City Fusion Party recalled, “and I would tell him. He would jump around and shake his fist and he’d say, ‘Well, there’s only one man going to be the candidate, and I’m the man. I’m going to run. I want to be mayor.’”¹²⁹

Gradually La Guardia won the support of key fusionists. New York County Republican Chairman Kingsland Macy, recognizing that FDR’s emergence as the dominant figure in American politics had likely shut his party out of state and national office for the near future, came to view La Guardia as the Republicans’ best opportunity to hold on to at least one major source of patronage. Adolf Berle, who sat on the “harmony committee” that ultimately selected a fusion candidate, gave his strong support to La Guardia. And most important of all, Samuel Seabury, whose status as the public face of the anti-Tammany movement gave him immense power in the fusion proceedings, set his heart on the Little Flower’s candidacy. Berle, the first to approach Seabury on La Guardia’s behalf, had satisfied the Judge that La Guardia was not in fact a “noisy, cheap, self-promoting politician” (as Seabury had apparently been told) by recounting the Little Flower’s diligence and ability during the Lame Duck session. Seabury soon came to believe La Guardia combined the qualities he most wished to see in a reform candidate:

¹²⁹ Mann, *La Guardia Comes to Power*, 79, 86.
“he’s absolutely honest, he’s a man of great courage, and he can win.” By the time the harmony committee convened in early August, Seabury would accept no one else. He used his influence to block all other candidates, and after a stormy backroom session on the evening of August 3, the committee chose La Guardia.  

There was only one issue in New York’s local politics, La Guardia told his Fusion running mates at one September meeting, “and that issue is the Tammany Hall of [New York County Chairman] John F. Curry.” But if the politics of anti-bossism inevitably dominated the 1933 campaign, La Guardia himself had integrated good-government institutional reform into the vision of progressive municipal government he had developed a decade earlier; the two were now thoroughly intertwined, and though he devoted most of his words on the campaign trail to denouncing Tammany plunder and theft, he had little difficulty explaining how a government of “brokers and fixers” (as Seabury put it) impeded the realization of his own vision of civic progress. The city’s collective advancement, he believed, had been blocked by politics conducted for private gain; the paternalistic, advantage-driven character of machine government had stymied the development of a local government that could make true social progress.

Too often life in New York is merely a squalid succession of days, whereas in fact it can be a great, living, thrilling adventure. The reason, I think, is plain. . . . We need imagination in City Hall – imagination for the other fellow; and hitherto all we have had has been astuteness to find personal advantage. . . .

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131 Mann, La Guardia Comes to Power, 92.

132 NYT, Oct. 3, Nov. 4, 1933.
First and foremost, I want justice on the broadest scale. By this I do not mean the justice that is handed out in police courts. I mean the justice that gives to everyone some chance for the beauty and the better things of life. . . .

From Bowling Green to the south boundaries of Yonkers, from the Hudson River to Queens and Coney Island, there are great areas of the people who regard city government either as a natural enemy or as a devouring monster to be propitiated with offerings before their rights of citizenship can be secured.\(^{133}\)

A sagacious Democratic leader in the Murphy mold, encountering the circumstances which confronted Tammany in 1933, would have nominated a respected outsider unbesmirched by the challenges involved in governing during the fiscal crisis and acceptable to the city’s business community, which wanted reform but remained leery of La Guardia. But Tammany Hall did not possess sagacious leadership. “It is a fiction, the New Tammany,” John F. Curry had proclaimed upon assuming the New York County chairmanship in 1929. “I will carry out the policies in which I grew up.”\(^{134}\)

The Seabury hearings and the rise of Roosevelt had only intensified Tammany’s insistence on guarding the organization’s prerogatives, and he now renominated O’Brien, one of the Manhattan machine’s own. Almost immediately upon O’Brien’s victory in the Democratic primary, a boom began among anti-Tammany, anti-La Guardia businessmen for a third ticket, the candidate to be the former acting mayor Joseph McKee. News soon broke that President Roosevelt’s two top political operatives in New York, Flynn of the Bronx and New York State leader (now also DNC chair and Postmaster General) Jim Farley, had agreed that McKee’s candidacy on an independent Democratic ticket would

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\(^{133}\) FHL, “New York as No. 1,” \(^{NYT}\), Dec. 4, 1982 (a reprint of an edited version of the Bronx address printed in \(Liberty\) magazine shortly after La Guardia’s inauguration).

be desirable. McKee, who did not really want to reenter public life, dithered for a few
days before succumbing to pressure from the national administration and announcing his
candidacy.\footnote{NYT, Sept. 22-23, 1933.}

It was widely believed at the time that McKee would not have entered the race
without the White House’s approval. Only years later did it become evident just how
active a role Roosevelt had played in launching McKee’s candidacy. He presided over
the meeting at which it was decided that McKee would run\footnote{The first-hand accounts are at odds, but all are in accord that Roosevelt was personally involved. Farley’s diary is the fullest, most contemporary, and most credible. This source indicates that both Farley and State Democratic Committee lieutenant Vincent Dailey had been planning McKee’s candidacy for some time prior to the Democratic primaries, spurred by poll data supplied by the \textit{Literary Digest} which showed O’Brien could not win in a two-man race with La Guardia, and had pitched the plan to Flynn. Farley had arranged before the primary to have dinner at the White House shortly after the results were known and decide upon a course of action. At that dinner (attended by Roosevelt, Farley, Flynn, Dailey, and Missy LeHand), it was unanimously decided that McKee would enter the race. “The President is delighted,” Farley wrote, “and while he will not actively take part the plan has his sanction and approval.” (James A. Farley diary, Aug. 28, Sept. 20-21, 1933, Farley Papers, Private File, LC; cf. Flynn, \textit{You’re the Boss}, 133; Adolf A. Berle, Jr., diary, Oct. 31, 1939, Berle Papers, Box 211, FDRL; \textit{NYWT}, Nov. 2, 1940.)}136, helped to draft the
statement announcing Farley’s intention to vote for McKee\footnote{The draft of Farley’s statement and correspondence related to it is in the Farley Papers, Presidential File, “Roosevelt, Franklin D., 1929-1933,” LC.}, and used his personal
influence to secure at least one of McKee’s ticket mates – Ferdinand Pecora, who
received acclaim for his high-profile investigation of Wall Street and now agreed to run
for Manhattan district attorney.\footnote{Reminiscences of Ferdinand Pecora, CCOHC, 793.}

Roosevelt had intervened “so adroitly and indirectly,” his biographer James
MacGregor Burns later wrote, that “politicians were arguing years later as to which
Democratic faction he had aided, or whether he was intent mainly on electing La
Guardia.” He definitely did not intervene with the intention of helping La Guardia get
elected – for the decision was made based on polling evidence that La Guardia’s victory in a two-way race with O’Brien was all but certain. It does not necessarily follow, of course, that Roosevelt was actually antagonistic toward the prospect of a La Guardia mayoralty. It seems most likely that Roosevelt was relatively indifferent to the outcome as between McKee and La Guardia; and that he saw in the 1933 municipal elections an opportunity to reorganize the Democratic Party in the city, building up the pro-New Deal factions in the Bronx and Brooklyn and marginalizing the incumbent leadership of Tammany Hall. (He and Farley would continue with this project during La Guardia’s first term.)

October saw a rough-and-tumble campaign in which La Guardia worked assiduously to keep bossism at the center of the election and McKee sought to make the race a referendum on the national administration. The campaign culminated in mid-October when the Fusionists published selected parts of a quarter-century old article penned by McKee which, when read out of context, suggested anti-Semitism. This incident, Flynn later claimed, prevented Roosevelt from making the open endorsement he had promised when he urged McKee to enter the race.

La Guardia won with forty percent of the total vote to McKee’s twenty-eight percent and O’Brien’s twenty-seven percent; Fusion took the comptrollership and the presidency of the Board of Aldermen, along with the borough presidencies of Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, giving it control of the Board of Estimate. Five factors

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140 Mann, *La Guardia Comes to Power*, 103-118; Flynn, *You’re the Boss*, 136-138. See also Additional Materials to be Added to the Reminiscences of Paul Windels, CCOHC, 18, on La Guardia’s fear that McKee would claim the mantle of the New Deal.
stand out as essential to La Guardia’s triumph. First, Italian Americans, who voted overwhelmingly for La Guardia, had provided Fusion with a firm base of support. Second, the fiscal crisis and the political theater of the Seabury hearings together had produced a soaring turnout in affluent, Republican-leanings neighborhoods: in the two most staunchly Republican districts in Manhattan, voting had increased by sixty-nine and seventy-four percent, respectively, and La Guardia’s share of the vote had climbed by twenty-one and sixteen percent. (The extraordinary jump in voter participation between 1929 and 1933, when the number of ballots cast grew by more than fifty percent, was disproportionately a mobilization of the affluent.) Third, a minority of independent Democrats – perhaps a third of those who were in play between La Guardia and McKee – had crossed party lines to vote for the Little Flower. Fourth, the Socialist Party, which had seemingly revived between 1929 and 1932, had suddenly and unexpectedly declined, with La Guardia apparently the main beneficiary. Fifth, and not least, McKee had been unable to convince habitual Democratic voters to abandon the star (the traditional Democratic ballot symbol) and vote Recovery: had he won even half of O’Brien’s ballots, he, not La Guardia, would have been mayor of New York and the New Deal would have come to Gotham via a reformed Democratic machine.141

Roosevelt and La Guardia had come to power on the basis of quite different electoral coalitions. Roosevelt had garnered a traditional Democratic vote in New York, grounded in reinforcing cleavages of class and ethnicity. If Roosevelt’s voters came disproportionately from the tenement districts, La Guardia (his Italian supporters notwithstanding) did best among the wealthy and the middle classes. But La Guardia’s

141 The best analysis remains Mann, La Guardia Comes to Power, chap. 5, though Mann severely underestimates the significance of the mobilization of affluent Republicans – the single greatest change in La Guardia’s vote between 1929 and 1933.
vote was not simply the inverse of Roosevelt’s. The basic fact, which McKee discovered when he tried to make political advantage of his relation to the New Deal, was that in 1933 national and local politics were to a large degree unrelated. The traditional relation between national and local elections rested in the party connection; the fusion movement, the Democratic split, and the salience of the machine-reform cleavage had weakened that connection. And except insofar as they were organized by political parties, New Yorkers’ preferences in national politics had little bearing on their preferences in local politics. The issues in question in the 1933 mayoral campaign were corruption, machine rule, solvency, and social order – issues largely unconnected to the divisions between workers and managers, Wets and Dries that animating voting in national elections. It was not that there was no set of problems common to both national and local politics – by 1933, unemployment was the dominant issue at all levels of politics – but rather that few policies or institutions (beyond the parties) were in place to link the two levels of government. In 1933, municipal and national politics still operated in different spheres.

The socialist muckraker Paul Blanshard, writing in The Nation several weeks before the 1933 election, predicted that a triumphant La Guardia could “make out of New York a gigantic laboratory for civic reconstruction.” But most progressives and leftists, appreciative of the constraints which would confront the new administration, harbored no such optimism. “Certainly there is nothing in the outcome of the election which makes it unlikely that Tammany will come back in 1937,” the New Republic offered, “and when we consider the financial difficulties with which La Guardia will be confronted, the continuing and perhaps increasing burden of relief for the unemployed,

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the iron dictatorship of the bankers to which the city has pledged itself far into the future, it is hard to see how he can go out of office as popular as he enters it.”

IX

Three days after his election, seeking some rest after the campaign, La Guardia left New York for a ten-day vacation – the last he would enjoy for six years. Accompanied by his wife Marie, two family friends, and six newspaper reporters, the mayor-elect boarded a steamship bound first for Havana and then the Panama Canal Zone. Each day the newspapermen sent dispatches back to New York via wireless, recounting the day’s recreation and relating La Guardia’s pronouncements on what he expected to do once he took office. En route to Cuba, La Guardia suggested an approach to cutting the city’s expenditures and bringing its budget into balance; from Panama, he promised to seek unification of the rapid transit system and revision of the city charter. A few days later, he issued a plan for municipal beer gardens along the Harlem River, modeled on Vienna’s, to provide “wholesome recreation, based on a liberal, constructive and intelligent attitude” with the aim of giving jobs to the unemployed. On the last day of the trip, after speaking with Adolf Berle and Robert Moses in New York, La Guardia announced that he had made appointments in Washington with Public Works Administration director Harold Ickes and “minister of relief” Harry Hopkins to discuss public works and work relief projects for the city. The party then set out for Washington, not by ship, but aboard a fourteen-passenger Curtiss Condor biplane.

143 “Turning Out the Ins,” TNR, Nov. 22, 1933, 33.
La Guardia emerged from the meetings with Ickes and Hopkins visibly elated. To more than twenty Washington reporters who crowded into his hotel suite for an afternoon press conference – the meeting “took on for a time the aspects of a college reunion,” the Times reported – he announced that the conferences had been “very satisfactory. I am certain not only of full cooperation but a sympathetic understanding of our problems just as we understand their problems.” Several weeks later, a second visit to Washington, and his first meeting with Roosevelt, resulted in assurance of a PWA grant to complete the outer-borough segments of the Eighth Avenue Independent subway line, a project that had been written off as dead only days before La Guardia’s White House visit.144

By the time of La Guardia’s election, it was no longer as unusual as it would have been only a few years earlier to see a big-city mayor beat a path to Washington. Before 1933, one had to look hard to find direct federal-municipal contacts outside of wartime; “the great majority of federal-city relations,” one study concluded, “were casual and incidental, if not extralegal,” pertaining mostly to rivers and harbors, the construction of courthouses and post offices, and party patronage appointments.145 But as one city after another reached the edge of bankruptcy in the early 1930s, local officials, having quickly given up on rural-dominated state governments unsympathetic to urban issues (particularly unemployment relief, frequently denounced as a “dole”), had begun to reach out to the federal government. In mid-1932 Detroit Mayor Frank Murphy, whose city had been hit harder than practically any other as a result of the centrality of heavy manufacturing to its economy (and whose admirable record on local relief gave him a

144 NYT, Nov. 11-15, 18-20, 22-24, Dec. 6-7, 9, 10-11, 13, 1933; Warren Moscow interview in New Deal / New York, Dante J. James, dir., PBS Home Video, 1993.

145 Mollenkopf, The Contested City, 47 (quoting a study by the National Resources Planning Board).
good deal of moral standing), had assembled many big city mayors (including Jimmy Walker) to discuss collective measures for easing the relief burden and addressing the financial dilemma. Six months later the United States Conference of Mayors was founded so that America’s big cities could petition the federal government collectively for a national unemployment program and municipal debt refinancing. “Mayors are a familiar sight in Washington these days,” T. Semmes Walmsley of New Orleans remarked in 1934. “Whether we like it or not, the destinies of our cities are clearly tied in with national politics.”

Still, that La Guardia made a visit to Washington one of his first official acts, and that he did it in such spectacular fashion – for air travel in the early 1930s still represented the pinnacle of modernity, La Guardia’s flight to Washington being a kind of counterpart to Roosevelt’s own dramatic flight to Chicago to accept in person the 1932 Democratic nomination – broke all precedent. And if nascent federal-municipal relations derived from the prostrate condition of America’s big cities, La Guardia had a more expansive vision of what the federal government and the cities, acting in concert, could achieve. After he took office he sent some of his commissioners to Washington to make the acquaintance of federal department secretaries and undersecretaries. “It is part of my program to establish very close relations between your Department and the City of New


147 Quoted in Gelfand, A Nation of Cities, 66.
York,” he wrote to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace in a letter introducing Markets Commissioner William Fellowes Morgan. “The possibilities are tremendous. The surface has not even been scratched.”

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\[148\] FHL to Henry A. Wallace, Jan. 15, 1934, SF, “Correspondence with Federal Officials,” NYMA.
Part II:

The New Deal
Chapter Two: “Jobs Is the Cry”: The Political Origins of the New Deal

Intergovernmental Public Investment State

“It’s more than a New Deal,” Harold Ickes remarked of Roosevelt’s Hundred Days. “It’s a new world.” As La Guardia took office, many New Yorkers believed a new era had likewise dawned in Gotham. The Herald Tribune put it this way on the first day of 1934: “It is a new year so singular for this community as to be somewhat difficult to take it all in at once; its implications may prove so far-reaching in the lives of all residents of the city that no one would attempt to foresee them.”

La Guardia took office with a blaze of activity and publicity, moving quickly and spectacularly to end the Walker-era practices of political preferment, graft, and low municipal productivity. “Perhaps never before,” the Times wrote, “did a mayor of New York begin his term with such an air of getting down to business and enforcing industry and honesty on the part of every city employee.” He rushed to fires; he conducted unannounced inspections of city hospitals, relief offices, and jobsites; and as soon as the courts permitted him, he confiscated slot machines, smashed them with a sledgehammer (as the newsreel cameras rolled), and sunk them in the Long Island Sound. One New Yorker recalled that it was as though a hundred short men in black Stetsons had been loosed upon the city.

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1 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Coming of the New Deal (Boston, 1959), 23.
2 NYHT, Jan. 1, 1934.
The dynamism with which La Guardia began his administration, the sense of urgency he displayed, and above all the force with which he broke from the old regime prompted countless comparisons to Roosevelt’s first days in office. Their styles were different – Roosevelt, the patrician who reassured the public with his jaunty confidence, La Guardia, the scowling defender of the public interest. But each brought vigorous action after an interlude in which government had seemed impotent; each offered a firm hand on the wheel and promised bold experimentation; and each, coming to power in the context of fear, confusion, and desperation, stood forthrightly in opposition to the received order. In this sense, New York had a New Deal of its own.

The power to create a new political order, as the political scientist Stephen Skowronek has brilliantly elucidated, hinges on the authority to repudiate the old order. La Guardia, like Roosevelt, possessed this authority in abundance. But the political freedom of action and the authority such a position implied would, it appeared, be tightly constrained by a poverty of governmental resources. La Guardia assumed command of a government limited by the shrinking of its revenue base whose finances would presumably be subject, for the duration of his term, to the conditions imposed in the Bankers Agreement. Under such circumstances, Norman Thomas had forecast, the mayor of New York would be “scarcely more than a receiver in bankruptcy under a broken-down political and economic system.” Indeed, most signs indicated that La Guardia would preside over an era of austerity and public disinvestment, and would do so without strong party support or even much of an electoral mandate.


Yet already the events and processes that would liberate La Guardia from the logic of negative-sum politics were underway – in Washington, where Roosevelt was grasping for a means by which to address the problem of unemployment. Joblessness had been the nation’s paramount political and moral problem when Roosevelt took office; it remained such two years later. But in the interim the problem of “unemployment” had been redefined, and Roosevelt’s own ideas and preferences for how to address it had changed. Initially, he had viewed reemployment as an objective to be attained through a broader intervention in market economies: when a rationalized and harmonious economy produced greater purchasing power for the “consuming classes,” he believed, reemployment would naturally follow. But the persistent failure of reemployment to match the rapid economic expansion of Roosevelt’s first term forced FDR to search for a program specifically to provide jobs. From numerous alternatives, he chose to employ jobless workers, under the auspices of municipal governments, in the production of public goods and services – in the process altering the very possibilities of urban government.

I

Like his reform predecessors, La Guardia drew his top-level appointees from the worlds of professional philanthropy and charity, private business, and the academy. He also retained several members of Walker’s administration, enlisted the most prominent alumnus of Al Smith’s cabinet, and conducted national searches – a novelty – to find
commissioners of Health and Corrections. A few owed their appointments primarily to service rendered during the 1933 campaign. Sworn in to much fanfare, La Guardia’s commissioners assumed the work of ending the abuses of the Walker era and moved to institute administrative practices (such as centralized purchasing) that had their origins in the Progressive Era efficiency program. They also assumed the vital task of choosing able deputy commissioners to oversee particular programs and departmental initiatives.

If professionalization was the keyword for the upper, appointive reaches of La Guardia’s government, “meritocratization” was the theme in staffing the rest of the civil service. Tammany had filled the most desirable mid-level positions with party workers and had distributed other municipal jobs through the clubhouses: this was where New Yorkers could most easily learn about job openings, and a recommendation from a party leader was usually enough to see an applicant through the civil-service examination procedure. Conversely, La Guardia’s Civil Service Commission began the practice of publicizing job openings and replaced the essay exams the Democrats had used to give their examiners maximum discretion with multiple-choice tests. The Commission also increased the number of municipal jobs that required a competitive civil service examination: the percentage of civil service jobs in the “competitive” class rose from 54.5 in the last year of O’Brien’s mayoralty to 74.3 at the midway point of La Guardia’s.6 Meritocratization, combined with the weak private job market of the 1930s and the relatively great prestige the city’s public sector now enjoyed, caused civil service applications to soar – from 6,327 in 1933 to 252,084 in 1939.7

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7 Ibid., 136.
administration, drawing from a much broader and deeper pool than had its Democratic predecessors, reaped a windfall of talent; the extraordinary cohort that entered the structurally powerful *mezzo* level of the civil service during these years, later known as the “Depression geniuses,” would run the day-to-day operations of Gotham’s municipal government until they began to retire in the 1960s.\(^8\)

La Guardia’s first priority upon taking office was to shore up the city’s balance sheet and, by so doing, regain access to the credit markets. Like Roosevelt, who had used his powers of appointment to herd reluctant Democratic congressmen into line behind his own Economy Act, La Guardia considered it politically and financially essential to begin his administration from a strong fiscal position. Restoring the value of municipal bonds offered La Guardia a way of pulling the investor class more securely into his coalition (and winning over that part of it which had backed McKee in the 1933 election). The city’s credit rating also had symbolic power: at a time when creditworthiness had strong moral overtones, bond ratings and balanced budgets became for La Guardia a touchstone by which to contrast Fusion with the “immoral” Tammany regime that had preceded it. Most importantly, poor municipal credit impeded the new administration’s ability to

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There were, of course, exceptions to these general patterns. Those who had served effectively in La Guardia’s campaigns were more likely to be selected for preferment, and La Guardia used the powers of appointment to fortify his own political organization and those of the parties that supported him, as well as to satisfy powerful civic, religious, and ethnic groups. Sometimes La Guardia made patronage appointments simply on personal whim. Manhattan Borough President Stanley Isaacs recalled one instance when La Guardia sent over names for two paving inspection positions that required neither expertise nor a full day’s work. One “was the nephew of a very important cleric in the Catholic Church”; the other was the Mayor’s “favorite drunkard.” (Reminiscences of Stanley Isaacs, CCOHC, 98.)
undertake other parts of its agenda. “[U]nder the present economic system,” La Guardia remarked, “a city simply cannot do the things it would like to do unless financially able.”

By the time La Guardia took office, New York was no longer threatened by default, thanks to the Bankers Agreement. But neither could it sell its bonds on the open market: this, La Guardia and his advisers believed, would necessitate closing an inherited budget deficit of some thirty million dollars. With little sympathy for the Tammany-appointed public employees – many of whom he considered incapable of providing the kind of productive labor progressive city government required – La Guardia was prepared to slash jobs from the city and county governments and reduce salaries in order to close the budget deficit. On his first day in office, he submitted to the Board of Estimate a piece of legislation which proposed to close the deficit by allowing the mayor to override charter provisions and civil service laws to reorganize city and county offices (and abolish those deemed unnecessary), impose new salaries, compel month-long payless furloughs, and cut up to ten thousand jobs – all by executive order. The provisions of the proposal (which was dubbed the Economy Bill) were to last for two years; the Board of Estimate quickly amended this to nine months. Despite some opposition, the city legislatures passed the bill, and Governor Herbert Lehman gave his approval after persuading La Guardia to vest the powers in the Board of Estimate (which Fusion controlled) rather than in the mayor’s office. The real test took place in Albany, where

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the bill required a two-thirds majority in each chamber, allowing for concerted opposition from the Democratic organizations and public employees.\(^{10}\)

When the measure came up for a vote in late January, the State Assembly voted it down.\(^{11}\) “I would be against this bill even if the City of New York went bankrupt or the United States went bankrupt,” one Manhattan assemblyman remarked.\(^{12}\) For more than two months, La Guardia shuttled back and forth between New York and Albany, working the State House assiduously; downstate civic groups and newspapers, particularly those that had supported McKee in the election, began to rally around him. Powerful Democrats came out in support of the measure – first Postmaster General and DNC chairman James A. Farley and Bronx County chairman Edward J. Flynn, then Roosevelt himself. FDR, who was sufficiently worried about New York’s financial management that he had specifically instructed Public Works Administrator Harold Ickes to withhold federal loans to the city until it demonstrated a balanced budget, had discussed the outlines of the legislation when the two first met following La Guardia’s election in December, 1933.\(^{13}\) (La Guardia later hinted that Roosevelt had given him advice on how to get it through the state legislature.\(^{14}\)) After the bill stalled in the Assembly, Roosevelt

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\(^{12}\) Quoted in Chalmers, “The Crucial Test,” 245.

\(^{13}\) Harold Ickes to Louis Howe, Dec. 29, 1933; Frederick L. Cranford to Howe, Dec. 6, 1933, OF 88, FDRL.

\(^{14}\) *NYHT*, Mar. 18, 1934.
called the two ranking Democrats, Assembly minority leader Irwin Steingut and Senate president *pro tempore* John J. Dunnigan, to the White House, presumably to indicate his own support for the measure; when the Albany Democrats voted it down for a second time, Roosevelt brought Steingut and Dunnigan back to Washington. “I told the Majority Leader in the Senate and the Minority Leader in the Assembly [the Democratic leaders in each chamber] that the quicker the City of New York was put into a proper financial status, the quicker they would get federal funds,” he explained afterward, “and that we could not wait all year, that some other city might balance its budget and be entitled to it.”

La Guardia’s representatives in Albany made additional concessions, and the bill passed the Assembly on April 5; a few days later, after heaping abuse and epithets on La Guardia, the Senate followed suit.

The final bill left Fusion hardly any authority to reorganize the city and county governments: this would await the voters’ enactment of a new city charter in 1936 and reform of the county governments by petition and referendum in 1941. In the meantime, La Guardia was able to use its provisions for salary reductions and month-long payless furloughs to cut about $13.5 million from the city budget. The rest of the $30 million deficit was made up by restoring O’Brien’s utility taxes and levying a very small tax on business and professional income. Together, these measures had the desired effect on the financial markets. A few months after the Economy Bill finally passed, La Guardia, Comptroller Joseph McGoldrick, and Chase National Bank chairman Winthrop Aldrich, with Reconstruction Finance Corporation chairman Jesse Jones mediating, negotiated a refinancing of the city’s long-term debt, dropping the interest rate from 5.75

15 *CPPC*, Mar. 16, 1934.

16 On county reform, see Garrett, *The La Guardia Years*, 243-248.
to 3.8 percent. For the first time in several years, municipal bonds were selling at above par; by the midpoint of La Guardia’s first term new bond issues were carrying the lowest interest rates in the city’s history. “So ends another cycle in New York City financing,” Adolf Berle wrote to Roosevelt, “and, incidentally, finishes what I set out to do in this New York adventure. Now all we have to do is to govern the town.”

The Economy Bill represented an important early victory for La Guardia, for it not only won him the admiration of many good-government reformers and municipal bondholders, but also permitted him to establish a reputation as a skilled and resourceful political fighter. Roosevelt’s involvement had demonstrated to Farley, Flynn, Kings County Democratic chairman Frank Kelly, and Governor Lehman (with whom La Guardia thenceforth would have a stormy but productive relationship) that they would not simply be able to take the President’s support for granted in their contests with New York’s Fusion mayor. 

Still, the fact remained that La Guardia had begun his administration by cutting further into departments that had already been pared close to the bone. La Guardia’s commissioners discovered upon taking office that the Mayor expected them to reduce their expenditures: he required this of every department but Hospitals and Welfare. They found, too, that there was insufficient money in the city cofferst for even the smallest and most advantageous of local projects.

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17 Berle to FDR, July 25, 1934, Berle Papers, Box 10, FDRL; Marvin McIntyre to Roosevelt, July 20, 1934, OF 200-F Miscel., FDRL.


conditions, an ambitious social program appeared out of the question – at least until the budget imperative was met. But already, programmatic innovation at the federal level had begun to loosen the constraints which operated upon New York’s municipal government.

II

“Our greatest primary task,” Roosevelt had proclaimed at his inauguration the previous March, “is to put people to work.” That those words were followed almost immediately by an appeal to recognize frankly “the overbalance of the population in our industrial centers” indicated that FDR had not at all abandoned his desire to move workers out of the cities and into the countryside.\(^\text{21}\) A full resettlement program would come later; in the interim, the new administration produced as its first substantial jobs effort a scheme to employ a quarter of a million young men in rural conservation and flood control work for terms ranging from six months to two years. Thousands of city youth soon found themselves planting saplings, clearing undergrowth, building watchtowers, restoring battlefields, fighting forest fires, or battling all manner of insects under the auspices of the Civilian Conservation Corps.\(^\text{22}\)

The CCC notwithstanding, unemployment \textit{per se} remained a secondary consideration for much of Roosevelt’s first two months in office. During that time, the

\(^{21}\) \textit{PPA}: Vol. 2, 1933, 13.

President signed into law (or enacted by executive order) a series of measures intended to achieve general economic recovery. First was the Emergency Banking Act, which suspended transactions in gold, enabled Roosevelt to appoint receivers to reorganize banks that could not meet government stability tests, and authorized the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to buy preferred stock in American banks in order to recapitalize them. Next, he asked for and received the Economy Act, which gave him broad authority to cut federal salaries and trim veterans’ pensions in order to reduce the federal deficit (and thereby, he believed, encourage private investment). Soon, the President would depart from the gold standard, take various measures to reflate the dollar, and sign into law several programs to facilitate the refinancing of mortgage debt.  

Legislation of this sort, Roosevelt suggested, represented “foundation stones,” intended to halt a deflationary cycle that was destroying assets and national confidence and causing myriad economic and personal dislocations. By mid-May of 1933, Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress had moved on to measures the President claimed would go “much more fundamentally into our economic problems.” The common objective of these measures was to raise the level of purchasing power among “the consuming classes” and, in so doing, to build markets for the products of American industry and agriculture. “If all our people have work and fair wages and fair profits, they can buy the products of their neighbors and business is good,” Roosevelt told his audience in a July fireside chat. “But if you take away the wages and the profits of half of them, business is only half as good. It doesn’t help much if the fortunate half is very

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prosperous – the best way is for everybody to be reasonably prosperous." His approach, as he explained it, was to use the power of government to enable (in some instances to force) producers to take collective action for the collective good, which they could not do on their own in a competitive economy. “Partnership,” “coordination,” and “planning” became the keywords of this phase of the New Deal.

In May, Roosevelt signed into law the Agricultural Adjustment Act, a measure which sought to raise the prices of agricultural commodities (and hence rural purchasing power) by limiting farm production. The following month, Congress created the National Recovery Administration (NRA), an agency which attempted to do for the industrial economy some of the things the AAA sought to do for farmers. The NRA was the product of many hands and combined elements of many different agendas and approaches, but its provisions served two main purposes. First, by suspending antitrust laws and providing “government sponsorship for industry-by-industry cooperation to coordinate prices and regulate production levels and conditions of employment,” it aimed to halt the recession-driven “cutthroat competition” which placed powerful downward pressure on prices, profit margins, labor costs, and working standards. In other words, it sought to use government coordination to stabilize the industrial sector as a whole. Second, by using the carrot of legal sanction for “business self-government,” it sought to induce industries to accept voluntarily some of the objectives for which congressional progressives had been fighting – “reasonable wages,” “reasonable hours,” an end to child labor, and a guarantee of the right of workers to bargain collectively. Like the congressional progressives, Roosevelt argued that the limitation of working hours would

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25 Ibid., 297
serve to “spread” employment more broadly and thereby to address the maldistribution of purchasing power.\textsuperscript{26}

Throughout the Hundred Days, and notwithstanding the Civilian Conservation Corps, Roosevelt had viewed efforts to create jobs directly by government spending with considerable skepticism. He had little faith in the concept of a “multiplier” effect that underpinned arguments for countercyclical government spending – i.e., that the respending of government payments by workers and businesses would stimulate additional private-sector employment and production.\textsuperscript{27} “It is the habit of the unthinking,” he had remarked during the 1932 campaign, “to turn in times like this to the illusions of economic magic. People suggest that a huge expenditure of public funds by the Federal government and by State and local governments will completely solve the unemployment problem. . . . Let us admit frankly that it would be only a stopgap.”\textsuperscript{28}

Absent a larger economic rationale, a spending approach to job creation promised only to undermine the reputation for sound finance he had worked so hard to foster with his Economy Act.

Yet Roosevelt was not prepared to resist the powerful movement for a federal public works program that had developed in Congress, among unionists, and within the broader progressive community. Pressed both by the pro-spending group in Congress –


\textsuperscript{28} PPA: \textit{Vol. 1}, 1928-1932, 625.
Senators La Follette, Costigan, Wagner, and others – and by some of his own advisers and cabinet members, he agreed to a $3.3 billion appropriation for the construction of public works projects, non-self-liquidating as well as self-liquidating. Roosevelt remained so concerned with sound finance that he committed nearly half the message to Congress recommending passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act to ways of raising adequate revenue to pay interest and amortization on the debt the government would incur. But by agreeing to include non-self-liquidating projects, he had gone beyond Hoover. The $3.3 billion was appropriated under Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which also authorized Roosevelt to create a Public Works Administration (PWA) to allocate and administer the funds.  

Much of the appropriation was earmarked for one purpose or another – $450 million for roads, $238 million for shipbuilding, and $25 million for resettlement. But to spend the larger share, some $2.2 billion, federal policymakers turned to local officials: the money was distributed in the form of grants and loans (at first, thirty percent grant and seventy percent loan) to local and state governments whose project applications the PWA had approved. This intergovernmental approach was partly dictated by the limits of the federal government’s jurisdiction (for many of the projects would be built on state and local property). But it was also a practical solution to the underdevelopment of the American central state. Seeking a means by which to attain the national objectives of job creation and the stimulation of heavy industry through purchase orders, federal officials had enlisted the planning, operational, and fiscal resources of local governments by

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29 PPA: Vol. 2, 1933, 202-204.

offering to help them solve pressing problems of their own—joblessness and the inadequacy of local infrastructure.\textsuperscript{31}

This early New Deal venture in intergovernmental collaboration was not a success. Even as they sought to draw upon the strengths of local governments, the New Dealers had designed a program that emphasized their weaknesses—for the exhaustion of local finances and the constraints of local debt ceilings all but assured that local governments would choose not to invest in public works, even on the comparatively favorable terms the PWA offered. (Federal officials had exacerbated this flaw by making federal loans contingent on the sound credit of recipient governments.) New York was representative: before the Bankers Agreement, Mayor O’Brien did not apply for a single PWA grant; the PWA was able to funnel money into Gotham only through public authorities such as the Port Authority and the Triborough Bridge Authority, which were not encumbered by state borrowing limits and could pledge future toll revenues as security for their bonds.\textsuperscript{32} Thus constrained, the PWA directed much of its early spending toward federal agencies (particularly the military); it could show little in the way of job creation “in the field,” and by the end of the summer of 1933, pressure had begun to build for the agency to show more concrete results. PWA administrator Harold Ickes, in turn, blamed the delays on state and municipal governments.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} Badger, \textit{The First Hundred Days}, details very effectively the many instances in which a lack of central state capacity shaped and constrained the policy options available to the New Dealers; also Skocpol and Finegold, “State Capacity and Economic Intervention in the Early New Deal.”

\textsuperscript{32} The Port Authority received $17 million from the PWA for the construction of the Lincoln Tunnel; the Triborough Bridge Authority received $44.2 million for the massive three-span complex it was building to connect Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens via Wards and Randall’s islands.

\textsuperscript{33} Smith, \textit{Building New Deal Liberalism}, 46-51.
As the PWA spun its wheels, the industrial economy as a whole, having recovered rapidly in the months following Roosevelt’s inauguration, turned sour. Relieved of the crippling fear that had gripped the American economy during the interregnum, business had expanded rapidly in the second quarter, with indices such as factory output and industrial stock prices shooting up from their March lows. But in July, this expansion came to a sudden halt. At first, Roosevelt viewed the slowdown as a “healthy reaction to speculation,” but by the fall he was expressing privately his worries about the direction of the American economy. This, the first of several economic contractions to occur on Roosevelt’s watch, prompted the administration to undertake a new round of policy initiatives, utilizing authority delegated by Congress during the Hundred Days. National Recovery Administration director Hugh Johnson issued a “blanket code” providing for uniform wages and hours standards in industry and launched the massive “Blue Eagle” propaganda campaign to persuade businesses to comply with it. (On the second Wednesday of September, some 1.5 million New Yorkers turned out to watch the city’s employers and employees affirm their support for the President’s recovery program by marching down Fifth Avenue, one of the greatest parades in the city’s history.) Roosevelt created the Commodity Credit Corporation, an effort to raise agricultural prices by purchasing surplus goods (which were distributed to relief families), and began buying gold at above-market prices – another effort to reflate commodity prices. And that fall, he launched a new jobs program that utilized the direct-employment approach.

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34 This paragraph draws especially upon Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, chap. 4, and Freidel, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, chap. 10.


36 *NYT*, Sept. 14, 1933.
pioneered by the Civilian Conservation Corps – but which was centered not in the American wilderness but in the great cities.

III

Private industry had begun, during the rapid expansion of the second quarter of 1933, to reemploy the most productive workers thrown out of work at the depth of the Depression. Yet as summer turned to fall, unemployment remained widespread, touching members of all classes and professions. Lorena Hickok, the garrulous and acute journalist employed as a roving reporter by federal relief administrator Harry Hopkins, wrote after visiting New York:

One city block will contain almost 200 families on the relief rolls. Those 1,250,000 human beings [the city total] represent a complete cross-section of the population, the best and the worst – the most intelligent, and the most highly educated, and the most helpless and the most ignorant. Among them are represented more than 30 nationalities. . . . And among them are business and professional men whose incomes five years ago ran into many thousands of dollars. There they are, all thrown together into a vast pit of human misery, from which a city, dazed, still only half awake to the situation, is trying to extricate them.\(^{37}\)

Twelve thousand of the 15,000 members of the New York City musicians’ local were unemployed, and paid memberships in the Actors Equity Association had declined by seventy percent, two-thirds of New York’s “legitimate” (i.e., non-burlesque) theaters

\(^{37}\) Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, eds., One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression (Urbana, 1981), 44.
having been closed for most of that season. Many advertising agencies had reduced their
staffs by half or more. No one could tell precisely how many doctors were out of work,
but the head of the Kings County Medical Society reported that thirty percent of
Brooklyn doctors had taken the telephones out of their offices; the figure for Manhattan
was even higher. With construction all but stopped, *The Nation* estimated that one-half
of engineers and six of every seven architects were out of work. In some of the building
trades, unemployment was estimated at ninety percent.38

Many of these unemployed men and women, having exhausted personal, family,
and community resources, now relied on public relief. The responsibility for
administering unemployment relief in New York City belonged primarily to the city’s
Home Relief Bureau, which had been created in 1931 (when the city received authority
from the state legislature to provide “outdoor” relief), and the New York State TERA,
which continued to reimburse local governments a share of their relief expenditures.
Since March of 1933, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) had given
essential support to state and local relief efforts, dispensing grants-in-aid to state relief
agencies (half on a matching basis – one federal dollar for every three local dollars – and
half at the director’s discretion). Though the FERA did seek to assert a measure of
federal control, building up a staff of welfare professionals to combat “local
incompetence, miserliness, fiscal conservatism, and outright corruption” and in a few
instances actually nationalizing inadequate state-level relief set-ups39, the federal

38 The figures are from *The Nation’s* series, “The Professions and the Depression,” Nov. 15, Sept. 27,
Dec. 20, Sept. 13, and Aug. 9, 1933, respectively; and Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Public Housing That
Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, 2008), 15. For medical professionals, see
Lorena Hickok to Hopkins, Dec. 19, 1933, Hopkins Papers, Box 59, FDRL.

presence was generally limited to channeling federal money to state and local relief administrations – particularly in places like New York where state and local relief institutions were relatively strong.

The FERA’s establishment had, however, provided an institutional base from which social welfare professionals could seek to expand the federal presence in the field of social provision. Preeminent among those who pushed for a greater federal role was the agency’s director, Harry Hopkins, the Iowa-born social worker whom Roosevelt had previously made the operational head of the TERA. Educated in the Christian social reform milieu of Grinnell College, Hopkins had gone to New York and found work at the Christadora settlement house; in the next two decades he had moved through the city’s charity organizations, serving first as a supervisor for the Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor (where, during the recession of 1914-1915, he had overseen a survey of the city’s unemployed and a small work relief project for the Bronx Zoo40), then as executive secretary of the Board of Child Welfare, and later as director of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Society. An associate in the New York social work world remembered him this way:

He was intense, seeming to be in a perpetual nervous ferment – a chain smoker and black coffee drinker. . . . Most of the time he would show up in the office looking as though he had spent the previous night sleeping in a hay loft. . . . While other executives . . . would say, ‘We have this amount of money available – and this is how much we can spend,’ Hopkins, by contrast, never worried about the cost until later . . . and then he would scramble around to get the money.41

40 New York Call, Feb. 3, 1914.

Politically, Hopkins had followed a fairly common path for a left-leaning New York social worker: a registered but relatively uncommitted Socialist, he had voted for John Purroy Mitchel in 1913 (and had seen Mitchel appoint his mentor, AICP director John Kingsbury, commissioner of Charities); in 1917, having soured on municipal reform, he had voted for Morris Hillquit; thereafter he had supported Al Smith, and by the early 1930s he was a liberal Democrat. But he owed his appointment to the TERA more to his professional reputation within the New York social work world than to his party affiliation.\(^\text{42}\)

Like many New York social workers, Hopkins was acutely attentive to the social, moral, and psychological dimensions of the unemployment crisis. And like many of his former colleagues, he had come to believe that idleness exacted a toll far beyond lost wages: humiliating and destructive, it created a sense of failure and uselessness that ate away at a worker’s social status, sapped people of their “self-respect,” “ambition,” and “pride,” and weakened families. He also believed that so-called “home” relief, meaning relief without the requirement of work, exacerbated these costs, depriving people of “their sense of independence and strength and their sense of individual destiny.”\(^\text{43}\)

Hopkins favored work relief – a form of social provision, he believed, that mitigated rather than reinforced the social and psychological damage of unemployment and that would, moreover, conserve the job skills and work habits of the unemployed such that they would be employable when private industry recovered. Through the summer of 1933, Hopkins pushed state administrators both to expand their work relief programs and


\(^{43}\) Quoted in Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 268.
to improve the quality of the projects (which varied widely in social utility); the FERA also established some limited projects of its own. By the end of the summer Hopkins and his aides were making plans to nationalize the function of work relief by creating a public employment program over which the federal government would have direct control.44

It was Hopkins’s good fortune to be pushing a program with strong expert support (and potentially strong popular support) at a moment when Roosevelt considered it acutely desirable to expand his administration’s efforts on behalf of the jobless. “We are not going through another winter like the last,” FDR had promised the nation in July. “I doubt if ever any people so bravely and cheerfully endured a season half so bitter.”45 As the first winter of the New Deal approached, Roosevelt knew that he bore the weight of popular expectations to make good on this promise (not least because of the extraordinary connection with the public he had forged during the Hundred Days). This was the first time – it would not be the last – that Roosevelt’s search for a politically advantageous way of treating the unemployment crisis created an opening for Hopkins’s vision for American social policy.

Hopkins took his plan to Roosevelt in late October; Roosevelt agreed to divert money from the Recovery Act appropriation for several months to launch a program of small-scale, capital-light public improvements. On November 8, 1933, the day La Guardia was elected mayor, Roosevelt announced a “fundamental change” in his administration’s approach to the problem of unemployment: within three weeks, the


federal government would hire four million men and women directly. The objective, he explained, was to remove everyone capable of working from the relief rolls and “place them on regular employment” at prevailing wages, with enough jobs left over to give work to those who were unemployed but were muddling through without having registered for government assistance. The following day he created by executive order a new – and explicitly temporary – agency, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), to undertake the work. Hopkins was named director.46

“Now this work is really and truly a partnership,” Roosevelt remarked of the new agency. America’s governments, working collaboratively with each level “do[ing] its share,” “ha[d] in [their] hands to accomplish something that no nation has ever before done.” 47 Like the PWA, the CWA was premised on intergovernmental collaboration – on the idea that the compatibility of interests between the national and the local governments could be leveraged to form a relationship that would permit an exercise of power neither level would be capable of on its own. But the CWA envisioned a more intensive relationship than the simple grants-in-aid administered by the PWA and the FERA (and by pre-Depression era programs that had provided federal aid to education, highway construction, and maternal and infant health). Under the new program, the federal government would pay the wages of men and women who worked on useful public projects devised, planned, and carried out (with some federal and state supervision) by


47 “Address on Civil Works.”
municipal and county officials. Thus the CWA marked the apotheosis of the Progressive-era idea of “cooperation” between governments “in pursuit of shared social ideals.”

Unlike the Public Works Administration, the CWA utilized the capabilities of America’s local governments very effectively. It required little of the state and local governments in the way of expenditures (standing out in this regard both from the PWA and the federal matching programs created by the Social Security Act) – which meant that the program would be less likely to suffer from underfunding or from a reluctance on the part of local officials to participate. But it took full advantage of the planning and operational capacities of local governments – long the “producers” of the American federal system. The synthetic pairing of federal legal and fiscal resources and local operational capacities enabled the federal government to meet its objective of employing some four million men and women quickly and usefully whilst permitting local officials to undertake projects that might otherwise have been deemed unaffordable even during flush times. The new program, New York City CWA administrator Travis H. Whitney said, offered “a challenge and an opportunity to this city to have done those things which make our city more beautiful and useful, and which the city on its own behalf would hardly ever be financially able to do.”

Only days after his election, La Guardia assembled groups of architects, engineers, and other experts to develop proposals for everything from a city airport to park improvements, from subway extensions to public art projects, public housing to municipal beer gardens, promising Hopkins that they would be put into operation on the

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49 *NYT*, Dec. 21, 1933.
first day of his administration. There followed a brief three months in which New Yorkers attained a glimpse of the difference such an infusion of federal resources could make, not only in meeting the unemployment crisis, but also in urban social policy and public investment more broadly.

No city agency benefited more from the CWA than the Parks Department, newly consolidated into a single agency and placed by La Guardia under the driving leadership of Commissioner Robert Moses. A Yale-, Oxford-, and Columbia-educated career civil servant, Moses had begun what would be a remarkably long and eventful life in public service with the Bureau of Municipal Research; following John Purroy Mitchel’s defeat, he had received, unexpectedly, an invitation to join Al Smith’s state administration – an opportunity which was to change his life profoundly. “Without [Smith],” Moses later wrote, “I would have been just another academic researcher.” As secretary of state and chairman of Smith’s Council of Parks and Long Island State Parks Commission, Moses had garnered enough public acclaim to be seriously considered for the Fusion nomination in 1933. (La Guardia admired Moses’s Long Island parkways so greatly that he occasionally drove them, he once remarked, “for inspiration.”) Imperious and blunt, Moses brought to the city parks job a tremendous energy, a knowledge of the byways of

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53 Quoted in Caro, The Power Broker, 359.
political power in New York acquired in his service to Smith, brilliance in the fields of administration and public relations, and – not least – an exceptional team of landscape architects, engineers, designers, and superintendents.

Moses and his deputies, commanding the army of laborers the CWA had made available to him, set about restoring a recreational plant that had fallen into severe disrepair during the fiscal crisis years. CWA workers repainted and repaired vandalized benches, restored crumbling statues, exterminated rats, reseeded barren lawns, resurfaced pathways and tennis courts, and planted new trees; they also opened scores of new parks and playgrounds. By the end of April, every lawn in the park system had been reseeded, every park bench repainted, and every drinking fountain, trash can, and comfort station repaired or refurbished.54 The Central Park menagerie, America’s oldest zoo, had been reborn as the Central Park Zoo, “a cluster of charming, small-scale red-brick buildings” intended to serve not as a full-scale zoo but rather as “a delightful place for children”; it was soon drawing more than one hundred thousand patrons on an average Sunday.55

More extensive renovations were well underway: Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on the Lower East Side and the 79th Street Boat Basin were in the works; and September would see the reopening of Bryant Park, a priceless Midtown green space which had been used in the early 1930s as a storage yard for the Board of Transportation (coming to resemble the site of an oil strike, Louis Mumford wrote) and which reemerged as one of the stateliest parks in the city.56


Many New Yorkers were astonished at what had been accomplished. “Even with the aid of Federal funds,” the New York Times opined, “[these achievements] seem little short of miraculous.”\(^{57}\) The vast expansion of resources provided to local officials by the advent of federal work relief had enabled Moses and La Guardia to accomplish feats that had seemed to many New Yorkers to be beyond the reach of city government; by changing the calculus of local governance, it had permitted them to establish reputations as charismatic public servants able to do the impossible.\(^{58}\)

Besides the Parks Department, which commanded about thirty-five percent of the CWA’s expenditures in New York City, the principal beneficiaries of the CWA were the borough presidents, who used the money for long deferred street repavings, sewer repairs and the like. Other projects, following in the Gibson committee’s footsteps, employed professionals, clerical workers, and artists. To publicize La Guardia’s anti-slot machine crusade and his “Fish Tuesday” campaign (an effort to help the fishing industry by promoting fish consumption), the city created in conjunction with the CWA a Mayor’s Poster Commission that survived the termination of the CWA and went on to become the germ of the iconic WPA Poster Division.\(^{59}\) Under the leadership of Juliana Force, the director of the Whitney Museum, the CWA employed hundreds of artists and sculptors.\(^{60}\) Other CWA workers staffed libraries, worked in fire stations, and opened a nursery

\(^{57}\) NYT, May 6, 1934.


\(^{59}\) Christopher DeNooon, The Posters of the WPA (Los Angeles, 1987), 17-19; Michele H. Bogart, Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art (Chicago, 1995), 120.

\(^{60}\) See e.g, NYT, Dec. 22, 1933, Mar. 11, 1934.
school. By February, the Civil Works Service (the white-collar division of the CWA) employed twenty-one cartographers, twelve botanists, fifty-nine doctors, 531 nurses, 135 dentists and thirty-eight dental hygienists, 1,841 teachers, 210 librarians, 167 architects, seven geologists, twenty-eight linguists, and thousands of researchers, statisticians, stenographers, secretaries, bookkeepers and accountants.\footnote{NYT, Feb. 4, May 6, July 20, 1934; Hickok to Hopkins, Dec. 29, 1933, Hopkins Papers, Box 59, FDRL; Rankin, ed., \textit{New York Advancing . . . 1934-1935}, 283-284. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, New York City did not receive a disproportionate share of money from the CWA: New York received $7.03 per capita under the program, compared with Chicago’s $10.50, Philadelphia’s $1.77, Detroit’s $11.09, Los Angeles’ $12.60, and Cleveland’s $14.28. See Clarence E. Ridley and Orin F. Nolting, eds., \textit{The Municipal Yearbook: 1937} (Chicago, 1937), 430; cf. Kessner, \textit{Fiorello H. La Guardia}, 296. The difference was presumably due to the fact that unemployment was more acute in the centers of heavy industry.}

In some instances, CWA workers effectively replaced furloughed civil servants – a phenomenon political scientists later came to call “displacement.”\footnote{See for instance John J. McElligott to FHL, Feb. 13, 1934, SF, “Civil Works Administration,” NYMA.} In others, federal relief workers became a constituent part of local state-building, allowing the municipal government to launch new programs and services which were to become a permanent part of the municipal landscape. Moses’s parks projects offered one example; the creation of the Department of Markets’ Consumers Service Division offered another. The latter, launched by Deputy Commissioner Frances Foley Gannon, sought to help housewives take advantage of market gluts which periodically reduced the price of consumer goods and brought luxury items – strawberries, for instance – within the range of working-class budgets. Each morning, the department sent supervisors to the warehouses and docks where the city’s food supply was being unloaded to collect data; this information was then broadcast at 8:25 a.m. over most of the city’s major radio stations, providing consumers with valuable and otherwise unavailable information.
Within a year, estimates found that more than one million people were listening to the broadcasts and that the Consumers Service’s notices and informational campaigns had increased the sale of particular items by as much as twenty percent. New York’s pioneering program became the basis for a portable model developed by the federal Agricultural Adjustment Administration which was eventually instituted in more than thirty American cities. None of this could have been done without the infusion of manpower supplied by the CWA (and, later, the Works Progress Administration). In its first year, the Consumers Service Division had a municipal appropriation of all of $200; as late as 1936, it had six civil service workers and seventy-five federal work relief employees.  

The arrival of federal work relief also shaped local social politics in indirect ways. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed New York City to raise the standards of its own relief program. By removing many employable people from the city relief rolls, the CWA had raised the ratio of resources to recipients. (Additional funds had also been made available by loan under the Bankers Agreement.) The Board of Estimate was able to appropriate $1,000,000 more in January, 1934, than it had in December, and an additional million in February; this in turn permitted municipal relief authorities to regularize payments, extend relief to unmarried adults, and raise monthly allowances. Around the same time, an act of the state legislature enabled the city to distribute cash instead of food tickets, which restored to unemployed families the normal human activity of handling money and likewise restored to housewives that part of their work which

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brought them into contact with the commercial economy.\textsuperscript{64} (Cash relief was justified by one welfare association on the grounds that it “tend[ed] to preserve the ingenuity and energy of the housewife,” and several unemployed men interviewed in one study “remarked with pride as to the managing ability of their wives.”) Unemployed families used the flexibility provided by cash relief, studies found, to buy according to ethnic dietary customs and to follow doctors’ dietary recommendations, to cover expenditures such as haircuts, household purchases, and subway fare, and in some cases to hide their unemployed status from neighbors.\textsuperscript{65}

The third week of January, 1934, despite public clamoring for a continuation of the program beyond its scheduled termination date, Hopkins announced that the CWA would be phased out by the end of March. Roosevelt had always intended the program to be temporary, a makeshift measure to buy time for industrial recovery and for the launch of the Public Works Administration’s heavy-construction program. Still deeply committed to the idea of economy and the principle of fiscal discipline, he now seemed to realize that, if allowed to continue, the “spending solution” implicitly presented by the CWA might inadvertently become a permanent part of the New Deal.\textsuperscript{66} “We must not take the position that we are going to have a permanent depression in this country,” he remarked at a meeting of the National Emergency Council, “and it is very important that


\textsuperscript{65}Gladys Niebling and Ruth Hanauer, “A Study of the Use of Cash Relief in the Emergency Home Relief Bureau of New York City” (New York School of Social Work, 1934), 22-43; [William Hodson, transcript of Feb. 4, 1934 radio address], [Hodson, Address to Women’s City Club, Feb. 13, 1934], Hodson Papers, Box 10, NYPL.

we have somebody to say that quite forcefully to these people.” In New York, the announcement touched off protests that were aimed as much at La Guardia as at Roosevelt and Hopkins – an example of how new national programs could create greater demands on local officials. La Guardia sent Hopkins a public telegram, lauding the federal government for its “vision” in creating the CWA; “Surely all this good work should not be destroyed . . . ,” he wrote, “thus precipitating a real crisis.” He announced publicly that he hoped to see Roosevelt to protest the termination but withdrew his request after a long talk with Hopkins. On April 1, the CWA went out of operation, and the cities returned to the system of state and local administration and local, state, and federal funding in place prior to the CWA.

But if the intergovernmental administrative and fiscal aspects of work relief returned to something like the status quo ante, the politics of work relief did not. Policy made politics: mayors, the unemployed, local merchants, and elements within the labor movement had acquired a stake in the CWA’s continuation, and the ill-fated fight to continue it brought them into an informal alliance that would be fortified in the years

67 Quoted in Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 122.

68 The protest telegrams are filed in OF 1892, FDRL. See also FHL to T. Semmes Walmsley, Jan. 22, 1934, SF, “Mayors – Correspondence,” NYMA.

69 E.g., NYT, Mar. 14, 30, 1934.

70 FHL to Hopkins, Mar. 12, 1934, SF, “Correspondence with Federal Officials,” NYMA.

71 NYT, Mar. 13, 16, 1934.

ahead. And although reports of pointless “leaf-raking” projects and “political interference” had abounded, impartial audits convinced Roosevelt that the agency had largely succeeded at the task of creating useful work for four million unemployed Americans in nearly every locality in the nation. The CWA had shown that a national public employment program, though complex and costly, was at least possible; and thus this brief experiment had established new boundaries and expectations in the realm of federal employment policy.

IV

Roosevelt liquidated the CWA in January, 1934, expressly because he feared that the agency, and the approach to joblessness it represented, would become a permanent part of the New Deal. By the end of that year, he had produced a new jobs plan, the centerpiece of which looked very much like the CWA (though with a few important differences). How did this sharp reversal, so crucial to the urban politics of the 1930s, come about?

Big policy changes, the political scientist John Kingdon tells us, come when developments within three different “streams” – “problems,” “solutions,” and “politics” – join up. What we think of as “issues” arise when “problems” – undesirable conditions –


are paired with technically (and politically) feasible “solutions.” Once this pairing process occurs, effective governmental action becomes imaginable; and political leaders may make these issues part of the political agenda. But even the best policy solution, meeting the most pressing problem, will not become policy if political conditions do not allow. The fates of viable policy options are determined not only by the mobilization of interests, but also by how well those alternatives “fit” with various political conditions. Do they fit the political orientations and needs of the administration and its legislative allies? Do they enjoy broad public support, and do they lack powerful and organized opposition? Are they congruent with what Kingdon terms “the national mood”?75

The “problem” Roosevelt faced in 1934 was, of course, unemployment. But by the end of the summer of 1934 he understood unemployment in somewhat different terms than he had a year earlier, after the close of the Hundred Days – and, consequently, he searched for different policy alternatives to meet it. The “problem” of unemployment had been reconfigured both by the economic events in 1933 and 1934 and by the feedback effects of earlier New Deal employment efforts.

It is practically axiomatic that the New Deal did not “end” the Great Depression; but by some measures, the American economy in Roosevelt’s first years in office was a remarkable success. After stabilizing in the spring of 1933, the industrial economy, with some fits and starts, had recovered rapidly. Real GDP had grown by 10.9 percent in 1934; with the exception of the war production years of 1941-1943, the American economy has never expanded so rapidly since.76 Although some economic indicators continued to lag, by 1937 (after several more years of rapid expansion) real GDP had

matched its 1929 level.\textsuperscript{77} And for those with steady employment, real wages were higher than they had been in the Roaring Twenties. The problem was that job creation did not keep pace with the rise in output. Mass unemployment had allowed managers “to be very selective in hiring and retaining workers, and they made the most of their opportunity”; as a result, productivity and real wages had soared (at the time GDP reached its 1928 level, “output per worker-hour was 22 per cent higher” and “[hourly] real wages averaged 36 per cent higher”) while reemployment had lagged.\textsuperscript{78} Whereas GDP returned to its pre-Depression level in the mid-1930s, it would be 1943 before unemployment did the same.\textsuperscript{79}

Amidst what would now be called a “jobless recovery,” unmistakable public pressure for a government jobs program began to build. The dispatches from Hopkins’s field reporter in New York, the journalist Wayne Parrish, convey nothing more clearly than the intensity of popular sentiment for government action to create jobs. Young people, Parrish found, were “‘bored’ with relief” and “want[ed] something to do”; older people had begun to realize they were “out for good” in the new, more productive economic order and yearned for work to assuage the sense of futility they felt. “Jobs is the cry everywhere, and I can’t over-emphasize this point. All agree that this is the one solution, and with no jobs in private business, they must be created by the government.”

“Clients have no ideas about what the government should do except that it should provide


jobs. Among the supervisors and administrators, they are at a loss to predict what is to come and have only one suggestion to solve the problem. That is jobs.”

That these public expectations were directed so squarely at the White House was a product both of the evolution of the presidency and the changes in American political culture wrought by the early New Deal programs. Beginning in his first inaugural address, the political scientist Samuel H. Beer has written, “Roosevelt called not only for a centralization of government, but also for a nationalization of politics. He not only said that the federal government would take the lead; he also . . . exhorted voters and citizens to turn to Washington as the center of power on which to exert their pressures and project their expectations.”

Though some New Dealers continued to feel constrained by the centrifugal tendencies that operated in American public life, there was no question that many unemployed Americans were looking to Washington for a solution to the jobs crisis. As a Pennsylvania miner told another of Hopkins’s field investigators: “If he doesn’t make a go of this, a lot of people are going to be surprised, that’s all.”

Moreover, the earlier New Deal social programs had wrought, with astonishing speed, a virtual revolution in popular ideas of the mutual obligations of citizens and the national state. Shown that it was at least possible for the national government to serve as the employer of last resort, many Americans had begun to insist that they had a “right” to a job – or at least to a subsistence living. New York City Deputy Commissioner of Welfare Stanley Howe told Parrish that many New Yorkers were “now look[ing] on

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80 Wayne W. Parrish to Harry Hopkins, Nov. 11, 17, Dec. 8, 1934, Harry Hopkins Papers, Boxes 65-66, FDRL.


82 Lorena Hickok to Harry Hopkins, Aug. 7-12, 1933, Hopkins Papers, Box 67, FDRL.
relief as a right equivalent to a Spanish-American War veteran’s pension or a rural mail carrier’s pension. . . . ”

New Deal pronouncements about economic security and a higher standard of living were driving popular expectations for government policy, and programs such as the FERA and the CWA appeared to validate these expectations. The new medium of radio did much to facilitate this nationalization of popular political demand. “The relief client not only reads newspapers for relief and works news announcements,” Parrish wrote, “but listens to all the radio stuff out of Washington.”

The termination of the CWA and the concomitant decline in standards as work relief was returned to the localities touched off a series of public demonstrations in America’s large cities – the largest of which, in New York, pitted six hundred unemployed workers and their advocates in a fistfight with one hundred policemen outside the Department of Welfare. In the context of rising popular protest and organizational gains by the Communist Party, many urban officials voiced fears of social upheaval. One New York City relief administrator, stationed in East Harlem, told Parrish that she felt like she was “sitting on a volcano”; Commissioner of Welfare William Hodson remarked that if reemployment “doesn’t come, and come pretty quickly, there is trouble ahead.”

There is little evidence to suggest that radical protest “forced” the Roosevelt administration to respond with a new policy; nor is the administration’s search

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83 Parrish to Hopkins, Dec. 8, 1934, Hopkins Papers, Box 66, FDRL.


85 Public demonstrations by the unemployed and their advocates are amply documented in the major daily newspapers; for New York, see esp. NYT, Apr. 29; May 27, 29; June 5; July 1; Aug. 24; Sept. 23, 1934.

86 Parrish to Hopkins, Nov. 11, 24, 1934, Hopkins Papers, Box 65, FDRL.
for a jobs program best understood as an effort to head off social upheaval. But radical protest played an important role during these months, for it articulated broader public opinion and kept in front of public officials the plain fact that the status quo was unacceptable to a broad section of the public.

By the end of the summer of 1934, Roosevelt was convinced that joblessness represented the primary economic and political problem facing his administration. He defined his immediate task not as reviving the industrial economy as a whole – for this was already occurring – but rather as finding work for those who remained unemployed. The intensity of public pressure for some kind of jobs program made it clear that there was a political profit to be won by programmatic innovation and, likely, a cost to be incurred by maintaining the status quo. Yet if the political necessity for some kind of action was clear, public opinion provided few real cues as to what form it should take: a wide variety of programs could have satisfied the same popular demand. And many different policy alternatives existed, each with strong advocates and at least some claim of expert support. Roosevelt remarked in a mid-September press conference that he had received “150 or 200” different plans for dealing with the unemployment problem.87

Over the course of several months, the President, guiding the policymaking process in the absence of an established bureaucracy or a council of advisers for economic policy, narrowed them down until he arrived at a set of proposals that, though still vague, could be submitted to the newly-convened 74th Congress.

One alternative open to Roosevelt was to subsidize the creation of jobs by private employers. Experience with subsidization was, at the time, limited to a few experiments

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(perhaps most notably in the dying days of the Weimar Republic). But this approach did have influential support – above all from the eminent economist Irving Fisher, who had first proposed the idea to Roosevelt shortly after the inauguration and believed FDR had “expressed special interest” in it.\textsuperscript{88} And it could offer some clear advantages over government-made work: private subsidies were less costly (because private employers would supply most of the overhead); they helped the unemployed retain the job skills required for work in private industry better than did employment on government public works; and they could, in all likelihood, be implemented more quickly and more efficiently.

One reason the idea of private subsidies made no headway was that it lacked champions within the Roosevelt administration. Whereas Harry Hopkins and Harold Ickes had personal stakes in the creation of an expanded public employment program, there was no bureaucratic advocate of private subsidies. Yet Roosevelt himself entertained the idea, at least briefly. When Fisher urged the plan on him again during a private meeting at Hyde Park in September 1934, he found the President outwardly enthusiastic: Roosevelt read Fisher’s memorandum out loud (Fisher wrote to his son) “with running comments. When he finished, he said ‘Grand! Perfectly Grand!’” But Fisher found Roosevelt already thinking “in terms of employment by the Government rather than reemployment in private industry.”\textsuperscript{89} Perhaps, as the historian Richard Jensen has speculated, Roosevelt recoiled at the idea of subsidizing “economic royalists”\textsuperscript{90};


\textsuperscript{90} Jensen, “The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression,” 574-575.
perhaps he believed public works would be more powerful politically, for workers would know whom they had to thank for their jobs; perhaps he believed subsidies unworkable, or considered public works more desirable than private production; perhaps he was swayed by the opposition of the building trades to job training for the unemployed (which they feared would glut the market for skilled labor). Whatever his reasons, Roosevelt never seriously considered creating jobs by paying private businesses to hire unemployed workers.

Other groups, also envisioning a program that would put the unemployed to work manufacturing goods for private consumption, proposed that the federal government finance “production-for-use” by leasing underused factories and idle land, making them available to the unemployed, and establishing a system by which the items produced by unemployed workers could be exchanged outside the commercial system. The most famous champion of this idea was the novelist and muckraker Upton Sinclair, who was then campaigning for governor of California (having swept the Democratic primary in August) on his “End Poverty in California” (“EPIC”) plan. Some limited “self-help production” programs were already underway at the state level – with FERA funding. The State Relief Commission of Ohio had established a program in which workers, by laboring beyond the hours required to draw their work relief checks, earned credits which could be redeemed for “dresses, overalls, furniture,” and other manufactured items.

Roosevelt was enthusiastic about the experiment of the Ohio Plan, and Sinclair’s candidacy earned him meetings with Hopkins, Ickes, Treasury Secretary Henry
Morgenthau, Jr., and RFC chairman Jesse Jones as well as with the President himself. But FDR did not consider production-for-use feasible even on the state scale, as Sinclair had proposed: it was “impossible, absolutely impossible, on a scale anything like that,” he remarked in a press conference. “[I]f Sinclair has any sense in him,” he concluded, “he will modify at least in practice this perfectly wild-eyed scheme of his and carry it on as a community experiment. It will do a lot of good work that way.”

Roosevelt and Hopkins were sufficiently committed to the ideas embodied in the Ohio Plan to see that some production-for-use projects were undertaken by the Works Progress Administration (which would employ workers to make garments, toys, and other objects for relief families). But Roosevelt they did not seek to make production-for-use the centerpiece of their national employment program.

The search for a jobs program also gave renewed impetus to Roosevelt’s dream of balancing the population by resettling urban workers in the countryside. Roosevelt still saw massive unemployment as a symptom of social imbalance, and the old talk of decentralization picked up again as Roosevelt and Hopkins began talking about plans for an expansion of work relief. “There are a million people too many [in New York],” FDR remarked at a press conference. “Suppose we could come back to the 1929 level of industry? Wouldn’t we still have a million people on relief in the City of New York?”

From this sociological perspective, a program designed to achieve “decentralization of

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92 CPPC, Sept. 7, 1934.

93 On such projects in New York City, see Barbara Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View from New York City (Lewisburg, 1979), 140-142.

94 CPPC, Nov. 7, 1934.
population” by subsidizing the creation of subsistence homesteads and model industrial towns promised to get at the root causes of unemployment in a way other government spending programs could not. The FERA drew up plans for rural-industrial “relief towns” housing between 150 and 700 families each, eighty percent self-sufficient, and Roosevelt talked about them enthusiastically.95

But Roosevelt’s back-to-the-land schemes were simply too expensive and too socially disruptive to serve as a way of meeting mass unemployment. FDR never surrendered his decentralization hopes, but he did learn to set them aside.

“[Employment] is our first task,” Roosevelt told the advisers. “That, in turn, means that we have got to know certain facts: Where these unemployed are located, and we have got to give these projects insofar as is possible to those localities where these unemployed on the relief rolls actually live. That means also that a lot of us will have to give up a lot of ‘pet’ projects of our own.”96 Roosevelt hoped to move a million families to subsistence

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FDR discussed this subject with La Guardia from time to time. “Mayor,” he once said, “I think you have two million more people than you ought to have in your city.” La Guardia answered cheerfully, “Mr. President, I don’t agree with you. We have four million more than we ought to have.” On another occasion, when Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace asked Roosevelt to boost funding for rural work projects “in order to result in a slight movement of the city workers to places where they can be put to work more economically,” La Guardia drew laughter from high-level administration officials by offering a counterproposal: “I would pay $100 for each man you could drag out of the city to your rural districts.” La Guardia himself sometimes lamented that New York was too big; still, he was wary of the decentralization schemes. They struck him as transparent attempts by industry to secure cheaper labor. “[I]t will bring our whole standard down,” he cautioned, “and no city can afford to meet that kind of competition.” (Betters, ed., City Problems of 1945-1946, 47; “Proceedings of the Advisory Committee on Allotments,” June 3, 1935, Hopkins Papers, Box 47, FDRL; William Seabrook, “The Wild Bull of Manhattan,” in Reader’s Digest, Nov., 1937, 94; Betters, ed., City Problems of 1935, 13-14.)

96 Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations on Work Relief and Relief and Relief for Fiscal Year 1940, House, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., 370-371; “Proceedings of the Advisory Committee on Allotments,” May 7, 1935, Hopkins Papers, Box 47, FDRL.
farms; in the end, the Resettlement Administration placed only 11,000 families, and only three out of sixty proposed “Greenbelt Town” model suburbs were built.  

By ruling out subsidization of private industry, production-for-use, and resettlement, Roosevelt had decided that unemployed workers would be deployed to produce non-commodified goods in the locales where they resided. It was a short step to ground the new program in the kind of public investment projects sponsored by the PWA and undertaken by the CWA. The search for a program now narrowed: policymaking became a question of how to re-form previous federal programs, and of how to reconcile the conflicting visions of public employment and public works embodied in these agencies. Historians have tended to depict this process as a struggle between Hopkins and his proto-Keynesian economic rationale for a program of relatively light work relief projects spreading broadly among the unemployed population and Ickes, the champion of heavier, more capital-intensive public works projects. But many of those who participated in top-level policymaking discussions in the fall of 1934 were pulled in conflicting directions. Hopkins, for instance, returned from a tour of Europe in August of 1934 “much impressed by the public construction he had observed, especially in the Scandinavian countries. Why [he asked] should not the United States, with its vast resources, embark upon a grand scheme for building public housing, dams, and electric transmission lines, which would add appreciably to our national wealth?” For a while, he seemed to support a program of large-scale, self-liquidating public works projects.

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It was at this juncture that mayors, and La Guardia in particular, became heavily involved in the policymaking process. On September 5, the day after he met with Fisher and the day before his highly-publicized meeting with Sinclair, Roosevelt chatted with La Guardia in the small, book-lined study he used as his office when he was in Hyde Park. La Guardia told reporters afterward that the two men had gone “into some detail concerning conditions and many plans for meeting the [unemployment] situation” and conditions in the cities more generally.99 Apparently La Guardia already had a fairly detailed set of proposals, for when he cabled White House secretary Marvin McIntyre a few days later to arrange an appointment for the entire executive committee of the United States Conference of Mayors, he noted that Roosevelt was already “familiar with [the mayors’] program.”100

Basing their suggestions upon the premise that the nation had reached a “new normal” level of unemployment (seemingly borne out by the lag between rising production and reemployment), the mayors proposed “a long-term program which will meet what is called the ‘unemployment problem.’” Their program had five features: “(1) It would include workers of all types; (2) The governments, Federal, state and municipal, should draw upon those benefited from the fund for work on public work relief projects; (3) Such benefited persons should be paid prevailing wage rates up to the amount of determined benefits; (4) The United States should be divided into regions for the purpose of fixing weekly benefits in accordance with the regional costs and standards of living; (5) General administration and supervision of the plan and fund should be the

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100 FHL to Marvin McIntyre, Sept. 13, 1934, OF 1892, FDRL.
responsibility of the Federal Government.” The mayors urged specifically the
construction of low-cost housing and new schoolhouses and suggested that the program
be financed out of current revenue, as La Guardia was attempting to do in New York.\textsuperscript{101}

The mayors’ proposals looked more like what eventually became the Works
Progress Administration than did the memos Hopkins and Ickes were submitting to the
President, which still envisioned a large program of self-liquidating public works. That
this was true said less about the intellectual or political influence exercised by the
mayors’ lobby than it did about the congruence of objectives between national and local
officials. Both shared the basic goal of moving authority in relief policy from the states
to the national government. (FERA officials were concerned with the question of how to
operate work relief programs in cities where state governors and legislatures favored less
expensive home relief and were “generally more resistant to New Deal policies” than
were big-city mayors.) Most of all, both Roosevelt and the mayors wanted to employ
people quickly. In this context, the mayors’ proposals indicated to Roosevelt that he
would have administrative and political allies for a program that would look something
like the CWA.\textsuperscript{102}

In one respect, the mayors’ plan was intellectually influential. As a way of
justifying the creation of a federal work program, the mayors proposed a division of labor
between the national and the state and local governments, the former to take
responsibility for the “employable” unemployed and the latter for “unemployables” –

\textsuperscript{101} NYT, Sept. 23, 1934; Paul Betters to Roosevelt, Sept. 24, 1934, OF 1892, FDRL.

\textsuperscript{102} Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors, and the New Deal Regime,” 419, 435; U.S. Work Projects
New Deal programs, see James T. Patterson, \textit{The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition}
(Princeton, 1969), esp. chaps. 3-4.
“those mentally, physically or otherwise unfit for regular gainful employment.” They repurposed the old distinction between “employables” and “unemployables,” used since the early nineteenth century to distinguish between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor, in order to provide Roosevelt a justification for a vast expansion of the federal government into what had traditionally been the functional domain of the localities.\footnote{NYT, Sept. 23, 1934.}

It would be a year before Roosevelt had settled the questions the New Dealers wrestled with in the fall of 1934 – the ratio of capital to labor, the share of projects that should produce new revenue, and so on. But by Christmastime of 1934, he knew what he wanted to ask of Congress. In the interim, the last political barrier had been surmounted: the electorate had returned a huge Democratic majority in the midterm elections, meaning that Roosevelt would retain the quasi-parliamentary relation he had enjoyed with the legislature for much of the 73\textsuperscript{rd} Congress. “Boys – this is our hour,” Harry Hopkins famously remarked. “We’ve got to get everything we want – a works program, social security, wages and hours, everything – now or never.”\footnote{Schlesinger, \textit{The Politics of Upheaval}, 265.}

Roosevelt’s proposal of a major new works program in his annual message to Congress on January 4, 1935 broke, one reporter wrote, “with bombshell suddenness.”\footnote{Donald S. Howard, \textit{The WPA and Federal Relief Policy} (New York, 1943), 776.} Proclaiming that the New Deal had “undertaken a new order of things . . . through tested liberal traditions,” Roosevelt used the address to broadcast and amplify the New Deal’s commitment to security – “the security of a livelihood,” “security against the major hazards and vicissitudes of life,” and “the security of decent homes.” The centerpiece of the speech was the work program proposal. “We have here a human as well as an
economic problem,” Roosevelt said. “When humane considerations are concerned, Americans give them precedence” – and that, according to the President, meant providing jobs to those employable people currently on public relief. “The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief,” he declared. He adopted the mayors’ distinction between employables and unemployables, remanding the latter to the care of local welfare programs. For the three and one-half million employable people on relief, Roosevelt said, “the problem is different and the responsibility is different. This group was the victim of a nation-wide depression caused by conditions which were not local but national. The federal government is the only government agency with sufficient power and credit to meet this situation.” He proposed a new program of emergency public employment. All the work, he stipulated, should be useful; it should not compete with private industry; and it should be designed to provide the greatest ratio of labor to material costs. In order to make work relief less desirable than private employment, workers would be paid in the form of “security wages” – larger than home relief benefits but less than the prevailing wage for private industry. In his annual budget message, submitted the following day, Roosevelt requested $4 billion to start the works program – the largest peacetime appropriation to that point in U.S. history.106

Roosevelt’s program went to Congress in the form of an extremely vague joint resolution that aimed above all to give Roosevelt as much control as possible over how the appropriated funds would be spent and what machinery would be established to spend them. The group that drafted the resolution, supervised by the acting director of the budget, spent much of its time devising “inclusive phrases that would invest the President with ample discretion”; the finished product – which ran to all of two pages – was so

broad that its authors feared it would run afoul of the delegation of powers clause. The objective was to leave the administration room for “adjustment,” “flexibility,” and “ingenuity.” The House passed the resolution almost exactly as the administration had submitted it; the Senate added only a few broad directives on how the money was to be spent. Roosevelt signed the bill into law in April, 1935.\footnote{Macmahon, et al., \textit{The Administration of Federal Work Relief}, 44-45, 47. On the bill’s legislative history, see Macmahon, op. cit., and E. Pendleton Herring, “First Session of the Seventy-Fourth Congress, January 3, 1935 to August 26, 1935,” \textit{American Political Science Review}, Vol. 29, No. 6 (Dec., 1935), 991-993. It is frequently noted that congressional progressives called for a much larger appropriation than that which Roosevelt recommended; but Harrington’s analysis suggests there was at least as much strength on the conservative side, not least on the Senate Appropriations Committee, which nearly converted the entire measure into a fund for the provision of direct relief.}

By this time, New York had put its own relief program on permanent footing. Around the time the Civil Works Administration was liquidated, it had become evident that the $70 million bond issue which had funded municipal relief since the Bankers’ Agreement would be exhausted by the end of the summer. Rather than negotiate another loan with the city’s financial community, La Guardia and the fusionists pursued new taxes, to be earmarked specifically for the city relief program, the mayor arguing with conviction that this “pay-as-you-go” policy was morally correct—that his generation had no right to expect its children and grandchildren to pay for its “blunders.” Beginning in midsummer, La Guardia had cast about for politically acceptable sources of revenue; each of its proposals elicited howls of protest. The matter was finally resolved in November, when, having exhausted all other options, the mayor agreed to a 2 percent sales tax on all items excluding food and medicine—duly assailed in the New York press
as a “soak the poor tax”—along with lower-yielding taxes on public utility corporations and inheritances.108

These taxes would provide a firm fiscal basis for New York’s local relief program for the duration of the Depression before being absorbed into the city’s general revenues in 1941. In the interim, the extraordinary expenditure of political capital La Guardia had made to attain their enactment gave the Little Flower strong moral authority when he asked for additional federal spending; pleas for federal money were invariably accompanied by the reminder that New York City was “doing its part” in the “partnership” of which Roosevelt spoke.

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Given immense discretion by the Congress, Roosevelt went about establishing the machinery by which the billions appropriated under the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act would be dispensed.109 The central question remained whether the new program should emphasize direct public employment or capital-intensive projects and indirect employment – whether the new program would look more like the CWA or the PWA. Roosevelt was not prepared simply to jettison the idea of large-scale, monumental public


works projects. He chose to continue the PWA, and at the urging of La Guardia (who operated during the summer of 1935 as a kind of informal adviser on urban affairs), he improved the terms it offered its applicants, raising the grant-to-loan ratio from 30-70 to 45-55 and dropping the interest rate of the loan by one percent. But he remained skeptical of economists’ claims that capital-intensive public works projects created jobs indirectly through a “multiplier” effect; and he “could not get over the fact,” the economist Herbert Stein writes, “that, per dollar, [work relief] put about four times as many people to work directly as did the public works program.” The purpose of the new bill, he told one administrative committee, was to “use as much of it as possible for the purpose of employing people now on the relief roll – and nobody else – directly.” And so he leaned toward a program of labor-intensive, small-scale public projects.

At the end of the summer, Roosevelt gave about twenty percent of the unexpended works money to the Public Works Administration, which also drew upon a revolving fund made available by the repayment of loans and the sale of municipal securities. The other eighty percent he directed to a new agency, the Works Progress Administration, which he had created by executive order, placed under Hopkins’s direction, and tasked with carrying out “small and useful projects.” The new agency

La Guardia, sitting as the U.S. Conference of Mayors’ representative on the Advisory Committee on Allotments, a short-lived board Roosevelt had established to hash out allocation policy, argued that more favorable terms were required before the cities would submit the volume of grant applications necessary for the PWA to serve as an effective stimulus mechanism. Producing a telegram from the mayor of Oklahoma City, he told the committee that a number of cities had projects ready to go as soon as the federal government improved the terms. He suggested a fifty-fifty grant-to-loan ratio with a 3.8 percent interest rate; after conferring with Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Roosevelt arrived at the new terms of 45-55 and three percent interest. (“Proceedings of the Advisory Committee on Allotments,” Hopkins Papers, Box 47, FDRL; “Memorandum of Conference Held in Secretary’s Office May 23, 1935,” Henry Morgenthau, Jr. Papers, Box 65, FDRL; Henry Morgenthau, Jr. diary, May 23-24, 1935, FDRL.)


“Proceedings of the Advisory Committee on Allotments, May 7, 1935,” Hopkins Papers, Box 47, FDRL.
would pay the workers on projects “planned and sponsored” by local units (like the CWA) rather than making grants-in-aid (like the PWA). To ensure that the jobs went to those who most needed the income, the WPA would draw its workers almost entirely from local relief rolls – meaning that those who wished to apply for jobs with the agency would be required first to apply for relief, and hence to submit to a “means test,” the invasive and degrading procedure local authorities used to ensure that relief recipients did not possess other means of support. Launched “with no considered plan for either its duration or its scale,” this dual public employment and public investment program would lie at the heart of the New Deal until the coming of World War II.

We tend to remember the New Deal as a response to the Great Depression. The historian Daniel Rodgers has rightly issued a corrective: Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress, he notes, moved into space created not only by the economic collapse, but also by the “inability of the Hoover administration to stem the economy’s ever-downward slide and the attendant devaluation of the idea of the market’s self-adjusting capacity.” But we would do well to remember, too, that key parts of the New Deal were a response to the failure of Roosevelt’s own program. The failure of the recovery measures enacted in the first year of Roosevelt’s presidency to reduce unemployment to a politically acceptable level created a political space into which temporary public employment, until 1935 a purely emergency measure, was to spread out into something like a program for meeting the problem of joblessness.

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The New Dealers forged many kinds of states: with the NRA and AAA, they built a microeconomic management state; Roosevelt’s devaluation of the dollar and experiments with gold (and later, his experiments in fiscal policy) embodied a macroeconomic management state; the FERA and the Social Security Act of 1935 created a safety-net state; and, less prominently, the resettlement programs and the National Resources Planning Board pioneered a social and economic planning state. To these was now added an intergovernmental public investment state that relied heavily on the labor of the unemployed and the initiative of local officials – channeling underutilized manpower to produce goods and services for the public wealth. Until the coming of World War II, the federal government would commit about a quarter of its annual expenditure to public investment via the WPA and the PWA – about 2.3 percent of annual GDP.

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The share of total federal spending devoted to intergovernmental public works and work relief programs was:

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<td>FY 1936</td>
<td>9069</td>
<td>86005</td>
<td>1298.3</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
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<td>FY 1937</td>
<td>8281</td>
<td>91900</td>
<td>2079.9</td>
<td>25.10%</td>
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<td>FY 1938</td>
<td>7304</td>
<td>87218</td>
<td>1570.2</td>
<td>21.50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY 1939</td>
<td>8765</td>
<td>94626</td>
<td>2569.6</td>
<td>29.30%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
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Dollar amounts in millions. This table excludes FERA money, some of which was used by state and local relief administrations for work relief. Fiscal years ended on June 30 – e.g., “FY 1935” ran from July 1, 1934-June 30, 1935. (Calculated from Annual Report of the Secretary of the Treasury on the State of the Finances for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1940 [Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941], 24, 26, 28; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, National Income and Product Accounts, Table 1.1.5)
By the answer it developed to the paramount moral, economic, and political problem of unemployment, the federal government had shifted the balance of American production away from goods and services for private use and toward the production of public goods for the common wealth. The great majority of this production would come in the form of projects designed, proposed, and supervised by local officials. The New Dealers had been able to create a public investment state without parallel in the democratic world because they had learned to utilize the operational capacity of the local governments effectively. In turn, they had made it possible for local officials to extend the reach of the city government and to undertake more creative local programs than fiscal and personnel constraints would otherwise have allowed. It is to the effect of these federal innovations upon New York City’s public sector that we now turn.
Chapter Three: The New Deal’s “Lost Legacy”:
The New Deal Works Programs and New York City’s Local Public Sector

Shortly before the election of 1940, La Guardia, deeply involved in Roosevelt’s bid for a third term, participated in a question-and-answer session with a group of Roosevelt campaign workers. A woman asked him how she and her fellow volunteers should respond to the charge that WPA workers did nothing but “[lean] on their shovels and so forth” – evoking the stereotype of lazy, unproductive workers and useless projects that had plagued the agency since its inception. In response, La Guardia ran through some of the standard arguments the New Dealers used to defend their most controversial program: federal work relief had allowed Americans to retain their dignity and self-respect; the circulation of dollars first paid as work relief wages had stabilized the American economy and contributed to recovery; calls for the abolition of work relief made in the name of fiscal probity and personal self-reliance were in fact nothing more than a cloaked attempt to saturate the job market and bring down the price of labor. He also made a telling admission: “I get credit and take the bows for parks and playgrounds and swimming pools and buildings and firehouses and airports,” La Guardia said, “but it was through the medium of WPA that all of that was possible. . . . Reputations have been built on what the WPA made possible for New York City.”\(^1\)

Indeed, not only political reputations but also key parts of the city’s infrastructure and of its public sector were built by and through the New Deal works programs. By the decisions they had made as they pursued their own objectives, the New Dealers had

\(^1\) [Remarks to Roosevelt Campaign Volunteers at the Hotel Biltmore, Oct. 24, 1940], National Committee of Independent Voters for Roosevelt and Wallace Voters, Box 14, FDRL.
pushed the federal government into functionary realms that had previously belonged exclusively to counties and municipalities. The New Deal, wrote Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar in their history of Central Park, “added parks to the national political agenda”; it did the same for community health, adult education, mosquito control, recreation, and low-cost housing. Yet these would not cease to be municipal activities simply because the national state assumed some responsibility for them. Rather, by injecting the resources of the national state into local governance, the New Deal works programs had created an unprecedented degree of functional overlap between the national and the local governments; they had also made possible a remarkable expansion of government activity at the local level. Before the conservative congressional resurgence and the shifting of national resources to war production curtailed their efforts, the federal government and the City of New York, acting collaboratively, built highways, tunnels, bridges, subway extensions, and a major world airport; they also opened and staffed neighborhood health clinics, launched a program of working-class public housing, staged high quality music and dance performances at affordable prices, gave new life to the city’s public radio station, built campuses for Brooklyn and Hunter colleges, and opened new school houses across the city.

Central to the public-investment impulse was a broad understanding of “wealth” and a belief that government shared in the responsibility for creating it, particularly by filling lacunae in a system of economic production that cleaved hard toward the private and commodifiable. Adolf Berle, the great theorist of the La Guardia regime as well as one of its leading policy intellects, explained:

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We are wrong in thinking that wealth is only that sort of goods which produce other goods and result in a mercantile profit. Central Park, for instance, is one of the great resources of New York City. It does not produce a profit, and never will. It produces enjoyment, instead. Yet enjoyment satisfies a human need just as much as a plate of pork and beans. It is justifiable, accordingly, for a municipality to incur a long term bonded debt for assets which steadily supply a human necessity, as, for instance, parks, schools, playgrounds, hospitals, bridges, roads.  

Projects of this sort were not really antagonistic to private enterprise. If public-sector provision challenged private industry for land, labor, and market share, it also contained the promise of future private wealth; advocates of public health clinics and public housing could and did argue that such services would render the workforce more efficient, would produce cost savings to employers and property tax payers by reducing illness and disorder. (And pace Berle, Central Park did, and does, produce private profits by its effect on the value of surrounding property.) Still, this was public investment in a capacious sense: with the aid of the national government, New Yorkers undertook not only to fashion an infrastructure which would permit commerce in the city to flourish and develop, but also to provide goods and services that would increase the common wealth of the city and the happiness and freedom of opportunity of its citizens, families, and communities. Now a “lost legacy” of the New Deal, public investment became the cornerstone of the local state Roosevelt’s national program made possible in New York.  

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3 Adolf A. Berle, Jr., “Taxation and Municipal Finance” [speech delivered Nov. 19, 1937], Berle Papers, Box 141, FDRL.

The Public Works Administration, as we have seen, operated on a very straightforward principle: in order to meet national objectives – the provision of jobs, the stimulation of heavy industry – it sought to encourage local governments to expand their activities in the traditional municipal area of public works construction by relieving them of a large part of the cost. By utilizing the operational capacities of local governments, the PWA allowed the federal government to extend its own infrastructural power beyond what would otherwise have been jurisdictionally and operationally feasible. But it also ensured that its efforts would be constrained by local conditions – especially by local state capacity and local political forces.

Municipal resources were a major constraint on the PWA – for the success of this federal program depended on both the ability of local governments to plan desirable projects and the ability and willingness of those governments to shoulder a majority of the cost. These constraints, which had prevented the PWA from making a quick launch in 1933, proved manageable enough that the agency was eventually able to build in all but three American counties. Even so, local institutional factors contributed to wide variations in PWA spending from one jurisdiction to another. Political opposition, in theory, should have been less troublesome. Public works projects generally enjoyed the support of a broad coalition of well-organized and politically powerful groups – construction firms, the building trades, merchant associations, civic organizations,

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financial institutions (which handled the associated bond issues), newspapers, and public officials and party leaders eager to claim credit for them. In the absence of the kinds of neighborhood, preservationist, and environmental checks on the public construction process that developed in earnest beginning in the 1960s, the only reliable set of opponents were those directly inconvenienced by their construction. Yet in some cities, the PWA did encounter stiff political opposition. Sometimes this was of a partisan nature: the most famous case was Philadelphia, where the local Republican administration eschewed the PWA’s offer to finance a badly-needed water filtration system, it was said, for fear that the project would redound to the favor of Roosevelt and the local Democrats. In other localities coalitions of “economic elites” (such as large property owners and bondholders) and property tax-payers worked to restrict public spending in the name of economy and fiscal probity.

New York was comparatively free of both institutional and political constraints on its ability to invest through the PWA. Because they had expanded so rapidly in the decades preceding the Depression, most American cities possessed comparatively great capacity to plan new public construction projects. New York stood out in this respect even among the big cities: the Port of New York Authority, Robert Moses’s public construction empire, the municipal departments’ own engineering bureaus, and a loose

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8 See for instance Paul A. Stellhorn, “Depression and Decline: Newark, New Jersey, 1929-1941” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1982).

network of entrepreneurs who moved easily between the realms of planning, engineering, finance, and government gave it a capacity to plan public improvements that no other American locality could match. Organizations such as the Regional Plan Association and the Mayor’s Committee on Plan and Survey (created by Jimmy Walker in 1926) had assembled inventories of desirable public works projects such that, when the PWA arrived, New York could draw upon a great number of already-developed plans (some of which had actually been started, only to be halted by the Depression). Yet the city was not, from an economic point of view, “overbuilt”; its population still growing and the assessed valuation of its property declining only modestly, it possessed a relatively great ability to spend on capital improvements. Only in the late 1930s would it begin to bump up against its constitutional debt ceiling; in the interim, the development of the new instrumentality of the public authority, authorized to issue revenue bonds outside the limits imposed on municipal debt by the state, had created additional local spending capacity.


11 The rise to political independence of those public authorities operating entirely within the city limits was one of the great subterranean developments of the 1930s. La Guardia had assumed that the directors of these authorities would simply recognize the authority of elected officials; gradually, he came to appreciate the implications of the legal and fiscal powers the authorities possessed, and what these would mean in the absence of centralized party control. An exchange of correspondence with Triborough Bridge Authority Chairman Robert Moses pertaining to the hiring of toll-takers is revelatory:

Moses: “This may appear to be a small matter, but it goes to the heart of these business enterprises which depend on the proper collection of tolls for the integrity of their bonds. It is silly to force a court test on such a matter, but I shall have to take this up with attorneys for the bondholders and with the trustee unless the matter is adjusted.”

La Guardia: “Now, there is one matter I want to make perfectly clear. The Authority bondholders have absolutely nothing to say and have no control over purely administrative matters of the City of New York. . . . The Mayor establishes the policy for the City as well as the selection of the Commissioners of the Authorities. . . . You are a City official and will take up matters with the Corporation Counsel of the City of New York and not with ‘attorneys for the bondholders.’"
Political conditions in New York also favored heavy public investment in infrastructure projects. The PWA’s natural constituencies – contractors, building trades workers, merchants, bond investors – were all strong and well-organized. Property- and solvency-minded “economic elites” whose counterparts in other cities formed the core of antispending coalitions were not, in New York, particularly averse to taking on additional debt for capital improvements – which they considered essential to the continued commercial development of the city.\(^{12}\) They were convinced, too, by the value La Guardia appeared to place on sound municipal finance. And perhaps most of all, they trusted La Guardia’s appointees, men such as Robert Moses (whom the city’s well-to-do held in particularly high esteem) to invest municipal appropriations wisely.

More puzzling, perhaps, is why the New York Democracy, which regained control of the Board of Estimate from 1935 to 1937 (and was thus able, if it so desired, to obstruct La Guardia’s local spending program\(^ {13} \)), offered little opposition. Several potential explanations stand out. First, the rise of the pro-Roosevelt wing of the New York Democracy, centered in Brooklyn and the Bronx, made it less likely that the opposition party would seek to obstruct federal programs created by a popular

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\(^{13}\) The Democratic Party, having lost control of the Board of Estimate in 1933, regained it by winning special elections held after La Guardia’s 1933 ticket mates, Comptroller Arthur Cunningham and President of the Board of Aldermen Bernard Deutsch, each died in office. For the duration of La Guardia’s first term, the Democrats possessed nine votes to Fusion’s seven. Fusion would regain the majority in 1937.
Democratic president (while also marginalizing the Manhattan organization, which was quickly developing into a bastion of conservatism both within the city and in Congress and might otherwise have made the party as a whole a vehicle for fiscal retrenchment). Second, the Democrats did not realize until it was too late that they would not be able to translate credit for the New Deal programs into support for local Democratic candidates; they would instead, in the mayoral campaign of 1937, engage La Guardia in a credit-claiming contest, urging New Yorkers to indicate their approval of “economic and social plans that were Democratic in conception and Democratic in execution” by “preserv[ing] that instrument of progress,” the Democratic Party.14 And third, many Democrats simply shared La Guardia’s vision of what was good for their constituents and good for the city: whatever their disagreements on issues such as charter reform and the abolition of county offices, they would not stand in the way of new schools, roads and bridges, and recreational and health facilities. Thus Peter J. McGuinness, the legendary “Duke of Greenpernt” whose Brooklyn ward was the single most regular Democratic district in the city, remarked at the dedication of a new building at Greenpoint Hospital: “Thanks be to God we had such a Mayor and such a Commissioner of Hospitals to help us. They will take care of our poor people from now on, irrespectless of what befalls. They have done it honest and done it good.”15 Several years later, McGuinness wrote in a letter to La Guardia:

By the way . . . I know the President thinks the world of you. He told me so himself. . . . He said to me, “Peter, he is a great man and my pal.” And the President said he was very happy to give you whatever monies he

14 NYT, Oct. 8-9, 19, 27, 1937.
could at that time to help out our City, and he did not make any mistake when he said that because he has given you plenty and thanks be to God, you were there to get it.\(^\text{16}\)

Flynn himself later wrote that he was willing to work with La Guardia because he considered much of the Mayor’s program to be “in the best interests of the city.”\(^\text{17}\) At least as pertains to public spending, there is little in the historical record to contradict him. And for his part, La Guardia, for all his antipolitical rhetoric, was willing to meet cooperative Democrats halfway; he allowed Democratic leaders like McGuinness to share credit for projects in their districts, and he developed a close working relationship with Flynn, which, by the 1940s, involved significant collusion on appointments.\(^\text{18}\)

La Guardia, then, enjoyed both the opportunity and the ability to spend heavily on PWA-financed projects. Like many politicians of his generation – a generation that had seen the advent of electrical lighting, the spanning of the Hudson River, the rise of skyscrapers and of automotive and air transport – he considered it one of the responsibilities of a progressive public leader to leave his dominion in better physical condition than he had found it. He shared the civic-booster mentality which had long underpinned municipal public investment\(^\text{19}\); but, more than this, he viewed himself as a shaper of the metropolis. “You know, I am in the position of an artist or a sculptor,” he

\(^{16}\) Peter J. McGuinness to FHL, Sept. 6, 1940, SF, “Walker, James J.,” NYMA.

\(^{17}\) Edward J. Flynn, You’re The Boss (New York, 1947), 139.


\(^{19}\) La Guardia’s early civic boosterism is best observed in his work on port development while president of the Board of Aldermen, documented in the newspaper-clipping scrapbooks in FHL Papers, Series VI, NYPL.
once remarked; “I can see New York as it should be and as it can be if we all work together.”

From the moment they were able, La Guardia and his Fusion colleagues invested heavily in PWA-financed public works projects. As soon as the city had closed its budget deficit in April, 1934, La Guardia hastened to Washington with City Chamberlain Adolf Berle and Comptroller Joseph McGoldrick to persuade PWA administrator Harold Ickes to release more than $37 million in grants and loans for the completion of the IND’s Eighth Avenue line and the construction of new schools, hospital buildings, and incinerators. Ten months later, with Roosevelt’s works bill before Congress, he traveled to Washington to present Ickes with a new pile of blueprints – this one including more than $1 billion in spending for highways, subways (including a line from Brooklyn to Staten Island), schools, hospitals, sewage treatment and disposal plants, playgrounds, parks, housing projects, a tunnel beneath Manhattan linking New Jersey and Queens, and a viaduct that would double the city’s water supply, all ready to start at once.

As New York’s engineering bureaus turned out “an endless stream” of detailed plans with complete blueprints, cost estimates, and amortization schedules, La Guardia assumed responsibility for expediting the city’s grant applications. He formed a close (if frequently contentious) relationship with Harold Ickes, an old Chicago political reformer whose emphasis on honest and “clean” public administration mirrored La Guardia’s own.


21 *NYT*, May 17, 1934; Joseph McGoldrick to Ickes, May 17, 1934, SF, “United States – Miscellaneous,” NYMA.

22 *NYT*, Feb. 12, 1935.

(“We talk the same language,” La Guardia said after their first meeting.\textsuperscript{24} In his efforts to protect the federal treasury from graft-inflated construction costs, Ickes had overstaffed his agency’s legal and investigation divisions and had wound the application process in red tape; La Guardia more than once saw fit to denounce the agency’s “semi-colon boys,” but he usually managed to surmount bureaucratic impediments to his own projects by working directly with Ickes (and sometimes with Roosevelt).\textsuperscript{25} When procedural barriers threatened to stall construction at home, he cleared those, too. Of one PWA project he later claimed: “We fussed around with it for months and finally [Secretary Ickes] said, ‘Now look here, if you can get title to the land in 30 days I will give you the money for the first project.’ . . . Well, you don’t pick that much money up every day, so we went out and condemned the land. Now that it is over and the buildings [are] there, I can tell you about it. If something had happened to Mr. Ickes or if something had gone wrong with that appropriation, I don’t know what the Mayor would have done with that land or who could have paid for it. But we got away with it!”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{NYT}, Nov. 24, 1933.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{NYT}, June 7; Nov. 19-20, 1935; On the overstaffing of the PWA’s legal department, see Smith, \textit{Building New Deal Liberalism}, chap. 3. For La Guardia’s role as an expediter, see the correspondence between the Mayor’s Office and the PWA in SF, “Federal Works,” NYMA.

\textsuperscript{26} FHL, “Postwar Era Offers a Challenge to Engineering,” \textit{Heating, Piping, and Air Conditioning}, Apr., 1944, 240.
TABLE 3.1: Per capita spending on PWA non-federal projects (including both federal grants and municipal spending, excluding limited-dividend housing loans and Housing Division projects) of the five largest U.S. cities by facility type. Among the most common facilities in the “Other” category were government office buildings, courthouses, firehouses, dispensary plants, sewage facilities, and waterworks. (“List of Allotted Non-Federal Projects as of May 30, 1942,” RG 135, Entry 59, Box 1, NA II. Figures include projects sponsored by counties and public authorities and may not add due to rounding.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility Type</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Chicago</th>
<th>Philadelphia</th>
<th>Detroit</th>
<th>Los Angeles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>$36</td>
<td>$26</td>
<td>$5</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>$9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automobile</td>
<td>$32</td>
<td>$9</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>$9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highways</td>
<td>$4</td>
<td>$3</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridges &amp; tunnels</td>
<td>$25</td>
<td>$4</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streets</td>
<td>$3</td>
<td>$2</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>$5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail</td>
<td>$4</td>
<td>$17</td>
<td>$5</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>$7</td>
<td>$6</td>
<td>$11</td>
<td>$2</td>
<td>$31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and hospitals</td>
<td>$7</td>
<td>$19</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$14</td>
<td>$4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>$8</td>
<td>$9</td>
<td>$2</td>
<td>$2</td>
<td>$6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$58</td>
<td>$59</td>
<td>$18</td>
<td>$19</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total, Ickes’s agency helped finance 107 projects in New York City; and New York ultimately claimed some $58 per capita in PWA grants and loans – considerably more than the national mean (about $33). In so doing, it made an immense investment in the physical infrastructure of the city and the region. TABLE 3.1 shows how this spending was distributed, and how New York’s spending compared to that of other large cities. There was a striking variety in how big cities chose to invest through the PWA. Mayor Kelly of Chicago used PWA funds to build the Loop section of the Windy City’s mass transit system. Los Angeles spent its PWA money primarily on educational facilities. Philadelphia and Detroit chose to spend significantly less than the national mean, and less still than the other large cities. New York utilized the PWA above all to construct a new automotive transportation infrastructure. In New York, the PWA

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27 For a complete list of PWA projects, see “List of Allotted Non-Federal Projects as of May 30, 1942,” RG 135, Entry 59, Box 1, NA II.
financed the Lincoln and Queens-Midtown tunnels, the Triborough Bridge, the Belt Parkway ("the greatest municipal highway venture ever attempted in an urban setting," the Times claimed\textsuperscript{28}), and a number of smaller bridge, tunnel, and grade-crossing removal projects.

The building of a specifically automotive infrastructure, though it introduced a radically new element to urban life, represented but the latest phase in a longer project to forge a transportation infrastructure adequate to support an interconnected, interdependent metropolitan area and region.\textsuperscript{29} Since the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, if not before, New York’s engineers, bureaucrats, and civic leaders had sought to link the central business areas more securely to the metropolitan region (and to New England and the Mid-Atlantic beyond); reduce the inefficiencies associated with an outmoded, chaotic, sclerotic transportation system; and open up new areas for development – which they hoped would relieve the intense crowding of the central city. They had built hundreds of miles of rapid transit lines and scores of bridges. Now, the massification of the automobile left them with the challenge of building automotive crossings and arterial highways. In particular, they faced the challenge of adapting a primarily insular city “shaped and in large measure completed before the age of the automobile” to the new technology of the combustion engine.\textsuperscript{30} This they accomplished, relying on the new

\textsuperscript{28} NYT, June 29, 1940.

\textsuperscript{29} This paragraph draws especially upon Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, eds., Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York (New York, 2007), esp. 86-93, 204-241; Robert A. M. Stern, et al., New York 1930: Architectural Urbanism Between the Two World Wars (New York, 1987), 685-700; Revell, Building Gotham; Doig, Empire on the Hudson; and, more generally, Jo Guldi, Roads to Power: Britain Invents the Infrastructure State (Cambridge, 2012).

\textsuperscript{30} Nathan Glazer, From a Cause to a Style: Modernist Architecture’s Encounter with the American City (Princeton, 2007), 222.
bases of state infrastructural power developed by Moses and the Port Authority and the fiscal aid of the national government.

Though roads, bridges, and tunnels dominated New York’s PWA-financed expenditures, Ickes’s agency also spent generously on educational and health facilities, and, in so doing, helped to build the infrastructure upon which expanding city services would depend. A new campus for Brooklyn College and a new administrative building at Hunter College’s Midtown location allowed the city to extend its singular system of municipal higher education. The construction of fifteen neighborhood health centers facilitated the most important institutional innovation the Department of Health made during La Guardia’s mayoralty: the creation of a system of district health centers that allowed the Department to target resources where they were most needed, build local knowledge and work closely with community institutions like churches, schools, and labor unions, respond more rapidly to outbreaks of communicable disease, and “bring health” (as Commissioner John Rice put it) “to the doorstep of all.”

The PWA also helped to launch public housing in New York. What was true of municipal social politics in general was particularly true of public housing: local aspirations would have foundered on the shoals of austerity had it not been for innovations at the national level. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), created by the state legislature in early 1934 at La Guardia and Lehman’s urging, did not

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even have an appropriation; it met its bills by selling scrap from work relief demolitions of old-law tenements and got by in large part with the clerical and research assistance of CWA workers. And in the absence of a convincing display of its financial soundness, it had difficulty establishing the marketability of its bonds.

Crucial support came from the PWA Housing Division, written into the National Industrial Recovery Act by Senator Wagner, which financed the construction of two public housing projects in New York: the Williamsburg Houses and the Harlem River Houses, both low-rise complexes with on-site laundries, social rooms, playgrounds, child care and public health facilities, and public art.33 The Williamsburg project came first. After months of jousting over bureaucratic procedure and the division of labor between the state and local authorities, Ickes and La Guardia, after Roosevelt’s personal intervention, arrived in September 1934 at a working accord which allowed the city to begin assembling property titles; fifteen months later, the two men clambered into the cabin of a steam shovel and jointly broke ground on the project.34 In the autumn of 1937, the first residents moved in.35 Assuming that public housing would not acquire broad public legitimacy should it flout Depression-era racialist attitudes, NYCHA filled the Williamsburg Houses with white tenants; “We don’t want to act in such a way . . . that it will deter white people from going into projects,” NYCHA board member Mary Simkhovitch told a group of Harlem advocates in 1939. “You may say it is up to the white population to receive the colored people in equal numbers everywhere because that


is justice. But . . . [we] have to think first of housing."\textsuperscript{36} Adhering to this philosophy of separate-but-equal (and pressed hard by Harlem community leaders after riots engulfed the neighborhood in March of 1935), NYCHA and the PWA undertook a second project at the northern terminus of Seventh Avenue. Both complexes drew about thirty applicants for each available unit, which allowed NYCHA to conduct a highly intensive selection process. These fortunate tenants enjoyed a living environment that had practically no equal at the price: the Harlem River Houses in particular provided an example of “what New York might be,” Lewis Mumford wrote, “if we wanted to make it rival the richer suburbs as a place to live and bring up children.”\textsuperscript{37} Too expensive to serve as a reproducible model for public housing within the market-pricing paradigm, they stand today as monuments to a fleeting moment when the federal government built housing of exceptional quality for the “submerged middle class.”\textsuperscript{38}

The PWA Housing Division would be succeeded in 1937 by the United States Housing Authority (USHA), authorized to allocate $1 billion over four years for slum clearance and public housing.\textsuperscript{39} Senator Wagner, the program’s chief sponsor, would forced to make such considerable compromises to get the bill through Congress that the final act amounted almost to a Greek gift from a Congress in which the antagonists of New Deal urban policy were starting to gain the upper hand. Limits on per room and per

\textsuperscript{36} Bloom, \textit{Public Housing That Worked}, 87–88


\textsuperscript{39} This and the following paragraph rely especially upon Rodgers, \textit{Atlantic Crossings}, 473–78; Bloom, \textit{Public Housing That Worked}, chaps. 2–3.
unit construction costs, inserted to guarantee non-competition with the private sector, would ensure that the new buildings were of much lower quality than the PWA projects (and, additionally, that federal public housing would never gain a working-class or middle-class constituency). The USHA would spend 50 percent less per room on its Queensbridge and Red Hook projects than the PWA had spent on the Williamsburg Houses and the Harlem River Houses, making necessary such cost-cutting measures as doorless closets, concrete-slab floors, and an architectural style Mumford dubbed “Leningrad formalism.” The national government would now help to build housing for the poor—which the PWA Housing Division had not—but it would no longer build for the “submerged middle class.”

Yet as the federal government withdrew from an area it had pioneered in collaboration with local authorities, the city and state would move to fill the vacancy. The year after the USHA’s creation, New York State voters would approve a constitutional amendment creating state and municipal housing programs, which would serve a considerably larger sector of the housing market. The state and city projects, the first of which opened during and shortly after the Second World War, would occupy the space ceded by the termination of the PWA Housing Division; as the historian Nicholas Dagen Bloom writes, their creation would allow New York to continue to build working-class housing and thus to reject the premise of federal policymakers that public housing should be “only for the poorest families.”

40 Quoted in Radford, *Modern Housing for America*, 192.

Like the PWA, the Works Progress Administration operated on the principle of collaborative federalism: it utilized the planning and operational capacities of the local governments to meet the national objective of creating some three million public-sector jobs, paying particularly necessitous unemployed men and women (whom it selected from among those certified by local relief officials) for their work on projects planned, operated, and partly funded by local governments. It left local officials broad discretion to determine how this labor would be deployed, requiring only that they comply with a few directives: work should be useful, should be done on public property, and should neither compete with private industry nor displace the “normal” operations of state and local governments; and the unemployed should be placed, as far as possible, in positions that utilized their existing skills. Though designed primarily as a way of making the federal government an employer of last resort, the WPA also routed federal resources through municipal and county governments for the purposes of producing public wealth—not only infrastructure (as with the PWA) but also other goods and services.

From the point of view of the municipalities, the WPA was essentially a gift of manpower. Just how valuable a gift this was depended largely on a particular locality’s structural position within the American economy—for the WPA could be most productive where it could allocate to municipal governments workers whose abilities, training, and experience were compatible with the manpower requirements of public-sector production. As Table 3.2 suggests, New York (like most large cities) was far richer than the nation as a whole (and the agricultural and mining regions in particular) in
workers whose occupational experience rendered them well suited to public sector and public construction work. New York City WPA administrators and local officials did face the challenge of employing waiters, garment workers, skilled artisans, and the like, and a fair number of them ended up in unsuitable construction jobs. But the New York City WPA could also draw upon many skilled tile-layers and carpenters, nurses and dentists, researchers and engineers – people whose skills and experience made them valuable as auxiliary municipal workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>New York City</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brick and stone masons and tile layers; carpenters; electricians; stationary engineers, cranemen, hoistmen; painters, glaziers, varnishers, enamblers; plasterers and cement finishers; plumbers and gas and steam fitters; roofers and slaters; and structural ironworkers</td>
<td>317.1</td>
<td>219.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builders and building contractors</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical engineers</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operatives, laborers and helpers b</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-Collar, Professional, and Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors and showmen</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists, sculptors, and art teachers</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors, editors, and reporters</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dentists</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicians and teachers of music</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicians and surgeons</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trained nurses</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and welfare workers</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technicians and lab assistants</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>6,930,446</td>
<td>122,775,046</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a (Brick and stone masons and tile layers; carpenters; electricians; stationary engineers, cranemen, hoistmen; painters, glaziers, varnishers, enamblers; plasterers and cement finishers; plumbers and gas and steam fitters; roofers and slaters; and structural ironworkers)
b (Construction and building industries only)

Table 3.2: Number of workers in select WPA-compatible occupations per million residents, 1930. (U.S. Department of Commerce, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population: Vol. 4 [Washington, 1933], 7-15, 1088-1100.)

42 Barbara Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View from New York City (Lewisburg, 1979), 62.
The federal policymakers created an additional set of constraints on the value of WPA-sponsored manpower to municipal governments. In order to provide first for relief-eligible breadwinners, they stipulated that ninety percent of WPA workers be drawn from the relief rolls and that only one person per family be permitted to hold a WPA job – rules that ensured that its pool of manpower would be less skilled, older, more male, and more destitute than the unemployed labor force as a whole. Whatever the other significances of these policies, they rendered the WPA workforce less productive than it might otherwise have been. So did Hopkins and Roosevelt’s decision to restrict the use of labor-saving machinery on WPA jobs in order to keep the labor-to-capital ratio as high as possible.43 And when forced by the building trades to pay union wages, the administration’s stubborn insistence that WPA work pay less than private employment resulted in a compromise under which prevailing wages were paid and working hours restricted, producing constant turnover and discontinuity on jobsites, particularly among supervisors and skilled workers.44

Within these bounds, the WPA’s potential to produce public wealth varied a great deal depending on how the program was administered locally by local officials and WPA administrators. Some urban regimes saw the agency primarily as a means of building or

43 Rexford Tugwell, then undersecretary of Agriculture, has recalled encountering Roosevelt and La Guardia in the presidential study in March of 1935 talking through early plans for what would become La Guardia Airport. Tugwell realized to his horror that they were in happy agreement that power machinery should not be used in construction – only hand tools, so more men would be employed. After listening with mounting exasperation, he finally interjected that the government’s effort might better be directed to building a number of airports rather than a “single hand-crafted one in New York.” (Rexford Tugwell, Roosevelt’s Revolution: The First Year, A Personal Perspective [New York, 1977], 45; Michael Vincent Namorato, ed., The Diary of Rexford G. Tugwell: The New Deal, 1932-1935 [New York, 1992], 229.)

44 See esp. Bonnie Fox Schwartz, The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934: The Business of Emergency Employment in the New Deal (Princeton, 1984), 255-258. See also Grace Adams, Workers on Relief (New Haven, 1939), a skillfully done polemic which grounded its general indictment in these features of the program.
fortifying party organizations; more concerned with rewarding supporters than using the manpower constructively, they placed ward and precinct workers in important (and desirable) supervisory positions for which they were frequently unqualified.45 La Guardia and his appointees, on the other hand, wished to maximize the WPA’s productivity, and they received important assistance from Roosevelt and Hopkins. The President and his “minister of relief” acceded to La Guardia’s pleas that New York City be given its own administrative unit rather than being subsumed in the New York State setup; Gotham thus became the WPA’s “49th State,” preventing an extra layer of administrative procedure and permitting city officials to retain a relatively high degree of command over its operations.46 They also favored La Guardia with their appointments to the position of New York City WPA administrator. The first, former NRA director Hugh Johnson, was mutually agreed upon by Hopkins and La Guardia; he essentially federalized the city’s existing work relief program, which had been run by professional engineers under the leadership of William J. Wilgus (of Grand Central Terminal fame). Johnson was succeeded in September of 1935 by the German American editor and publisher Victor Ridder, who had provided important support in La Guardia’s first successful run for Congress, was appointed by Roosevelt at La Guardia’s request, over the opposition of Ed Flynn, Frank Kelly, and Jim Farley. Ridder was followed by Colonel Brehon Somervell, a career Army officer chosen by Hopkins apparently without consulting any New York politician. Each of the three directors filled the agency’s


46 Millett, The WPA in New York City, 30-31.
administrative and supervisory positions with nonpartisan professionals – especially engineers and Army officers.\textsuperscript{47}

A professional, non-partisan local WPA administration helped to provide equal access to WPA jobs. But it also enabled New York to maximize the WPA’s potential to produce public wealth. New York City was far more successful than most administrative units in providing WPA workers with jobs roughly in line with their previous occupations – two-thirds met that standard in New York, studies found, compared to thirty-nine percent in Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{48} The quality of jobsite supervision provided in New York was also extraordinarily high. Whereas political machines in some cities filled desirable supervisory positions with loyal party workers, the New York City WPA, with La Guardia’s blessing, requisitioned experienced foremen and sub-foremen, which mitigated substantially the WPA’s tendency toward low productivity and morale. Lorena Hickok wrote to Hopkins after touring work sites in the city:

\begin{quote}
Mister, we’re getting some very, very fine work out of these men, work that makes jobs done by contractors look silly! . . . This is due entirely, I think, to the kind of supervision they have in that New York City show. It’s so far above the average that there just isn’t any comparison! [Not a single sub-foreman was] sent in by some ward-heeler! These men actually knew their jobs, the great majority of them – even down to the little fellows in charge of gangs of 10 or 15 men! It simply knocked me cold to find the New York City show so clean, so free of political manipulation. Gosh, if you could just see for yourself the contrast between New York City and – Camden, where today I was told about one supposed
\end{quote}


“engineer” in charge of a project who didn’t even know what a culvert was! 49

Studies showed that WPA construction was inefficient: Robert Moses thought the same work could have been done by private contractors for about fifty percent of the cost; La Guardia and Somervell placed the figure at sixty percent. But impartial audits also found that the work done in New York was, by and large, of notably high quality: in fact, it was less likely to be deemed substandard by city inspectors than that performed by the contractors. 50

Table 3.3 offers a snap-shot view of how New York used the manpower provided by the WPA. As under the CWA, the primary beneficiaries were the Parks Department, the Board of Education, and the borough presidents’ offices – the agencies responsible for the maintaining the city’s physical property. As this would suggest, a great deal of the WPA’s labor went toward patching and repairing the city’s public face and the physical plant upon which urban life depended. As a result, a decade that had begun with typical recession-era disinvestment – the kind of public squalor we associate with the 1970s – ended with the public property of the city in the best physical condition in its history. But the WPA also did much more. Like the PWA, it built crucial new

49 Lorena Hickok to Hopkins, Mar. 2, 1936, Hopkins Papers, Box 67, FDRL.


La Guardia’s commissioners turned in mixed reviews of the white-collar and professional WPA workers who labored in their departments. Some were extremely valuable additions, they reported; others, qualified for the jobs they held, dragged their feet because they resented doing the same work as civil service workers for lower wages; others simply were not fit for the work that was being asked of them. In nearly all cases, commissioners would have preferred regular civil service workers to WPA workers. But this option was not available; and many WPA workers became so fully integrated into the departments’ activities that, when the WPA cut workers from the rolls in 1937, the city government appropriated money to hire thousands of them. (Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed, 152-153; William Hodson, [Address to the League for Political Education, Mar. 11, 1936], Hodson Papers, Box 10, NYPL; NYT, June 26, 1937.)
infrastructure, some of it serving to connect the city physically, some of it facilitating the expansion of municipal services. In addition to refurbishing the city’s public space, it also expanded it. And by injecting additional manpower into municipal departments, it served, like the CWA before it, to catalyze new innovations in the public sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>1937 Municipal Budget</th>
<th>(WPA Expend. as a % of 1937 Budget)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Parks</td>
<td>$7,165,468</td>
<td>826.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board of Education</td>
<td>$145,539,953</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boro. Pres. of Brooklyn</td>
<td>$4,858,686</td>
<td>278.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boro. Pres. of Queens</td>
<td>$5,288,007</td>
<td>242.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boro. Pres. of Manhattan</td>
<td>$6,573,506</td>
<td>182.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boro. Pres. of The Bronx</td>
<td>$3,310,617</td>
<td>327.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boro. Pres. of Richmond</td>
<td>$1,610,311</td>
<td>535.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Public Welfare</td>
<td>$23,616,045</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Hospitals</td>
<td>$24,331,254</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Health</td>
<td>$4,855,564</td>
<td>125.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Water Supply, Gas, and Electricity</td>
<td>$17,282,616</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Docks</td>
<td>$1,193,565</td>
<td>419.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Plants and Structures</td>
<td>$6,638,438</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenement House Dept.</td>
<td>$901,803</td>
<td>291.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board of Higher Education</td>
<td>$7,929,907</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Dept.</td>
<td>$56,948,485</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armory Board</td>
<td>$156,397</td>
<td>1135.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Purchase</td>
<td>$1,452,404</td>
<td>119.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Public Library</td>
<td>$1,427,326</td>
<td>116.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Markets</td>
<td>$701,976</td>
<td>236.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire Dept.</td>
<td>$25,043,205</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Sanitation</td>
<td>$28,982,142</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dept. of Correction</td>
<td>$3,394,322</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queens Public Library</td>
<td>$659,814</td>
<td>139.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Public Library</td>
<td>$865,536</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan and City Libraries</td>
<td>$1,079,357</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$640,492,281</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.3:** WPA expenditures on behalf of New York City agencies as a percentage of departmental appropriations in the 1937 municipal budget. Annual WPA expenditure is a twelve-month average for the period Aug. 1, 1935—June 30, 1937. (Millett, *The WPA in New York City*, 206; “Text of Mayor’s Message Submitting 1938 Executive Budget to Estimate Board,” *NYT*, Oct. 3, 1937.)
Despite its relatively light use of capital, the WPA made a considerable contribution to the city’s economic development – above all in the construction of La Guardia Airport, which connected New York, not simply to the metropolitan area and to surrounding regions, but to other world cities.\(^{51}\) Here La Guardia’s own vision for the city guided the WPA’s activities. The former airman, a booster of American aviation during his time in Congress, foresaw clearly a day when airports would be as important in the economic life of cities as waterfronts and train depots, and he aspired to have New York claim a dominant position as the region’s air hub. “When our program is completed,” he promised, “New York City will have a ring of airports within a few minutes distance of the business and commercial center.” First, he had tried to claim from the War Department part of Governor’s Island, the Inner Harbor outpost. As they sailed up the East River during a fleet review in the spring of 1934, he had plied Roosevelt and Secretary of War George Dern with his vision for an airfield only minutes from Downtown Manhattan. But slowly, his focus shifted to a 105-acre marsh on the south shore of Flushing Bay. Though some believed the site impractical, La Guardia saw its advantages: favorable weather conditions, low-rise surroundings, proximity to Midtown via the newly opened Triborough Bridge and the Queens-Midtown tunnel (a PWA project begun in 1936), and sheltered waters which offered outstanding facilities for the marine clippers that made the majority of international flights in the 1930s. (It also allowed for the possibility of seaplane taxi service to Wall Street and Midtown, an

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early plan for transporting travelers to the airport.) In August of 1937, the city exercised its option to buy the property and appropriated $12 million for improvements. A few weeks later, Roosevelt, perhaps seeing a chance to bury the myth that WPA workers did little more than rake leaves, gave his full support to the project; eventually the cost would rise to $40 million, of which the WPA contributed $27 million. The airfield opened in 1939 and was immediately christened La Guardia Airport in an act of magnanimity by the Democrats on the Board of Estimate. “It is the greatest, the best, the most up to date, and the most perfect airport in the United States,” La Guardia wrote to Roosevelt when the project was finished. “It is ‘the’ airport of the New World.” The major airlines signed hangar leases, and New York became, as La Guardia had hoped, one of the world’s air traffic centers. Meanwhile, air travel was expanding so rapidly that only a few years after it opened, the new airport was considered inadequate in size, and the city began work on a second, far larger airport near Jamaica Bay – what would become Idlewild, now known as JFK.

The WPA’s blue-collar workforce also built twenty-five schoolhouses, eighteen new hospital buildings, and single-story baby health stations in “dozens of neighborhoods” – and scores of other small-scale construction projects. Infrastructural projects of this sort made possible the expansion of the city’s public sector. The fate of WNYC, New York’s municipal radio station, offers a case in point. During the 1933 mayoral campaign (and again at intervals during the first six months of his mayoralty),

52 FHL to FDR, Sept. 13, 1939, SF, “President,” NYMA.

La Guardia had actually pledged to abolish the station, weak in signal and programming alike, in the name of municipal frugality. But he had reversed course when a committee headed by CBS chairman William S. Paley returned a recommendation that the station receive a larger appropriation and new facilities. The WPA helped build ample new studios in the Municipal Building and, at the foot of Greenpoint Avenue in Brooklyn, a technical facility that housed a new transmitter, antennae, and motor. With the station was made technically viable by the WPA, La Guardia’s appointees, programming director Seymour Siegel and (beginning in 1938) station director Morris Novik, set about building it into something more than an “inept imitation of commercial radio.” Soon it would provide not only quality entertainment and cultural fare but also civic news, educational programming, and “information to help [New Yorkers] thrive in an increasingly complex world.” It became a kind of prototype for public radio in America.

Relieved by the WPA of a good share of its labor costs and able to commit its resources to the acquisition of land (which could be had in the 1930s at favorable prices) and the purchase of materials, Robert Moses and his Parks Department deputies expanded park acreage by nearly twenty-four percent – pushing New York from a laggard position to the front of the pack of America’s large cities in the share of its territory given to parks – and produced a staggering number of new recreational

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facilities.\textsuperscript{57} Utilizing WPA labor, the Parks Department built the grounds of the 1939 World’s Fair, Randall’s Island Stadium, and Orchard and Jacob Riis beaches. It also built nearly two hundred playgrounds, some in the dense central-city neighborhoods and some in the older parks, as well as seventeen spectacular swimming pools spread throughout working-class neighborhoods – Astoria, Morrisania, Red Hook, Greenpoint, Harlem, Sunset Park, Brownsville, Tompkinsville. It added golf courses, tennis courts, baseball diamonds, football and soccer fields, bocce courts, bridle paths, and even a public polo field to the public recreational plant. And it produced stunning renovations in many of the city’s older, more formal and pastoral parks.\textsuperscript{58}

Perhaps more than most New Yorkers realized, the expansion of recreational space during the 1930s was one aspect of a larger, conscious \textit{rearranging} of city space. New Yorkers had long used the city’s streets for urban commerce, social contact, political life, and recreation. As the urbanist Daniel Bluestone has detailed, La Guardia’s administration attempted to claim them for “traffic,” and, in so doing, displaced “earlier social uses of the streets” in the name of the “broader specialization of urban space. . . .”\textsuperscript{59} New playgrounds, neighborhood parks, and swimming pools aimed explicitly to


This rationalizing impulse extended to the designation of space within the parks. See, for instance, Moses’s defense of his decision to lay out baseball diamonds within Central Park against those who desired a “formal treatment”: “The North Meadow has been used for years for baseball in Summer and football and soccer in the Fall in a haphazard sort of way. All we’re doing is to come out frankly and recognize that this
move people (particularly children) from the congested and often dangerous streets to discrete recreational spaces; the Parks Department filled its official publications with statistics on declining traffic accidents. But as they sought to untangle the functions of urban space and to rearrange the geography of city life, La Guardia and Moses also provided access to a world of recreation many city dwellers had previously been denied.

Moses, who was smitten by the British Civil Service system while a graduate student at Oxford University, saw it as his task to translate European-style public provision to the context of America’s democratic, polyglot megalopolis. “We must recognize that we have a different kind of population here,” he wrote to a friend who had compared New York’s parks with those in European cities, “and not just one with lower standards, and we must also realize that New York conditions are peculiar because of our huge, mixed population, over crowding, high land values and other factors which do not by any means involve bad character, deficiencies in education or plain cussedness.” He was at heart (as the historian Jerald Podair puts it) a “middle-class moralist”; if a city such as New York were to have a world-class recreational plant, he believed, it would have to construct facilities that were “obviously suitable, adequate, durable, and perhaps even a little imposing.” He scorned the “side-shows [and] shooting galleries” of Coney Island; instead he built the sparer, more elegant beaches at Pelham Bay and Jacob Riis parks. He forbade “amusements” in the city parks, filling them, rather, with active

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60 Robert Moses to Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, Nov. 4, 1936, Box 97, Robert Moses Papers, NYPL.


recreational facilities “intended to promote good health and good behavior as well as to make living conditions more pleasant.”

Still, if Moses’s parks conveyed a touch of the bourgeois paternalism of their nineteenth century predecessors, they also threw open the doors to a kind of leisure previously denied to many New Yorkers. “Suddenly,” write the historians Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, “the city’s working-class communities had full entry into a recreational world previously reserved for the middle and upper classes. Access to recreation was undergoing its most dramatic ‘democratization’ of the past hundred years.”人民 who could not afford to go away on the weekends now had access to “an afternoon’s tennis or a Sunday at the beach” – or, despite Moses’s preference for active recreation over the pastoral vision of Olmsted and Vaux, to “quiet and a broad prospect and tranquility” in the sort of ordered natural setting that brought a touch of grace to the cacophonous city. Projects such as the pools and beaches, which had no counterparts in Depression-era urban America, bear out the urbanist Marshall Berman’s characterization of Moses as “a true creator of new material and social possibilities.” But even the renovations of old parks – which, after all, had been a part of the cityscape for decades – struck some New Yorkers as unlike anything they had imagined possible in the United States. “I really thought I was in another Country,” a Yorkville woman wrote to Moses following the renovation of Central Park. She had

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64 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 450-451, 458, 463.


grown “so sick and tired” of the scenery in the old under-maintained space; now she likened the renovated masterpiece to “the beautiful parks in Scotland + England.”

About thirty percent of New York City WPA workers labored on projects especially designed to employ professionals, clerical workers, and artists. Like the CWA workers who had preceded them, many of these workers essentially became adjuncts in the city departments and in city-supported nongovernmental institutions, their labor enabling those agencies to expand their operations at a time when they would otherwise have been forced to cut back, and in some cases to initiate new programs. The availability of WPA workers allowed the New York Public Library not only to extend its hours but also to create an “Open Air Reading Room” in Bryant Park. By 1937, the Department of Hospitals was using four thousand WPA workers as “doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, clerks, typists, kitchen help, orderlies, . . . laboratory technicians” and even barbers in the twenty-six city hospitals. The Department of Health sponsored two thousand WPA workers; some were engaged in a large mosquito eradication project, while others worked on the department’s anti-venereal disease campaign, administered chest x-rays to check for tuberculosis, or staffed dental clinics, child health stations, or school health services. WPA researchers undertook studies that were foundational to the initiation of municipal projects: the Mayor’s Committee on City Planning, operated as a WPA project, laid the groundwork for the City Planning Commission by making

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67 Mrs. J. French to Robert Moses, Jan. 18, 1935, Robert Moses Papers, Box 91, NYPL; “a disgruntled democrat” to Al Smith, Mar. 3, 1935, ibid.

68 Generally, see Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed, 147-217; Millett, The WPA in New York City, 105-128 and passim.

surveys, maps, and models; another set of WPA studies aided in the establishment of America’s first free port in Staten Island (a project La Guardia had devised to salvage a group of white-elephant piers built during the Hylan administration). Workers on the WPA “Radio Project,” “skilled in programming, writing scripts and continuity, and undertaking research” (many of whom had previously been employed in broadcasting, cinema, and public relations) provided the critically understaffed WNYC with essential manpower.\(^70\) WPA workers made up some five-sixths of Parks Department playground supervisors – “bright young guys,” one department official later recalled, who, in addition to supervising playground activity, were “trained in working with young people, . . . giving them leadership, giving them help.”\(^71\)

If some WPA projects augmented or extended upon the activities of municipal departments, others introduced altogether new functions to the local state (and for that reason tended to be sponsored by the Mayor’s Office rather than the departments).\(^72\) Some WPA workers set up community playgrounds and operated them in conjunction with local institutions (such as the settlement houses); others provided domestic work and home visits for the elderly and infirm. The WPA also paid unemployed teachers and experts – many of them young City College, Brooklyn College, and Hunter College graduates who had the misfortune of entering the job market in the mid-1930s, others older people who could find no market for their expertise – to teach free classes on

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\(^70\) Luscombe, “WNYC, 1922-1940,” 161-162.

\(^71\) Caro, *The Power Broker*, 511.

\(^72\) Millett, *The WPA in New York City*, 122.
everything from philology to astronomy to dance to such vocational subjects as “homemaking, sewing, typing, bookkeeping, accounting, and business management.”

Unlike the blue-collar and white-collar/professional projects, the WPA arts projects were not co-administered by the city government; run directly by Washington, they required no local sponsorship, and as a result they were not formally interlaced with the activities of the municipal government. Yet they, too, stimulated the development of the city’s public sector. Roosevelt had initially conceived the arts projects simply as a way to create jobs for a set of particularly hard-hit occupational groups: artists “have to live,” he remarked; “I guess the only thing they can do is paint and surely there must be some public place where paintings are wanted.”

From this rather inauspicious germ grew a program of remarkable social imagination. Under the sponsorship of the WPA, painters, sculptors, writers, actors, musicians, and researchers of all varieties produced works ranging from some of the most celebrated books and plays of the decade to neighborhood theater productions and phenomenally popular Saturday night dances and park concerts. They produced murals and sculptures to grace America’s public spaces, gave free music lessons and opened excellent art schools, staged famous “Living Newspaper” productions, and performed high quality musical works (some of them newly commissioned from emerging American composers) in free or inexpensive concerts, making the fine arts available to a much broader audience.

Unlike Roosevelt, La Guardia harbored the belief, then highly unorthodox in the United States (though not in Europe or Britain), that “high art” was intrinsically a proper

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73 Ibid., 171; Current History, May 1938, 58-59.

74 Frances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew (New York, 1946), 75-76.

75 Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed, 183-217.
concern of government, not only because it was a mark of civilization but also because working-class people were being unjustly deprived of it – just as they were being deprived of access to recreation, health care, and decent housing. 76 From the beginning of his mayoralty, La Guardia, who loved Classical and Romantic music deeply, entertained two related but distinct visions: first to create a municipal arts center that would include an opera house, a symphonic concert hall, an auditorium, art galleries, and perhaps a campus for the high school of music and art which he was to create in 1936; and second, to provide public venues where working-class families could have access to the fine arts. 77 “The industrial worker has a monotonous job,” he once remarked. “He sews on buttons, say, all day long, stitch after stitch after stitch after stitch. But when the worker’s day is over, he can find his spirit refreshed and uplifted through – yes – through music, through art.” 78

Eventually these two impulses merged in the form of the City Center of Music and Drama. 79 As with so many La Guardian initiatives, the birth of City Center was midwifed by the federal works programs. In 1939, City Council President Newbold Morris, acting as the administration’s liaison to the Federal One arts projects, arranged for the best of the city’s three WPA orchestras to perform a series of concerts – Wagner


78 Benjamin M. Steigman, Accent on Talent: New York’s High School of Music and Art (Detroit, 1964), 15.

79 This and the following paragraph rely especially upon Vautrin, “New York City and Its Cultural Institutions,” chaps. 5; Newbold Morris, Let the Chips Fall: My Battles Against Corruption (New York, 1955), 156-182; and NYT, Nov. 19, Dec. 18, 1939, Mar. 20, 1940.
and Tchaikovsky – at the new Center Theater at Rockefeller Center. Morris filled the subway with advertisements that read, “Mayor La Guardia presents the New York City Symphony,” with the identification “WPA Project” in small script at the bottom. The series sold out on the first night and later moved to the Metropolitan Opera House; it continued for three years, first at the Metropolitan, then at Carnegie Hall. The success of the WPA shows lent validation to the idea of a public center for the performance of classical music at affordable prices: “it was shown,” the Times music critic Olin Downes wrote upon the announcement of the plans for City Center, “that there was a large music public for the symphony concerts given by one of the leading WPA orchestras of this city, when these concerts were made accessible in price.”

In 1942, the city came into possession (through tax delinquency) of the neo-Moorish Mecca Temple, a “massive masterpiece of Turkish-bath rococo” located on 56th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues built by the Shriners and equipped with a large auditorium. It was Morris, in the wake of his experience with the WPA orchestra series, who convinced La Guardia to convert the building into a performance venue. He and La Guardia organized a non-profit corporation to run the enterprise and enlisted a group of subscribers consisting mostly of labor unions and philanthropists to meet the initial costs. The city repaired the building and agreed to lease it to the non-profit on the condition that maximum pre-tax ticket price be set at $2.00 (about a third the price of an orchestra seat at the Metropolitan Opera). By then the WPA had been liquidated and the Federal One

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81 “Rhinestone Horseshoe,” Time, Mar. 6, 1944, 55.

82 As the historian Murielle Vautrin has noted, City Center was not “public” in the sense that the European municipal theaters to which La Guardia looked for inspiration were public: it was operated by a
music project along with it, but Morris and La Guardia persuaded top performers to work for free or at the lowest union rate to launch the enterprise – effectively replacing the federal subsidy of Morris’s WPA concerts with subsidization by the performers, who were willing to donate their talent out of enthusiasm for the project and appreciation for City Center’s engaged and enthusiastic audience. City Center scheduled its maiden performance for December 11, 1943, in honor of La Guardia’s sixty-first birthday, and produced its first opera, a ragged-but-right Carmen cheered lustily by “Dubinsky’s garment workers and Curran’s seamen,”83 the following March. La Guardia dubbed it “the Cosmopolitan Opera house”; it would flourish for more than a decade as a unique public alternative to the higher-priced performing arts venues that surrounded it.84

III

As Roosevelt and his cabinet had anticipated85, the Works Progress Administration quickly became an extremely polarizing agency. “In the memory of American workers,” the historian David Montgomery writes, “no act of the New Deal non-profit organization rather than by a public agency, and it actually received less in the way of a public subsidy than many privately-founded, quasi-public institutions (such as the major art museums). City Center did, however, originate at the initiative of elected officials; its ticket prices were established by the city government; and, not least, credit for it accrued primarily to the city government.

83 “Rhinestone Horseshoe,” 55.


evokes a warmer response than the massive scale of its relief effort.” And yet few New Deal measures stirred up as much angry opposition – opposition so intense that even mainstream political commentators raised for public consideration the prospect of disenfranchising all public-sector workers lest the WPA become the basis for a huge New Deal political machine. When, in 1939, George Gallup’s pollsters asked men and women from every state and all walks of life to name the New Deal’s “greatest accomplishment” and “the worst thing the Roosevelt administration has done,” the WPA topped both lists by wide margins.

La Guardia, his own administration deeply implicated in the WPA’s operations, became heavily involved in the New Dealers’ efforts to defend the agency from its critics and political adversaries. Trading on his reputation as an honest and efficient administrator, he spoke on the WPA’s behalf in venues across the country, emphasizing, in turn, the “chaos” that would wrack the big cities if relief were returned to the states and the “right” of American citizens to work “so that they can support their families decently and properly.” He pleaded the WPA’s cause so forcefully that he sometimes felt he was

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88 The 1939 Gallup survey collected spontaneous responses to the prompts “What do you think is the greatest accomplishment of the Roosevelt Administration during the six years it has been in office?” and “What do you think is the worst thing the Roosevelt Administration has done in the past six years?” “Relief and WPA” (28% on the list of “Best Things Done,” 23% on the list of “Worst Things Done”) was followed by “Banking reforms” (21%), “Civilian Conservation Corps” (11%), and “Social Security legislation” (7%) on the “Best Things Done” list; it was followed by “Spending policy” (16%), “Farm program,” (12%), “Foreign Policy” and “Labor Policy” (each 6%) on the “Worst Things Done” list. (“June 5 [1939]: Roosevelt Administration,” Survey #157-A, Question #6A,” in Gallup, ed., *The Gallup Poll: Vol. 1, 157.)*

doing more for the New Deal than were the New Dealers themselves. Once, after trips to New Orleans and Boston, he chided Hopkins for not helping him adequately in his efforts to sell Hopkins’ own program: “Now listen, Harry,” he said, “I can’t carry the ball alone. I have to have a team.”

The United States Conference of Mayors, which elected La Guardia its president in 1935, would serve as the primary organizational vehicle by which America’s mayors worked in defense of the New Deal’s intergovernmental programs. Founded in 1932 to foster federal-municipal relations by giving the political leaders of the big cities an “effective organizational base” for lobbying Congress and the executive branch, the Conference of Mayors was a structurally powerful participant in the federal policymaking process. Though its members represented exclusively urban areas, they were otherwise an extraordinarily diverse lot: they represented cities in every region of the country; and they were the creatures of all different types of political regimes. And as an organization of local officials, it could speak with authority on some of the most contentious questions of the 1930s – whether or not federal spending was efficacious and desirable; whether or not the national programs initiated by the New Deal impinged upon the autonomy and freedom of smaller political communities.

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90 Hopkins and La Guardia, telephone transcript, Mar. 28, 1936, Hopkins Papers, Box 74-76, FDRL.
La Guardia was equally proud of his work as a champion of the Public Works Administration (a far less controversial agency). During one of his periodic dust-ups with Harold Ickes, he wrote the PWA administrator: “It was most unkind of you to say that I was a ‘publicity seeker’. . . . I might have been guilty of getting publicity in the last few months, but it was publicity in favor of your program. No one in this country has more favorably advertised and explained the PWA program than I have. . . . I am sure the President knows about it, because we have discussed it many times.” (La Guardia to Ickes, Nov. 23, 1935, SF, “Electric Street Lights,” NYMA.)

La Guardia had become a major voice within the mayors’ conference even before
he took office, when, in December, 1933, the mayors lobbied for the expansion of the
CWA to include all unemployed persons. By the following year he was the group’s
spokesman and *de facto* leader (as was evident in the September 1934 lobbying trips to
Hyde Park); he was elected its president in 1935, a one-year term that the mayors chose
to extend in 1936 and again in the years that followed; he would continue to hold the
presidency until he left office in 1946. “[W]e sort of broke the rules,” Mayor Kelly of
Chicago recalled, “because of his closeness to Washington, not only as to distance, but of
the powers that be. . . .” Under La Guardia’s direction (and that of executive secretary
Paul Betters), the Conference of Mayors would emerge as one of the primary sources of
organized support for the WPA.

One aspect of the Conference of Mayors’ work involved the publicizing of the
WPA’s contributions to local communities. Especially in a large and diverse nation such
as the United States, federal spending programs may suffer from deficits in public
understanding: citizens may be unaware of what those programs do; or they may assume
money is being spent in sections of the country other than their own, or for the benefit of
people unlike themselves. The WPA was far less vulnerable to the “invisibility” problem
than most government spending programs – indeed, it was one of the most visible
national spending programs in American history. But its advocates were acutely
concerned about public comprehension of what the agency was doing – particularly the
dissonance between the popular conviction that the WPA was doing useful work in local

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92 *NYT*, Dec. 15, 1934; Dec. 16, 1933.

Conference of Mayors* (Washington, 1946), 160.
communities and the lurking suspicion that, as a national undertaking, it was wasting taxpayer money on useless “boondoggle” projects.\textsuperscript{94} “There is a great deal of misrepresentation concerning the W.P.A., resulting in misunderstanding on the part of many well meaning people,” La Guardia wrote to a state administrator nine months into the program. “The projects themselves and work given to the unemployed will in the long run fully answer the criticism.”\textsuperscript{95} To help translate local support for WPA-sponsored public investment into support for national work relief policy, he and Betters produced a series of reports which publicized the benefits accruing to communities as a result of the WPA, and, most importantly, showed a striking consensus in support of the program that crossed regions, party lines and included machine and reform administrations, Democrats, Republicans, Socialists, and non-partisan city managers alike. Though the reports were presented as the work of a disinterested and non-partisan organization of local officials, La Guardia discussed them with Hopkins, and La Guardia corresponded with Roosevelt as to how they could be most effectively released.\textsuperscript{96}

The Conference of Mayors also emerged as a key participant in the lobbying process that determined how much was appropriated for the federal works programs and what rules would guide the spending of that money. In requesting WPA appropriations from Congress (which were adopted without alteration until 1939), Roosevelt was

\textsuperscript{94} See esp. Smith, \textit{Building New Deal Liberalism}, 146-147; also Donald S. Howard, \textit{The WPA and Federal Relief Policy} (New York, 1943), 155.

\textsuperscript{95} FHL to William Lynch, Apr. 13, 1936, SF, “Works Progress Administration,” NYMA.

subjected to two strong, antithetical popular pressures: first, the demand for adequate relief and public employment; second, a broad and powerful public sentiment for economy in government and a balanced budget. Popular support for “economy,” strong even in the mid-1930s, picked up after the election of 1936, particularly among Congressional Democrats who represented districts that had, by 1937, returned to something like pre-Depression conditions and who feared another economic collapse should rampant budget deficits continue and inflation, default, or a sharp hike in taxes follow.97 In the spring of 1937, some of these Democrats joined Republicans to form an “economy bloc” committed to reducing the federal budget by cutting appropriations for the works programs. The Conference of Mayors, along with the Workers’ Alliance (a union of WPA workers) and the WPA itself, acted as a countervailing force, articulating popular support for an adequate public employment program.

Roosevelt himself sought to steer a course between these two forces – reducing work relief spending, but more gradually than the economizers wished. To counterbalance the well-organized and structurally powerful congressional economy group, he fostered the development of the Conference of Mayors, frequently bringing La Guardia to the White House to discuss WPA appropriations, which assured that the mayors’ requests would make the newspapers nation-wide. With the economizers establishing the lower bound of mainstream public discussion and the Conference of Mayors’ requests indicating what would be sufficient to continue the WPA at its existing

levels, Roosevelt could make middle-of-the-road requests that protected the WPA from draconian cuts while satisfying centrist that he accepted the need to make progress toward a balanced budget.\textsuperscript{98}

Premised on sunny reemployment projections that never materialized, Roosevelt’s requests never sufficed to continue the WPA at its existing level for a full twelve months. Instead of gradually scaling back, Hopkins continued spending apace; when his appropriation ran low, he announced severe cutbacks, touching off protests and demonstrations in the cities and eliciting wails of discontent from the mayors. He did this so regularly that one historian has concluded he was acting strategically, precipitating the hue-and-cry in order to build support for supplementary “deficiency” appropriations.\textsuperscript{99} Whether or not this was so, the Conference of Mayors played a central role in a coalition that pressed for yearly deficiency appropriations when the conservative annual appropriations ran out.\textsuperscript{100}

The politics of work relief entered a new phase in the spring of 1937 when, in the first rumblings of what would ultimately prove a seismic shift, southern congressmen began to look at the WPA more critically. Some focused on the program’s pro-urban character. By soaking up the excess of labor in the cities, they now suggested, the agency was subsidizing an unsustainable (and perhaps undesirable) social arrangement. “What


\textsuperscript{100} Flanagan, “Roosevelt, Mayors, and the New Deal Regime,” 432; \textit{NYT}, Mar. 15, Dec. 4, 5, 1936; Nov. 29-30, 1938; John Morton Blum, \textit{From the Morgenthau Diaries: Years of Crisis, 1928-1938} (Boston, 1958), 277; \textit{Time}, Dec. 21, 1936, 11; Blumberg, \textit{The New Deal and the Unemployed}, 102-105; FHL to FDR, Nov. 22, 1938; FHL to Hopkins, Nov. 22, 1938, both in SF, “President,” NYMA.
are we going to do with the folks in the cities?” one rural congressman asked. “The
answer is that we continue on with this relief business and permit people to go to the
cities and live there.” 101 If work relief spending were curtailed and labor markets allowed
to take their course, these congressmen suggested, decentralization of the kind Roosevelt
claimed to support would be the natural result. As it was, rural tax dollars were being
funneled into the Northeast and Midwest to maintain people in the overgrown cities.
Other southern Democrats fixed upon the WPA’s regional wage differentials, a policy
they had previously supported but now came to see as a threat to the separateness of the
southern labor market – in some ways the very foundation of southern society. Senator
James Byrnes of South Carolina cited a much-publicized case of a Georgia man who,
faced with the choice between a $21 a week WPA wage in Georgia and a $61 wage in
New York, had packed up and moved to the city. 102 WPA work, some had concluded,
“constitute[d] a tempting alternative to tenant farming and agricultural work”; as such, it
seemed to threaten basic elements of the southern social order. 103

Southern congressmen responded to these mounting concerns by seeking to
reclaim policymaking authority they had ceded to the administration in the Emergency
Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. WPA policy thus became enmeshed in a larger
struggle between Congress and the executive branch, and, by extension, between the


102 Hearings Before the Committee on Appropriations Pursuant to H. J. 361, Emergency Relief

103 Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War
(New York, 1986), 8 and passim. See also Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger, and Daniel Kryder, “Limiting
(Summer, 1993), 283-306; Sean Farhang and Ira Katznelson, “The Southern Impediment: Congress and
SAPD, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), 45.
traditional elements of the Democratic Party and the New Deal forces. This institutional
tension between Congress and the administration, exacerbated by Roosevelt’s recently
introduced court reform and executive reorganization measures, first boiled over in a
contest between the administration and southern Democrats in Congress over the
“sponsor’s share” demanded of local governments by the WPA. Unlike the Public Works
Administration, which had a fixed ratio of federal to local expenditures, Hopkins had
broad discretion to determine how much a local government would be required to pay for
a particular project. He used this discretion to encourage local government spending on
PWA projects and home relief – in other words, to encourage local governments to
provide work or income maintenance for those “employables” the underfunded WPA
could not employ. In the summer of 1935, he had struck what Secretary Morgenthau
described as a “deal” with La Guardia\(^\text{104}\): under this informal understanding, the WPA
required New York to put up an unusually small “sponsor’s share” in recognition of its
heavy investment in PWA projects and its generous provision of home relief to the
“employable” people the WPA could not put to work (and, later, in exchange for
occasional extraordinary city contributions to WPA projects, such as those required to
build La Guardia Airport). On this understanding, La Guardia later wrote to Hopkins, the
Mayor “proceeded to the very limit” with the city’s public construction program.\(^\text{105}\)

When Senator Byrnes looked over the WPA’s spending figures, he saw that his
state of South Carolina was paying 23.6 percent of the cost of its WPA projects and New
York City was paying .5 percent – a detail he promptly made public. Byrnes’s revelation
became one more bit of evidence that the WPA was funneling money into the urban

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\(^\text{104}\) Henry Morgenthau, Jr., diary, Dec. 8, 1934.

\(^\text{105}\) FHL to Hopkins, Oct. 6, 1937, SF, “Federal Works,” NYMA.
North. But his complaint was not exclusively about inequity; he also charged that, through such arrangements, Roosevelt had ceded to mayors broad authority to determine what constituted relief – powers Byrnes believed should belong to Congress. The position Hopkins, Roosevelt, and La Guardia had agreed to, he said,

... is that you should take into consideration the amount spent by the mayor of New York for what he terms relief, and that when you take that into consideration it is not unfair to ask that they contribute only one-half of 1 percent, and I submit that if that is to be the test, then the Congress must determine what shall be included, what definition that shall be of the word relief, instead of leaving it to the mayor of a city. For instance it should be determined whether free hospitalization in Denver or Memphis or Charleston shall be included in the expenditures which a State makes for relief.

Byrnes proposed a rider requiring the sponsor to pay forty percent of the cost of a project or else specify in writing its inability to pay – a “pauper’s oath” – in which case the president could proceed as under existing law after investigating the local government’s taxes and credit facilities to see if it could not in fact pay more. A list of cases in which exceptions were made would be furnished to the Congress.  

“I cannot understand some of my old friends,” La Guardia said ruefully as he prepared to fight the measure. “I stood up for aid in their districts for fifteen years and it seems to me the Senators are not serving the best interests of their constituents lining up the farmers against the cities.” The onus for defending the existing arrangement fell to Roosevelt, who first took Byrnes on directly. Hopkins provided the totals of what the state and local governments of New York and South Carolina had spent on direct relief,

106 Hearings Before the Committee on Appropriations Pursuant to H. J. 361, Emergency Relief Appropriation, Senate, 75th Cong., 1st Sess., 259-265.

107 NYT, June 18, 1937.
work relief, and public works combined and found that New York, with its robust state and local social welfare and public-investment programs, had spent on a per capita basis $56 to South Carolina’s $8.\(^{108}\) “It occurs to me,” FDR wrote to Byrnes, “that due publicity should be given to this comparison when you speak on the floor of the Senate. What do you think? Or do you want me to do it?!”\(^{109}\) Byrnes’s rider made it through the Senate Appropriations Committee over Hopkins’s objections and gathered the support of the Majority Leader Joe Robinson, President Pro Tempore Key Pittman, and Appropriations Committee chair Pat Harrison – the first time the Democratic leadership in the Senate had lined up unanimously against Roosevelt. When the question of sponsor contributions reached the Senate floor, the administration pulled enough strings to defeat it by fifteen votes.\(^{110}\) “It was beaten by a combination of the President, Mr. Harry Hopkins, and his lobby of big city mayors, largely manipulated by Mr. La Guardia of New York,” the conservative columnist Frank Kent wrote.\(^{111}\)

But for La Guardia, the victory was not complete. Having successfully defended executive discretion, Roosevelt quietly moved to mollify the congressional conservatives, urging Hopkins to raise the sponsors’ shares wherever it was feasible.\(^{112}\) Worse, the ideas voiced by men like Byrnes and Russell during the 1937 debates signaled the formation of a powerful coalition opposed to the very lineaments of the New Deal work

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\(^{108}\) FDR to Hopkins, July 27, 1937, OF 444-C, FDRL.

\(^{109}\) FDR to Byrnes, June 9, 1937, OF 444-C, FDRL. See also FDR to Byrnes, June 11, 1937, OF 444-C, FDRL.

\(^{110}\) \textit{NYT}, June 13, 16-18, 20, 22, 1937. Byrnes’s original rider was voted down fifty-eight to twenty-five; a second amendment, offered by Majority Leader Joe Robinson, would have compelled states and localities to contribute twenty-five percent of the cost of WPA projects and was rejected by a vote of 49 to 34.


\(^{112}\) Gelfand, \textit{A Nation of Cities}, 398n57.
relief state – national executive authority, the intergovernmental “cash nexus,” and generous treatment of the cities. New York’s local New Deal found its first powerful set of adversaries not within the city but in the legislative chambers of Washington.

The politics of the WPA reversed direction momentarily in 1938. The American economy had collapsed suddenly the previous fall, driving employment and industrial activity down to levels comparable to early 1933. The coming of the “Roosevelt recession” had shocked the administration and had touched off a months-long search for a policy response. Gradually, Roosevelt was won over to what became known as the “spending solution” – an approach, favored by an influential group of White House advisers (including Hopkins, Lauchlin Currie, Leon Henderson, and Marriner Eccles), which embraced countercyclical government spending, until then a more-or-less unintended by-product of the New Deal relief and works programs, as a positive tool of national macroeconomic management. “From 1934 to 1936,” Currie argued in an influential memorandum, “the largest single factor in the steady recovery movement was the excess of Federal activity-creating expenditures over activity-decreasing receipts”; the logical response, then, was “a very substantial increase in the Government’s contribution to national buying power.”113 The works programs represented the natural vehicle for injecting purchasing power into the American economy through deficit spending.114

In mid-April, 1938, Roosevelt requested of Congress more than $4 billion in new spending, including a new appropriation for the PWA and an increase in WPA spending.

113 Quoted in Brinkley, The End of Reform, 97.

La Guardia and the Conference of Mayors again moved swiftly into action. After meeting with FDR, Adolf Berle “asked [La Guardia] to stand by to offer to put some of the public works money to work.” La Guardia hastened to Washington with a program intended to demonstrate that there would be no repeat of the PWA’s plodding start in 1933 and 1934 – that a “spending solution” grounded in local public investment projects was feasible from the standpoint of implementation. While Ickes put the onus on “our cities . . . to produce faster than ever before,” La Guardia went before Congress to testify that he “[could] have the dirt flying within 15 days of the time Secretary Ickes and the President approve the projects. . . .” The Conference of Mayors undertook an extensive lobbying effort, their appeals aided by the congressmen’s attention to the coming midterm elections and the economy group’s willingness to accept that the rationale they had deployed the previous year – that conditions had returned to “normal” – had been obviated by the recession. When Roosevelt’s program passed in mid-June, blueprints, long since prepared, were pulled off the shelf. The New York City WPA expanded its operations; and although New York was prevented from investing as heavily in large public works projects as it had in the mid-1930s by the fact that it was now bumping up against its constitutional debt ceiling, the third incarnation of the PWA funded the construction of schools, piers, public buildings, and above all the Belt Parkway.

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115 Berle and Jacobs, eds., *Navigating the Rapids*, 172.

116 PWA press release no. 3352 (July 4, 1938), copy at NYPL.


Nineteen thirty-eight was to be the Indian summer of the New Deal intergovernmental public investment state. That fall, the Republican Party, whose members had always been the most steadfast opponents of federal work relief, swept the midterm congressional elections, enabling congressional conservatives finally to claim a measure of control over the WPA. The anti-spending movement, moreover, had acquired a new edge following Roosevelt’s effort to “purge” selected conservative Democrats in the 1938 party primaries – which had exacerbated congressional conservatives’ discomfort with the immense discretion and unrestrained spending power the Congress had yielded to Roosevelt, leading them to view the WPA as a kind of national New Deal political machine that could be deployed to control state and local elections. When Roosevelt brought La Guardia to the White House at the end of December to discuss strategy for the WPA deficiency appropriation, La Guardia recommended that Roosevelt make it large and then allow the economy-minded Congress to cut it freely. If all went to plan, the “economizing congressmen would soon hear from their districts, which would strengthen the President’s control over the law-makers” when the regular fiscal-year appropriation came up in the spring. The economy group in the House, openly orchestrated by Vice President Garner, took the bait, slicing $150 million off Roosevelt’s request of $875 million (itself a more modest figure than La Guardia’s recommended $915 million) and writing into the bill a provision forbidding political activity by WPA


workers – the seed of what would become the Hatch Act ("An Act to Prevent Pernicious Political Activities.")\textsuperscript{121}

Senators Glass and Hatch had scarcely announced that they planned to trim the appropriation further when the WPA lobby went into motion. La Guardia, AFL President William Green, and John L. Lewis of the CIO beseeched members of both chambers not to wreak havoc on the cities, claiming that the House bill would dismiss upwards of a million WPA workers. The Workers’ Alliance, a union of WPA workers, threatened a hunger march. The WPA itself released a study which showed where its wages went: out of a million dollars of WPA money in a typical city, relief workers “immediately paid $335,000 to the butcher, grocer and baker, $23,000 to the landlord, and $145,000 to the clothier, druggist and shoe store. . . .” All told, “small business got 75 per cent of the $1,000,000.” WPA officials supplied Labor’s Nonpartisan League with a copy of the study; the unionists circulated it, and small businessmen in many cities joined the letter-writing and telegraphing campaign.\textsuperscript{122} The Senate economizers did not waver. Taking the pro-Administration forces by surprise, the Senate economy group passed the House measure by a single vote. The leader of the House economizers, Rep. Clifton Woodrum of Virginia, applauded the vote as a demonstration that Congress “can legislate and that it does not have to delegate those powers to the Workers’ Alliance or to the Mayors’ Conference.”\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} NYT, Jan. 1, 5, 7, 9, 11-13, 15-23, 26-29, 1939; Blumberg, \textit{The New Deal and the Unemployed}, 231-232.


\textsuperscript{123} NYT, Jan. 28, 1939; Sargent, “Woodrum’s Economy Bloc,” 196.
By the time the fiscal-year appropriation came up in June, all factions were prepared to ask for an extensive reorganization of the works programs. La Guardia – by now viewed by conservatives as something of an accomplice in the New Deal machine-making project (and by WPA workers across the country as one of their greatest champions) – had been called as a witness before the House committee investigating relief and, in the course of a long hearing that touched upon nearly every facet of the question, had recommended more or less in total the English system of integrating the administration of social insurance and work relief with a national employment service.\textsuperscript{124} Roosevelt proposed that the WPA be renamed (it became the “Work Projects Administration”) and consolidated, along with the PWA, the United States Housing Authority, the Bureau of Public Roads, and the procurement bureau of the Treasury Department, into a new agency, the Federal Works Agency. (He also submitted a bill, which died in the House, to create a federal revolving fund to finance revenue-producing public works projects.) Conservatives in Congress, if they did not seek to end the WPA altogether, wanted “a more equitable distribution of relief fund quotas among the states”\textsuperscript{125} and a means of preventing WPA workers from believing they had a “right” to a public job.

The House bill, passed in June, did away with the prevailing wage by mandating a thirty-hour week for a fixed security wage, reduced the regional wage disparity, forced a twenty-five percent contribution by local governments, ordered furloughs for all those under forty-five years of age who had been on WPA for longer than eighteen months,

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Hearings Before the Committee on Appropriations on H. J. Res. 326}, Senate, 76\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., 256, 257, 259.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{NYT}, Jan. 10, 1939.
capped the cost of WPA projects at $25,000, mandated loyalty oaths, excluded aliens, abolished the supposedly subversive Federal Theater Project, and struck $125 million from Roosevelt’s request (already substantially reduced from the previous year). La Guardia, testifying before the Senate, decried the limit on project costs and called for the Congress to “leave the limitation as to the manner in which it is to be spent in each district, and what should be done in each district, to the discretion and judgment of the Administrator and local sponsorship.”

He attempted to logroll votes by sending a telegram to the president of the Farm Bureau Federation endorsing a $365 million hike in farm aid, widely circulated by the farm bloc as their request sat in conference committee. The Senate relief bill restored the prevailing wage, did away with the furloughs, and raised the cap on project costs to $75,000. The conference report, however, more closely resembled the House bill. Passed the day before the new fiscal year began, Roosevelt had no choice but to sign a bill he believed would “work definite hardship and inequality on more than two million American citizens – about eight million if we count in their families . . . who through no fault of their own are in dire need.”

This marked the beginning of the end of the intergovernmental relief-and-public investment state first incarnated by the CWA in late-1933. The WPA itself, leaner, less socially imaginative, more efficient, and increasingly devoted to the new tasks of building the national defense infrastructure and training the long-term unemployed for

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126 Hearings Before the Committee on Appropriations on H. J. Res. 326, Senate, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., 257.

work in defense industry jobs, would live on until 1943, when Roosevelt, consumed with war and its attendant domestic pressures and unwilling to expend the political capital necessary to salvage the agency following the Republican gains in the 1942 midterms, ordered its liquidation. To the consternation of the New York left, the CIO unions in particular, La Guardia registered no strong objection. Both men were by then planning a postwar intergovernmental spending program free of the WPA’s political baggage.

It had been evident as early as 1934 that the federal work relief programs were stimulating the development of municipal agencies in ways that would not easily be curtailed once those emergency programs had been liquidated. “The record of accomplishment in one single year has been so great,” Markets Commissioner William Fellowes Morgan had written La Guardia in early 1935, “that I do not believe it can be overlooked in future administrations when economic conditions have improved to the extent that this so-called free labor will no longer be available.” Now, federal cutbacks created stresses in practically every part of the local government; even the Domestic Relations Court—which hosted a tiny fraction of the city’s WPA workers—found itself in a “very grave situation” (as its presiding judge wrote) as a consequence of the shift in

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129 Amenta, et al., “Bring Back the WPA,” 46, presents a useful tabulation of key congressional votes on the WPA and offers the most incisive analysis of the agency’s termination.

130 Minutes, Greater New York Industrial Union Council, Oct. 17, 1940, microfilm reel R-7419/1, Wagner Labor Archives, NYU.

federal policy. Commissioners who had once denigrated the contributions of relief workers came increasingly to understand that their agencies depended up them. Robert Moses, who had once described the WPA workers in his parks as “vagrants,” by the spring of 1937 thought it “decidedly worth trying as an experiment . . . to recruit a small force from home relief, add a few foremen and some material out of the $100,000 fund they promised us and see how much we can do with this gang. . . . There must be quite a few people on home relief who are willing and able to work.” Beginning especially in 1937, the city responded to federal cuts by assuming financial responsibility for projects that had previously been operated with WPA labor, and by absorbing into the Civil Service many WPA workers who had become essential to the functioning of the municipal departments. Somervell’s announcement in June 1937, for instance, that 34,000 local WPA jobs would be cut was met by an announcement that some 2,800 WPA workers in the Department of Public Welfare and the Emergency Relief Bureau and another thousand in the Department of Hospitals would receive permanent positions as soon as they qualified for the Civil Service.

As Table 3.1 suggests, this process of incorporation produced higher municipal spending in areas where the WPA had been particularly active, such as recreation and public health. As the municipal government picked up a larger share of the costs of the public investment state the New Deal had helped forge, debates about public sector provision—previously focused squarely upon Washington—shifted back into the

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132 Lawrence B. Dunham to Charles C. Burlingham, Jan. 31, 1938, copy in Thomas Kessner’s Research Notes, Box 27D8, Folder 5, La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, Queens.

133 Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia*, 340; Robert Moses to Allyn R. Jennings, Apr. 28, 1937; Moses to FHL, Apr. 29, 1937; Moses Papers, Box 97, NYPL.

134 *NYT*, June 26, 1937.
municipal arena. Property taxes began to rise—from 2.64 percent when La Guardia stood for reelection in 1937 to 2.84 percent in fiscal year 1940–41. For the first time during La Guardia’s mayoralty, high taxation became a major issue in city politics; organizations such as the Citizens Budget Commission were demanding a moratorium on all but the most essential municipal construction and grousing that the La Guardia administration’s “record for competency” excelled its “record for economy.” Soon, La Guardia and the Board of Estimate would pull back sharply on spending in the interest of conserving resources for the war effort, and many city workers were to take leaves of absence to join the armed services or the federal war bureaucracy. But already the pattern was evident: as the New Deal public investment state withered at the national level, its initiatives were picked up by the city.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>FY 1936</th>
<th>FY 1939-40</th>
<th>(% Change)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal admin.</td>
<td>$13,150,151</td>
<td>$14,690,105</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court admin.</td>
<td>$12,875,261</td>
<td>$13,771,369</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borough and county govts.</td>
<td>$28,850,037</td>
<td>$22,899,150</td>
<td>-20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks, libraries, museums, etc.</td>
<td>$9,559,853</td>
<td>$15,336,449</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police, fire, and corrections</td>
<td>$82,202,416</td>
<td>$98,420,604</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health, sanitation, water, housing</td>
<td>$51,401,533</td>
<td>$61,151,569</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare, hospitals, etc.</td>
<td>$59,519,610</td>
<td>$89,393,321</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public property, public works, etc.</td>
<td>$12,954,263</td>
<td>$18,726,140</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total budget (excl. education)</td>
<td>$487,508,133</td>
<td>$534,763,918</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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IV

While they existed, the New Deal works programs had allowed New York City to extend a public works program that had flourished under the old Democratic regime, now bending its operations to the new technologies of the automobile and the airplane. They had helped to capitalize new and expanded social programs – the district health center system, the public housing program, the city schools and colleges, the municipal radio station. And they had supplied auxiliary labor which had enabled the city to undertake a range of new initiatives – from public health screening to public radio.

Many of these new public programs were smash successes from the standpoint of use. More than 1.7 million New Yorkers attended a WPA concert in the first four months alone\(^\text{136}\), about the same number pushed through the turnstiles at the WPA-built swimming pools in the summer of 1936 (with usage at the largest, McCarren Pool in Greenpoint, often topping 14,000 swimmers per day).\(^\text{137}\) Orchard and Jacob Riis beaches registered nearly four million admissions during the summer of 1937.\(^\text{138}\) Millions tuned in to the Department of Markets’ morning broadcasts.\(^\text{139}\) More than 200,000 New Yorkers attended a WPA adult education class.\(^\text{140}\) When La Guardia and Moses opened local parks and playgrounds, entire communities turned out, and the occasions became

\(^{136}\) NYT, Sept. 26, 1935.


\(^{140}\) Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed, 168.
something of a civic pageant\textsuperscript{141}; the openings of larger projects were genuine mass events, with the largest, the dedication of La Guardia Airport, drawing some 325,000 people.\textsuperscript{142} Those numbers indicated the constituencies these new public goods and services would enjoy. They also signaled public approval of the role government was now playing in the city. Indeed, many New Yorkers came to view the goods and services now provided by the public sector as “rights” of urban citizenship.

Finally, by linking citizens to the government in new ways, by enabling citizens to “see” government in new ways, the New Deal altered the political culture of New York. Social provision turns on power, but also on imagination: “What people do about the government,” the political scientist E. E. Schattschneider has written, “depends on what they think the government is able to do.”\textsuperscript{143} Much of what La Guardia’s government did in the mid-1930s had been on the urban agenda since the reform socialist and the municipal populist movements of the early twentieth century – if not before. But mass popular support for this conception of government and the elements of which it consisted grew rapidly once the New Deal had shown these things to be actually attainable. The New Deal had made possible a new standard of municipal government; it had also catalyzed a rapid and far-reaching change in popular expectations for public-sector production. This phenomenon would continue to shape the city’s public life long after the New Deal works programs had passed out of existence.

\textsuperscript{141} Caro, \textit{The Power Broker}, 454-457, documents La Guardia and Moses’s efforts to stage civic pageantry.

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{NYT}, Oct. 16, 1939.

\textsuperscript{143} Schattschneider quoted in Weir, \textit{Politics and Jobs}, xiii.
The New Deal works programs lifted most cities; if New York was exceptional, it was in the effectiveness with which its municipal officials had deployed the resources made available by the New Deal – not simply in the quantity of federal money it pulled in. La Guardia worked hard to maximize New York’s share of federal aid, and, as we have seen, he and his colleagues on the Board of Estimate were willing to put the city’s own resources on the table in order to do so. But except for a few brief periods, New York did not receive more federal money than other large cities. WPA jobs were allocated by formula; under La Guardia and Hugh Johnson’s initiative, the New York City WPA administrative unit got up and working several months before any other, but by the end of the year the disparity had been reduced. And while New York invested heavily in PWA projects, so did several other large cities; over the life of the program, Chicago and Los Angeles both pulled in more PWA grant money per capita than did New York (though New York’s combined grant and loan share exceeded that of Los Angeles). (See TABLES 3.4 and 3.5.) Several Western states, too, garnered outsized shares of federal spending.  

And yet in spite of this, many Americans came to believe that New York was the New Deal’s favored city. La Guardia, the story went, used his personal good graces with the White House to secure a disproportionate share of federal money for his city. And

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Roosevelt seemed to confirm this. “Our Mayor is the most appealing man I know,” he said on one occasion. “He comes to Washington and tells me a sad story. The tears run down my cheeks and the tears run down his cheeks and the next thing I know, he has wangled another $50 million out of me.”

By the latter half of the 1930s, the myth of a special relationship between New York’s City Hall and the White House had become so pervasive that Republican mayoral candidates in other cities made reference to it to undermine their opponents’ claims that they, as Democrats, could bring home a greater share of federal largesse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>New York City</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept., 1935</td>
<td>456,013</td>
<td>169,204</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec., 1935</td>
<td>2,740,070</td>
<td>240,208</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June, 1936</td>
<td>2,255,898</td>
<td>205,490</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec., 1936</td>
<td>2,187,976</td>
<td>193,984</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June, 1937</td>
<td>1,817,480</td>
<td>177,204</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec., 1937</td>
<td>1,626,753</td>
<td>137,724</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June, 1938</td>
<td>2,765,568</td>
<td>170,082</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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145 NYT, Oct. 29, 1940.

146 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Apr. 4, 1937. For a contemporary version, see for example William Fulton, “New York Gets Inside Track on U.S. Easy Money,” Chicago Tribune, Sept. 12, 1937; for works of history and biography that incorporate or repeat elements of the myth, see among others Garrett, The La Guardia Years, 179-180; Ric Burns and Jim Sanders, New York: An Illustrated History (New York, 2003), 447; and Caro, The Power Broker, 453-454 (emphasizing Robert Moses’s role). The meme that New York received a disproportionate share of New Deal works money derives from Millett, The WPA in New York City, vii, which noted that New York, with 5.6 percent of the U.S. population, claimed fourteen percent of the WPA’s spending in its first eighteen months. As the tables below illustrate, nearly all of the discrepancy between the city’s share of the national unemployed population and the amount it received from the WPA may be ascribed to the fact that it launched its operations three to four months more quickly than the other administrative units.
TABLE 3.6: Per capita spending by federal and local governments on PWA projects. (“List of Allotted Non-Federal Projects as of May 30, 1942,” RG 135, Entry 59, Box 1, NA II. Figures include projects sponsored by coextensive counties and may not add due to rounding.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Federal Grants</th>
<th>Local Expenditures</th>
<th>Total Expenditures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>$16.48</td>
<td>$41.80</td>
<td>$58.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>$21.51</td>
<td>$36.36</td>
<td>$59.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>$5.83</td>
<td>$12.97</td>
<td>$18.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>$7.70</td>
<td>$11.66</td>
<td>$19.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>$19.03</td>
<td>$30.87</td>
<td>$49.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>$15.62</td>
<td>$29.93</td>
<td>$45.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>$12.33</td>
<td>$20.84</td>
<td>$33.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This “special relationship” myth had a certain basis in fact: New York, for reasons we have noted, tended to do unusually well in the very early stages of the New Deal programs, when perceptions were being formed. But the myth developed primarily because Roosevelt and La Guardia cultivated it, independently, for political purposes. For Roosevelt, emphasizing his close relations with La Guardia was a way of showing the federal government’s responsiveness to local officials and local conditions and its willingness to work with members of the opposing party, while assuring the strategically crucial voters of New York that the New Deal was looking after their city. For his part, La Guardia went to great lengths to tie his own administration to the New Deal political project, making ingenious use of the mass media – newspapers, newsreels, and the radio – to publicize his relationship with the White House. Rather than send commissioners to do the city’s business in Washington, he went himself – the better to establish the New York-Washington connection in the public mind. He replaced train travel with air travel, another means of garnering publicity, and he became known, as the New York Times wrote in May of 1935, as “the first air-commuter in the grand manner between New York
and Washington.”\textsuperscript{147} He also sought to involve federal officials in dedication ceremonies and ribbon-cuttings, knowing that their participation provided further evidence of the connection between the city government and the New Deal. Whether or not federal officials were in attendance, La Guardia almost always mentioned Roosevelt in his remarks, usually lauding FDR’s “vision.”\textsuperscript{148} Sometimes he credited the President as the inspiration for the projects, as in this account of the origins of the East River Drive:

\begin{quote}
Let me tell you just how it happened that WPA funds were made available for this project. I was driving down the West Side Highway with President Roosevelt . . . and he was admiring the highway. I told him about our plans to revise and rebuild Riverside Drive, covering the tracks and extending that thoroughfare down to the Battery. President Roosevelt, who knows his New York, said: “How about the East Side; are you ready with a drive there?” I said, “Sure we are.” I didn’t know at the time whether we were or not. “Can you start right away?” the President asked. I said, “Sure.”\textsuperscript{149}
\end{quote}

The myth of a special relationship was, finally, underpinned by the real ideological similitude between Roosevelt’s politics and La Guardia’s. Roosevelt and La Guardia told similar “stories” – similar accounts of the innovations in governmental activity over which they had presided, and of the objectives toward which those innovations reached. One of those objectives was the improvement of the national estate: both men, and both regimes, sought to leave the physical condition of the nation and the city better than they had found it. But their purposes went beyond the simple renovation

\textsuperscript{147} “In His Old Haunts,” \textit{NYT}, May 31, 1935.


\textsuperscript{149} “Roosevelt ‘Built’ East Drive Link,” \textit{NYT}, June 30, 1937. Plans for the East River Drive had in fact been in the works for many years.
and augmentation of the common wealth. They sought, too, to elevate people, families, and communities by meeting “needs” private production could not. American society and its component parts were basically sound, they believed. But individuals, families, and communities, they believed, had been submerged by conditions more or less outside their control, most of which involved deprivation of access or opportunity – to the moral satisfaction and remuneration of work, to adequate housing and recreation, to decent health care, to education, *et cetera*. It fell to government to remove these constraints.

La Guardia’s argument for government-built housing illustrates the point well: “Take a family from an old, long tenement house railroad apartment – middle room, no windows, a kitchen dark and drab, crowded, insufficient light. That family is depressed. Children are running around unkempt. The poor mother just bedraggled. . . . You take that same family and you put them into one of our low-cost housing, and you have really created new human beings. There is a new family.” This was what Roosevelt had in mind when he remarked in 1934 that America was “definitely in an era of building, the best kind of building – the building of great projects for the benefit of the public, and with the definite objective of building human happiness.” These stories were, finally, inscribed in narratives of civic virtue and national difference. The New Dealers lauded the WPA as the “American way” of meeting the Depression, contrasting American public investment

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150 Each was quick to excoriate those who did not meet certain expectations for productive citizenship: La Guardia’s contempt for “parasites” who would not labor productively if given the opportunity to work for ostensibly fair wages is telling in this respect.

151 Cf. Lawrence Friedman’s conceptualization of a “submerged middle class,” originally in Friedman, *Government and Slum Housing* (Chicago, 1968); see also his broader application in *American Law in the 20th Century* (New Haven, 2002), 153-154.

152 *Hearings Before the Committee on Banking and Security . . . on S. 1592 . . .*, Senate, 79th Cong., 1st Sess., 137.

to the British “dole” and German military production. (The United States, Roosevelt noted in his famous “quarantine speech,” was putting its “bridges and boulevards, dams and reforestation, the conservation of our soil and many other kinds of useful works rather than into huge standing armies and vast supplies of implements of war.”154) La Guardia’s admirers, particularly in the late 1930s and early 1940s, described their city as a showcase for American democracy, a place where the sons and daughters of all nations lived together in peace and contributed to social progress.

Some conservatives, too, were beginning to believe that Roosevelt and La Guardia stood for many of the same things. Heavy public spending, they believed, violated the rights of property and hence impinged on basic American liberties. If the New Dealers used the idea of work as the basis for social solidarity, many anti-New Dealers grounded their opposition to public spending in concepts of difference: the New Deal works programs, they charged, favored the foreign over the native, the parasitic over the productive. They also came to view public spending as a means of political control.155 La Guardia, they became convinced, was an essential cog in the New Deal’s “tax-spend-and-elect” machine, a mode of politics that purchased the support of new voters with public money. Particularly in the second half of the 1930s, these themes of otherness and political control ran together. The columnist Arthur Krock said of Hopkins and the WPA:

Hopkins was able to show Roosevelt the combination that would be made by . . . favoritism of the government, the administration, and the court to labor – the Negroes, the Jews, racial groups of certain kinds. . . . They held


the majority, when together. Hopkins showed him that the binding element was the New Deal program of federal spending, and Hopkins of course was in charge of the largest spending that we’ve ever known outside of war itself.\textsuperscript{156}

The rise of the New Deal spending state fed into the images of Roosevelt and La Guardia as demagogues, and detractors assailed both men as slick, unprincipled, power-hungry politicians who were “ruthless and unscrupulous” in their political means, who played on public passions and who were brilliantly devious at knowing “what would influence voters and what would get votes.”\textsuperscript{157} And by 1937, they seemed eager to storm the last bastions of conservative freedom – the principle of judicial review and even the Supreme Court itself.

By 1936, La Guardia and Roosevelt were more closely associated in the public mind than any mayor and president had ever been. “He has a confidential relationship with Mr. Roosevelt enjoyed by no Democrat,” the \textit{Brooklyn Times Union} political columnist John A. Heffernan wrote of La Guardia. “The doors of the White House open at his radiant approach, and the President is never too busy to sit down and have a chat with him.”\textsuperscript{158} And New York City had become a kind of laboratory for New Deal reform. But it remained to be seen how the newly forged ties between the White House and City Hall would play out in the electoral arena.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Reminiscences of Arthur Krock}, CCOHC, 64-65.

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Reminiscences of Francis Stoddard}, CCOHC, 119-122.

Chapter Four: From Fusion to Confusion: Remaking the La Guardia Coalition

A warm May evening in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, 1935. Nearly ten thousand people crowded in the square facing the red brick court house, the surrounding buildings draped in red, white, and blue bunting and American flags. The city was host to the first anniversary celebration of Wisconsin’s Progressive Party, a third party co-founded in 1934 by the La Follette brothers, Senator Robert, Jr., and Governor Phil, and their allies after they had lost control of the state Republican Party in 1932. La Guardia, detained in New York by city business, arranged to pipe in his address via radio.

Though he had pledged upon his election in 1933 that he would “stay out of politics” for four years, La Guardia had kept in close communication with his erstwhile congressional allies. In 1934, he had endorsed Senator Bronson Cutting of New Mexico and had traveled to Wisconsin to campaign for Robert La Follette, Jr., who was running for reelection on the new Progressive Party line. “It may seem strange that a Mayor from an Eastern town should come to the great state of Wisconsin,” he had admitted. But the prairie-state crowds had received him with an enthusiasm that must have lifted La Guardia’s hopes for a political alliance between the producing classes of the great cities and their rural and small-town counterparts. Wisconsin congressman Tom Amlie had

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1 The title of this chapter is borrowed from William P. Vogel, Jr., “What Did New York’s Election Prove?” Common Sense, Dec., 1937, 14.

2 NYT, Nov. 24, 1933.

3 FHL to Yolanda Matteucci, Oct. 26, 1934, SF, “Campaign Endorsements,” NYMA.

4 NYT, Oct. 23, 1934.
written the Little Flower after La Follette’s reelection that La Guardia’s appearance had
done “more to swing over public sentiment than any other thing.”

Now, at 6:15 p.m., La Guardia’s high-pitched voice rang out over the
loudspeakers on the shores of Lake Winnebago. “We are living in a critical period,” he
began. Rapid changes were occurring as America entered “a new economic system”;
progressives in government shouldered the responsibility for managing these changes in
order to create “an equal enjoyment of progress in science, machinery, transportation and
the natural resources of the country” and to bring “economic security and uniform
happiness [to] all of the people of the country.” The conservatives in both parties, he
charged, talked “with a parrot-like monotony of constitutional rights, of rugged
individualism, of government interference, and seem to accept and consider themselves
the anointed and chosen few to exploit the land, and seem to believe that the Constitution
was written for no other purpose than to guarantee continued exploitation of the many by
the chosen few.” In the face of these challenges, progressives could no longer allow
themselves to be separated by party affiliations. “This is no time for political fence
building,” he said. “The conditions are such that division along old-time party lines
barely seems possible.” The 1936 presidential election would place a greater
responsibility on progressives of all parties, he claimed, “than ever before in the history
of this country.”

The following eighteen months would give La Guardia cause for great optimism.
Labor, progressive, and dissident organizations would flourish, coalescing to form a
broad movement that looked beyond the Democratic Party toward more vigorous reform

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5 Tom Amlie to FHL, Nov. 30, 1934, FHL Mayoral Papers, 1941 Campaign Series, Box 4141, NYMA.

of the American political economy. In 1936, when those groups joined together behind the New Deal banner, La Guardia would speak of his joy at seeing for “the first time . . . the American working men and women . . . all united on one big subject.”

If 1936 augured a “great shuffling about” (as the Little Flower had predicted in mid-1934), the following year’s municipal elections evinced a similar state of flux. Galvanized by the political upheaval that had swept over the nation, political time in the city seemed to be running at warp speed: Tammany Hall collapsed; a new political party emerged; and tens of thousands of new voters continued to enter the electorate. La Guardia was to win reelection by the largest margin in the city’s history on the strength of a coalition unlike any New York had seen before. Visible in the election returns was the architecture of a new age in the city’s politics – one made possible, in large measure, by Roosevelt’s New Deal.

“The spring and summer of 1935,” the historian Alan Brinkley writes, “were heady times for those awaiting a major political upheaval in America.” The national economic recovery which was ultimately to carry Roosevelt to reelection had momentarily stalled, the Republican Party remained “weak and demoralized,” and “[d]issident movements were springing to life and gaining remarkable strength in

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7 NYT, Oct. 28, 1936.
virtually every region of the country.” By 1935, Wisconsin’s Progressive Party and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party had both won notable electoral victories, and insurgent groups working within the major parties had demonstrated strength in several Western states. Movements of small farmers remained alive in the Farm Holiday Association and the National Farmers’ Union. Intellectuals led by the philosopher John Dewey and the economist Paul Douglas, among others, had organized the League for Independent Political Action (LIPA) – La Guardia had signed its 1929 founding statement – which had as its ultimate aim a planned economy that operated on the production-for-use model. And the Communist Party, newly liberated from the “extreme leftist sectarianism” of the Third Period by Comintern’s popular-front policy, began to emerge as an important political force in a handful of states.

Most significant of all, perhaps, was the rise of industrial unionism. Periods of high unemployment had usually been disastrous for the American labor movement. But the favorable legal and political environment provided by the National Industrial Recovery Act – with its guarantee of the right to collective bargaining, its wages and hours codes, and not least the propaganda tools it had made available to union leaders (embodied in John L. Lewis’s slogan, “The President wants you to join the union”) – had given invaluable support and resources to an aggressive and skilled cohort of labor leaders. Organizing by plant and by industry rather than by craft, these unions, many of

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them soon to affiliate with the Committee on Industrial Organization (later the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO), were sweeping into labor’s ranks many first- and second-generation urban semiskilled and unskilled workers.\(^\text{11}\) New York City’s largest union, the International Ladies Garment Workers (ILGWU), had been on the brink of collapse in the early 1930s, reduced to 40,000 members and “bankrupt in every respect, financially, morally, and organizationally.” In 1933, it had added 125,000 members – “NRA babies” they were called, mostly immigrant women and their daughters.\(^\text{12}\) The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) had fared better than the ILGWU in the 1920s, but it too had doubled in membership following the NRA’s enactment.\(^\text{13}\) Concurrently, industrial unionism was restoring a radical edge to the American labor movement. “This new unionism does not stop at the formal lodge meeting,” one CIO leader wrote. “It sees the union as a way of life which involves the whole community” – and thus inevitably became wrapped up in political questions beyond those directly affecting the unions’ ability to bargain with employers.\(^\text{14}\)

The whirlwind growth of independent progressive, leftist, and labor politics caused Roosevelt considerable anxiety. The greatest threat to his reelection prospects, he believed, was a third party challenge which might strip him of enough votes in a handful


\(^{14}\) Quoted in Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics*, 44.
of key states to swing the election to his Republican challenger; at one sour moment he claimed to a Democratic associate that the progressive Republicans intended to sabotage his reelection in order to swing the nation “far to the left” in 1940.\footnote{FDR to Colonel E. M. House, Feb. 16, 1935, in \textit{PL}, 452-453.} He feared the progressives, he told a group of top Democratic politicos in the spring of 1935, more than he feared the clear-and-present threat posed by Louisiana Senator Huey Long.\footnote{James A. Farley diary, May 1, 1935, Farley Papers, Private File, LC.}

Beginning in the spring of 1935, about the same time as La Guardia’s Fond du Lac speech, Roosevelt moved to incorporate these movements into the New Deal coalition. The spring and summer of 1935 (the “Second Hundred Days”) saw a flood of progressive legislation: the Emergency Recovery Appropriation Act, the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, the “soak-the-rich” tax bill, and the “death sentence” on public utilities holding companies. It saw, too, the development of a potentially powerful and highly visible conservative opposition, embodied in the Supreme Court (which had already invalidated several New Deal measures and appeared to threaten many others) and the American Liberty League, a well-funded and vocal group which proclaimed itself “the spokesman for a business civilization.” By the fall of 1935 many of those who might otherwise have been inclined to challenge Roosevelt from the left had come to see themselves as stakeholders in the New Deal project. Of all the groups that had been contemplating a third-party candidacy in 1936, only Father Coughlin, Dr. Francis Townsend, and the remains of the late Huey Long’s organization...
took the plunge, forming a National Union ticket with the Midwestern populist William Lemke at the top.\footnote{17\ See esp. McCoy, \textit{Angry Voices}, 106; Lipset, “Roosevelt and the Protest of the 1930s,” 283-289; Steve Fraser, \textit{Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor} (New York, 1991), 355.}

As the election of 1936 approached, the forces of labor and independent progressivism rallied to the defense of Roosevelt and the New Deal. Yet they were not simply “co-opted” or “absorbed,” as some accounts would have it; the reality was a good deal more complicated. For a time, the desire to return Roosevelt to the White House and the pursuit of a realignment of national politics along progressive-conservative lines merged into a single project. The unenviable task of herding the various progressive factions into a campaign organization of Progressives-for-Roosevelt fell to Senator La Follette, who issued a call for a conference of progressives to be held in Chicago in early September. As the historian Drew McCoy has written, the conference’s “tactical goals” were to “whittle down the appeal” of Lemke and Coughlin’s National Unity ticket, to “offset the claims” of the Republican ticket headed by Kansas Governor Alf Landon to progressive support, and to “accentuate the liberal accomplishments of President Roosevelt.”\footnote{18\ Donald R. McCoy, “The Progressive National Committee of 1936,” \textit{Western Political Quarterly}, Vol. 9, No. 2 (June, 1956), 454-469 (quoted at 468). That fall, the campaign organization that grew out of the conference, the Progressive National Committee, would present a five-week long series of nightly broadcasts over the CBS network featuring well-known progressive politicians, figures from the Roosevelt administration (and four from La Guardia’s), labor leaders, and activists. But the group convened in Chicago with larger purposes: they sought to strengthen and to bring coherence to the progressive movement at a moment when its future possibilities seemed promising, and to claim the New Deal for independent progressivism rather than permit the Democratic Party to absorb the progressive movement. Its broader purposes were evident in a “statement of principles” drafted at the
convention (under La Guardia’s chairmanship) that represented, as the *Times* put it, a kind of “platform of the new Liberal-Progressive movement.”

Union leaders, also torn between a desire to stimulate their own independent movement and a desire to aid in Roosevelt’s reelection, adopted a broadly similar course of action. “The position of our organization is known: that we are for a labor party,” ACWA president Sidney Hillman explained. “We are today bound . . . to help bring about a labor or farmer-labor party.” But, he continued, “We have participated in making the labor policy of this Administration. . . . We know that the defeat of the Roosevelt Administration means no labor legislation for decades to come.”

In April, 1936, Hillman, along with United Mine Workers president John L. Lewis and George L. Berry of the AFL-affiliated International Pressmen’s Union, formed a national group, Labor’s Non-Partisan League (LNPL), to assist in the Democratic campaign. Yet the LNPL, too, had broader objectives. In seeking Roosevelt’s reelection, it aimed to fortify the development of industrial unionism – what Hillman called “the beginning of creating a

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19 *NYT*, Sept. 11-12, 1936. See also “Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Progressive Conference Held in Chicago on September 11, 1936,” Robert La Follette, Jr., Papers, La Follette Family Papers, Box C: 436, “Progressive Conference 1936: Important Papers RML Wants,” LC. An original copy of the resolutions as reported to the Conference by La Guardia may be found in the Box C: 436 of the Robert La Follette, Jr., Papers.

The statement, which was in fact a touched-up version of the Wisconsin Progressive Party’s platform, affirmed government as the people’s use of “intelligent direction” to channel the “vast energies” of the age “constructively to build a better life for us all.” Only through government, it held, could the people address the outstanding problems of the age. It listed some of these problems: millions of citizens were denied equality of opportunity, “one of our greatest traditions”; consumers were denied the full fruits of mass production through monopoly control of production and distribution; millions were denied decent homes despite the nation’s great productive power; farmers were denied the “benefits and comforts” of electricity; and two thirds of Americans lived in insecurity “in a country capable of producing an abundant life.” It went on to list six “principles,” the most notable of which was a right “of every American . . . to earn a comfortable living by useful work and to receive for his work an income which the full productive capacity of society can afford.” (“Text of the Progressives’ Resolution,” *NYT*, Sept. 12, 1936. McCoy notes the similarities between the Wisconsin Progressive Party platform and the Progressive National Committee’s; see McCoy, “The Progressive National Committee of 1936,” 462n27; also *Wisconsin Blue Book* [Madison, 1935], 476-481.)

20 Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, 358.
real labor movement” in America – which in turn would act as the social basis for the maturation of New Deal liberalism into social democracy.  

In New York, where the idea of a labor party (or a commitment to the Socialist Party) had been an important component of the ideological milieu that had fostered the growth of the New York unions in the early years of the twentieth century, this course of action bore immediate institutional fruit. Because New York State ballot laws permitted candidates to run on more than one party line, New York labor leaders had open to them the option of nominating Roosevelt on a third-party ticket. At Hillman’s suggestion, the leaders of the needle trades unions, whose membership together numbered about 395,000 (221,000 of whom lived in Gotham), together with the representatives of the pro-Roosevelt wing of the Yiddish socialist movement – the “old guard” of the Socialist Party, the Forverts, the Yiddish radio station WEVD, the Workmen’s Circle – decided to form a state-wide labor party.  

ILGWU president David Dubinsky later explained the decision as a practical means of obviating the effects of the needle trades unions’ decades-long educational campaign against Tammany Hall. “[O]ur people are all Socialists . . .,” he told Frances Perkins. “We’ve been warning them for years to never vote for Tammany Hall. ‘Never vote for Tammany Hall. Tammany Hall is against the working man. Never vote under the star [the Democratic ballot emblem].’ Now I can’t teach them to vote under the star all of a sudden. I’ve got to have them vote under something that’s got labor in it.”

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22 See esp. Fraser, Labor Will Rule, 363-364.

23 Reminiscences of Frances Perkins, CCOHC, Part II, 511.
the third-party option also offered a way of resolving, at least locally, the tension between “desire for a genuine third party . . . ; and the vision of a ‘realignment’ whereby the New Deal Democratic Party created by Roosevelt might contain within it the seeds of a social democratic labor party. . . .”24 The labor party was to Jewish labor socialism what the Progressive National Committee was to the broader progressive movement – simultaneously an attempt to channel independent votes for Roosevelt and an effort to use the political upheaval wrought by the New Deal to advance the enduring dream of an independent labor politics which predated the New Deal and did not entirely share Roosevelt’s goals.

It remains unclear when exactly La Guardia became involved in the labor party project. Adolf Berle, present at some of the earliest discussions, recalled that La Guardia entered only later; Steve Fraser, Sidney Hillman’s painstaking biographer, has found that Hillman talked through the labor party idea with La Guardia (and with Berle and Eleanor Roosevelt) before proposing it to the leaders of the needle trades unions and the Old Guard Socialists. What is certain is that La Guardia, recognizing how important a labor party might be to his own reelection prospects, took to the idea immediately. Along with Hillman and the First Lady, he presented the plan to FDR, arguing that it would bring 75,000 new voters to the polls in New York and would swing part of the Socialist vote to Roosevelt. Jim Farley (who subsequently blamed La Guardia entirely for selling Roosevelt on the third-party idea) and Edward Flynn both opposed it: a labor party, they feared, would introduce an element of irregularity into New York City politics and destabilize a political alignment that was working well for the Democrats. Despite the Democratic leaders’ objections, Roosevelt encouraged Hillman to go ahead with the plan,

24 Denning, The Cultural Front, 10.
and on July 16, 1936, the New York chapter of Labor’s Non-Partisan League formed the
American Labor Party (ALP).\(^{25}\) Farley, the New York State Federation of Labor (which
opposed the idea of a labor party but supported Roosevelt), and even the lawyers of
Tammany Hall dutifully helped collect enough valid petitions to get the party on the
ballot.\(^{26}\)

II

Roosevelt campaigned in 1936, one historian has written, “as the leader of a
liberal crusade which knew no party lines.”\(^{27}\) He gave much of the speechmaking burden
to the administration’s leading Republicans, Ickes and Wallace. And although
Republican leaders sought to use La Guardia as a wedge between the administration and
the New York Democratic organizations\(^{28}\), the President involved La Guardia heavily in
his campaign. In late September, he invited the Little Flower to Hyde Park for a high-

York, 1936-1954” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1977), 112; Fraser, Labor Will Rule, 356, 363-365,
408-410; David Dubinsky and A. H. Rankin, David Dubinsky: A Life with Labor (New York, 1977), 267-
269; Reminiscences of James A. Farley, CCOHC, 15; Reminiscences of Edward J. Flynn, CCOHC, 20-21;

\(^{26}\) Joseph C. Goulden, Meany (New York, 1972), 62.

\(^{27}\) William Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York, 1963),
190.

\(^{28}\) See, e.g., Franklyn Waltman, Jr., “Tammany and FDR,” NYT, Oct. 6, 1936; Frank R. Kent, “The
Great Game of Politics,” Los Angeles Times, Sept. 22, 1936; Atlanta Constitution, Sept. 27, 1936; Chicago
Tribune, Sept. 26, 1936.
A few days later he visited New York to lift the first shovel of dirt in the construction of the PWA-sponsored Queens-Midtown Tunnel. “Every now and then,” he told the crowd, “I would hear that your Mayor had slipped off to Washington, and each time I said to myself, ‘There goes another $5,000,000 or $10,000,000.’ But I was proud to help because everything that was initiated was a useful project. There were years when the interest rates were so high and there was such a noticeable lack of teamwork that we fell behind in carrying forward these needed public works.”

La Guardia himself seemed somewhat reluctant to engage in the active phase of the campaign. “I’m not mad at anybody,” he said on several occasions—a remark partially directed, one imagines, at Al Smith, now a vocal Liberty Leaguer, but also expressive of the discomfort he felt at taking an action that had once gotten him read out of the Republican Party. “Some of us are burning all our bridges ahead of us,” he wrote a friend from the Chicago progressive convention, “and we do so with our eyes wide open.” But once he had committed himself, he had little difficulty enumerating his reasons for doing so. “[T]his new cooperation [between the federal government and the municipalities] is so refreshing and novel,” he told one Bronx audience. “The understanding and sympathy of the administration in Washington has resulted in an improvement in public conditions throughout the city, and also in almost every other city in the country.”

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29 NYT, Sept. 27, 1936.

30 NYT, Oct. 3, 1936.

31 E.g., NYT, Oct. 11, 18, 28-29, 1936.

faire on the one hand and, on the other, a philosophy that “after surveying the situation . . . says, ‘This is something beyond industry and business. It now becomes the function of government to step in, and it is the duty of government to establish conditions by meeting the machine age.’”\(^3\)

A week before the election, La Guardia joined Governor Lehman (whom he had endorsed), Senator Wagner, John L. Lewis, David Dubinsky, and a host of other labor leaders in a rally at Madison Square Garden; there he announced that he would vote for Roosevelt and Lehman on the American Labor Party ticket. The following day he accompanied Roosevelt on a thirty-mile automobile tour of the city; and that evening he spoke for the Democratic ticket alongside Ickes and Edward Filene at Carnegie Hall.

Then, leaving the Fusionists to fight out the city races, he went off to Rochester and Gary, Indiana, to shore up Italian and labor support for FDR, then to Nebraska to stump for George Norris. He returned in time to make a final radio talk for Roosevelt over WABC on election eve – a quiet, unadorned reflection on the local improvements wrought by the New Deal which he claimed would be “lasting monuments to the vision and energy of President Roosevelt . . . .”\(^3\)

The following day New Yorkers voted three-to-one for Roosevelt, doubling his 1932 plurality and giving him by far the largest total to that time in the city’s history.

They also ratified, against the opposition of all five Democratic county chairmen, two

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\(^3\) *NYT*, Oct. 11, 1936.

\(^3\) *NYHT*, Oct. 30, 1936.

\(^3\) *NYT*, Nov. 3, 1936; “Budgets, Deficits, and Assets – Human Beings or Bank Balances,” [FHL speech draft, WABC, Nov. 2, 1936], SF, “Speeches – 1936,” NYMA. On La Guardia’s campaign speeches, see FHL to Marguerite Le Hand, Oct. 29, 1936; Stephen Early to FHL, Oct. 29, 1936; in PPF 1376, FDRL; *NYT*, Oct. 30; Nov. 1, 1936; and correspondence from Democratic candidates and party leaders, OF 1710, Box 1, FDRL.
major municipal reform measures that had been put on the ballot as referenda: a new city charter and proportional representation (PR). The fruits of the labor of La Guardia’s charter revision commission, the new charter reorganized several departments, created a new City Planning Commission with theoretically broad powers over land use and capital budgeting, and replaced the Board of Aldermen with a new City Council. The proportional representation law, long championed by civic reformers (and quietly favored by Roosevelt when he was governor), created a complicated rank-order voting system organized by borough rather than by district which was designed to give minor parties (i.e., the city’s anti-machine elements) representation on the City Council in proportion to their share of the total vote. PR was designed to break the Democratic stranglehold on the city legislature, and it did: in the last aldermanic election, the Democrats won sixty-six percent of the vote and garnered ninety-five percent of the seats; in the first city council election, organization Democrats (with forty-seven percent of the vote) took fifty percent of the seats. But instead of simply elevating traditional antimachine elements, as reformers had expected, it also empowered the left – allowing parties that stressed the relation between labor and capital, including the ALP and the Communist Party, far greater representation than they had enjoyed at any previous time in the city’s history.36

Here was one more paradox in a season of political confusion: New Yorkers had voted overwhelmingly to reelect Roosevelt while simultaneously dealing a powerful blow to the local Democratic Party. Like so much else that fall, it served to highlight an as-yet unresolved question: what would be the relation of the Roosevelt coalition to the

Democratic Party? In time, the election of 1936 would come to be viewed as the culmination of a party realignment that had begun in 1928 and which drew some of the most dynamic constituencies in Depression-era American politics – urban workers and housewives, progressives, and ethno-racial minorities – into a Democratic coalition the basic contours of which would endure for three decades. But many contemporaries, at all points on the political spectrum, saw the election of 1936 not as the fanfare for a new Democratic majority but rather as a landmark in a long process of realignment which might well result in the obsolescence of the Democratic Party. The *New York Times* reflected after the election: “Even now it is predicted that Democrats throughout the nation who gave their endorsement of President Roosevelt’s re-election may, incidentally and unconsciously, have signed the death warrant of traditional political Democracy in this country and the traditional two-party setup dominant in the politics of the nation from the start and prepared the way for a political realignment with sharp dividing lines among radicals, liberals, and conservatives.”

“It is to men the stripe of Dubinsky, Antonini, La Guardia, Norris, and [Minnesota Farmer-Labor Senator-elect Ernest] Lundeen . . . that Mr. Roosevelt will turn for counsel,” wrote the archconservative *Chicago Tribune*. “They are now the dominant forces in the New Deal party. The old leaders, particularly the organization men in the metropolitan cities, do not know it yet, but they are already on the way out.” As the new year dawned, it remained unclear what would emerge from the upheaval. The first electoral test would come the following year in New York City as La Guardia, having turned down vague offers of a cabinet position, tested the

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37 NYT, Nov. 4, 1936.

III

As New Yorkers surveyed their city in advance of the 1937 municipal elections, they saw a political landscape that had been thoroughly reworked by the Roosevelt revolution. The realignment of national politics and the policy innovations of the New Deal had fractured preexisting coalitions and had given rise to new ones, strengthening some groups and weakening others. In so doing, it had altered the organizational calculus of municipal electoral politics, making new combinations possible.

Nowhere was the Roosevelt revolution felt more acutely than in the inner sanctum of Tammany Hall. After the 1933 party split, Roosevelt and Farley had moved to oust Bosses Curry of Manhattan and McCooey of Brooklyn and replace the traditional process of brokering between outer borough leaders and a dominant Manhattan organization with a “council of five” in which each county leader would be represented. By the summer of 1934, McCooey had died and Curry had been subjected to the first formal removal of a county leader in Tammany’s history. McCooey’s replacement in Brooklyn, Frank Kelly, had satisfied the White House in nearly every regard and had joined Flynn as the co-leader of the pro-New Deal wing of the New York Democracy. In Manhattan, a compromise between the pro-Roosevelt forces and the Tammany district leaders had made James J. Dooling the county leader. But Dooling had developed close ties to the

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39 NYT, Dec. 27, 1936; Berle and Bishop, eds., Navigating the Rapids, 121.
now ardently anti-New Deal Al Smith, and from 1935 through the spring of 1937, Farley was maneuvering to replace him without an open break.40

As the 1937 election approached, it was clear that Tammany’s hegemony in New York Democratic politics had been destroyed; the pro-Roosevelt combination of Brooklyn and the Bronx reigned supreme everywhere except the Board of Aldermen, and that Tammany bastion had been voted out of existence with the passage of the new charter and proportional representation. But it was still not evident exactly what had replaced it. As the primary season neared, the warring Democratic chieftains tried to draft the one man acceptable to all factions: Senator Robert Wagner. Strongly urged by the party leaders – and evidently still deeply committed to the idea of a reformed Democracy in New York – Roosevelt personally asked Wagner to consider running. But New York labor leaders were vehemently opposed to the removal of their great champion from the Senate; and Wagner, who treasured his Senate seat, refused.41 A split between Tammany and the Flynn-Kelly combination now became avoidable. Farley pushed for the affable and intelligent State Supreme Court Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, a former law partner of Wagner’s and a long-time advocate of reform within Tammany’s councils of power who had come out for Roosevelt’s nomination before the 1932 Chicago convention; and Mahoney was accepted by Flynn, Kelly, and the less powerful party chairmen of Queens and Staten Island. Dooling, however, announced that the Manhattan organization would contest the Democratic primary, running as its candidate Wagner’s


Senate colleague Royal S. Copeland, a Hearst protégé and Tammany loyalist who had come out in opposition to Roosevelt’s proposals to reorganize the federal court system and bureaucracy. For the second consecutive election, the New Deal had split the New York Democracy.42

The New Deal had also reshaped New York City’s Republican Party. Many New York Republicans detested Roosevelt and stood in unwavering opposition to his policies. But others, especially the members of a rising generation of party leaders and public officials concentrated in Manhattan, appreciated the depth of public support for the New Deal and concluded that their party would never be capable of competing with the Democratic Party for the votes of moderates, independents, and organized labor so long as it adhered to the policies and philosophy of Old Guard Republicanism.43 The New York GOP should emulate the British Conservative Party, one prominent figure suggested, and appropriate all the good ideas of their liberal and labor counterparts, emphasizing their own ability to “administer them so that they work.”44

La Guardia’s policy of antipartisanship had so frustrated the party’s clubhouse element that three of the county chairmen had come out against his renomination.45 But the rise of the moderate faction gave him a group within the party with which he could

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42 NYT, May 2, 1937; NYWT, Aug. 30-31, 1937; Reminiscences of Jeremiah T. Mahoney, CCOHC, passim. Smith, who was credited with Copeland’s nomination, later told James Farley that he had been hoping to retire from politics and had agreed to support Copeland only at Dooling’s request. Dooling himself died before the primary. (Farley diary, Oct. 31, 1938.)


negotiate, and it was one of these young moderate Republicans, New York County
chairman Kenneth Simpson, who prepared the way for La Guardia’s renomination on the
Republican line. Even as he chided La Guardia publicly for espousing a “new political
alignment” and a “collectivist state,” Simpson opened negotiations with the Little
Flower over drinks in the well-appointed library of his East 91st Street house. A few days
later, following a party conclave at the Yale Club, Simpson made it known that he would
support La Guardia in the primary, cleverly forcing the Little Flower to accept
Republican running mates by preemptively announcing Republican candidates for
comptroller and city council president highly satisfactory to the nonpartisan civic groups.
Subsequent negotiations with the Republican leader of Brooklyn assured La Guardia
would not be overwhelmed by the organization vote in the Republican primary.

The conservative wing of the party could not be won over so easily. Conservative
Republicans objected to La Guardia’s local spending program and even-handed treatment
of labor-management disputes; and his public support of Roosevelt fed these discontents.
The staunchest anti-Rooseveltians were prepared to make common cause with Senator
Copeland, whose anti-New Deal bona fides they thought more than sufficient to
counterbalance his Tammany affiliation. Copeland entered the Republican primary,
making La Guardia’s New Dealism his primary issue. Copeland’s supporters identified
La Guardia as “one of the most aggressive and militant supporters of the New Deal” and
“Republican Public Enemy No. 2,” and, in the days before the primary, his campaign

46 NYT, May 27, 1937.
47 NYT, Aug. 26, 1937.
manager claimed that eight United States senators had written him expressing concern over the impetus La Guardia’s reelection would give to the New Deal in Congress.48

The New Deal had also produced in New York a formidable new political party: the American Labor Party. Hillman, the original force behind the party’s creation, had apparently expected it to go out of operation following the 1936 presidential campaign; instead, its leaders, under the direction of Alex Rose of the Hat, Cap, and Millinery Workers, had moved to establish it on permanent footing, hoping that it would grow into the “New Deal Party of our country” and a balance of power between the two major parties in New York State.49 La Guardia, David Dubinsky has recalled, became “terribly interested in the party.”50 Recognizing that the ALP might represent a “personal ace in the hole” (as one New York Republican later put it), he cultivated its leaders and helped to strengthen the fledgling party by supplying it with patronage and publicity.51 The ALP gave La Guardia its nomination and issued a platform calling for the extension of New Deal public investment – the provision of adequate relief and low-cost milk, the construction of more parks and playgrounds, a yardstick municipal power plant, and adequate sewage disposal plants, slum clearance and public housing, and “a frank attack on social diseases.”52

48 NYT, Sept. 16, 1937.


50 Dubinsky and Raskin, A Life with Labor, 269.

51 Additional Materials to the Added to the Reminiscences of Paul Windels, CCOHC, 6.

52 NYT, Sept. 8, 1937. See also the citations in note 25 of this chapter. Declaring it his intention to make New York a one hundred percent union city, La Guardia had written unionization clauses into city contracts, had required city printing jobs to bear the union label, and had at times used the tactics of an old-time city boss – selective pursuit of back taxes, for instance – to force
The rise of the ALP also had the unexpected side benefit of helping La Guardia to consolidate support among the predominantly Irish Catholic craft unions that affiliated with the AFL State Federation of Labor, the larger counterpart of the CIO and its industrial unions, and a group that had previously been tied at both the leadership and the membership levels to the local Democratic Party. As late as 1933, State Federation of Labor president George Meany later explained, the craft unions had “looked upon La Guardia . . . with some suspicion; we looked upon him as a Socialist who was a gadfly. We didn’t take him seriously.”53 The AFL union leadership was won over primarily by La Guardia’s record on labor issues and the close working relationship he developed with business owners to comply with NRA wages and hours codes. He had assisted the CIO with its unionization drives; on the eve of the 1937 primaries (at the risk of Republican voters) he had traveled to Lawrence, Massachusetts to urge the Italian American textile workers there to support the CIO’s Textile Workers Organizing Committee in an upcoming National Labor Relations Board election. He had spoken out, prominently, in support of state and federal policies organized labor favored: prohibition of child labor, wages and hours regulations, social insurance, and a guaranteed right to collective bargaining. Under his leadership the city had invested heavily in public works, a boon to construction workers; and had used the New Deal programs to create recreational facilities and activities workers and their families could use and afford.

With a few exceptions the NYPD had been even-handed during industrial disputes, particularly in comparison to the police in other cities. La Guardia himself had mediated countless management-labor disputes, often in an informal fashion which allowed him to claim the personal gratitude of the union leaders; and in 1937, he created a City Industrial Relations Board staffed with some of the best labor mediators in the country to adjudicate intra-state labor disputes outside the National Labor Relations Board’s jurisdiction (a task soon taken over when the state legislature created the New York State Board of Mediation, which possessed greater legal powers). It was true that municipal employees had borne most of the burden of the 1934 economy program; but La Guardia, pressed by Lehman and other Democrats and aided by the WPA, had restored the salaries, had put the city’s nurses on eight-hour shifts, and had reduced the firemen’s hours. The subject of municipal closed-shop public employee unionism, later to drive a wedge between La Guardia and a considerable part of the New York labor movement, would not become a major issue until the city completed its buyout of the transit corporations in 1940. On La Guardia’s labor policy record, see George Kaplan, “The Labor View of Fiorello H. La Guardia” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1962), esp. chaps. 3-4, 6; Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years, 620; Annelise Orleck, Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965 (Chapel Hill, 1995), 162; “Report to the Mayor from Elinore M. Herrick, . . . Director, National Labor Relations Board, District 2,” [n.d], FHL Mayoral Papers, 1937 Campaign Series, Box 4121, NYMA; Shefter, “Economic Crises, Social Coalitions, and Political Institutions,” 69-70.

Meany.\textsuperscript{54} But they were also eager to ensure that the popular mayor not be viewed as a “CIO” candidate.\textsuperscript{55} Thus did the dynamic of competition between the AFL and the CIO, often a great bane to state and local labor-based coalitions, work to La Guardia’s advantage. Meany, making his first real foray into a political campaign and claiming (with exaggeration) to control an “AFL vote” of 1.5 million – 600,000 union members, family and friends – organized a large steering committee and set the business agent from practically every AFL union in the city to work for La Guardia’s reelection.\textsuperscript{56}

By altering both the strength and the behavior of the key institutions in New York City’s local politics, the New Deal had presented La Guardia with challenges and opportunities. It had exacerbated a division between the Mayor and the conservative wing of his own party that could only partially be bridged by the appeal of “good government”; and in laying the groundwork for a liberalized, post-Tammany Democracy it had helped to create a potentially powerful adversary in municipal politics. But it had also helped La Guardia to expand the institutional bases of his coalition beyond the fusion movement that had lifted him to power with a forty-percent plurality in 1933. It had allowed him to solve the basic problem in New York’s reform politics: the fusion coalition’s inherent instability. Each time reform had come to the city, writes the political scientist Theodore J. Lowi, “its onset was widespread, energetic, irresistible. But once there was a partial redress of the Democratic imbalance of power, the


\textsuperscript{56} Goulden, \textit{Meany}, 66.
components dispersed. There has been no club core; no central bureaucracy; thus, reform has not been institutionalized.”57 But shifts in national politics and policy had altered the reform calculus. Working within the favorable circumstances created by the “Roosevelt revolution” and utilizing the resources made available by the New Deal works programs, he had met a challenge that had evaded every other reform administration in the city’s history: he had remade his original fusion coalition into something more stable and more durable.

IV

The municipal electorate might have been expected to contract in 1937, following the extraordinary surge of 1933. But it did not. Rather, it grew by 3.6 percent above the already high mark of 1933—and this figure masked double-digit jumps in central Harlem and working-class outer borough neighborhoods such as Brownsville, Stuyvesant, Hunts Point, and Tremont, offset by drops in suburban Queens and elsewhere. Other New Yorkers shifted their voting loyalties: many of those who had voted for McKee on the Recovery Party line in 1933 now pulled the lever for La Guardia, as did many of those who had previously voted the Socialist ticket.

An analysis of the 1937 election returns reveals three findings of particular interest. First, the voters who entered La Guardia’s coalition in 1937 were likely to have entered Roosevelt’s in 1936: the Republican mayor’s vote was converging with the

Democratic president’s, not because each man was winning over part of the other’s base, but because they were gaining ground with the same groups of voters—many of whom had not previously voted, or had voted for third-party candidates (see Figure 4.1). Second, most of those voters were Jewish or African American. Italian Americans voted heavily for Roosevelt and La Guardia, too, but they had done so previously, and in similar numbers. La Guardia’s share of the “Irish Catholic vote” rose significantly—a consequence, most likely, of the AFL unions’ support and of the restoration in 1937 of municipal salaries to their pre-1934 levels. But the rate of increase was only half that of Jewish and African American voters; and it entailed little entry of new voters into the electorate (see Table 4.1). Third, Black and Jewish women played an especially pronounced role in the growth of the urban electorate, and likely made up a disproportionate share of the newly-mobilized constituencies Roosevelt and La Guardia had won over. The rise in voter participation between 1928–29 and 1932–33 had been predominantly male: 70 percent of those who had joined the registered presidential electorate in New York between 1928 and 1932 were men; the figure for municipal elections was 55 percent. Conversely, the jump in voting between Roosevelt and La Guardia’s first elections and their reelection campaigns was predominantly female: the rise in registration was 58 percent female in the presidential electorate and 72 percent female in the mayoral electorate. The New Deal mobilization of women was strongest in working-class ethnic neighborhoods and in Harlem, which accords with the well-known fact that working-class and immigrant women were slower to enter the electorate after suffrage.
FIGURE 4.1: This scatterplot illustrates the positive correlation between the change in Roosevelt’s share of the total vote between 1932-1936 and the change in La Guardia’s share of the total vote between 1933-1937 in New York’s sixty-two assembly districts.

![Scatterplot](image)

\[ y = 0.64x + 0.15 \]
\[ R^2 = 0.43 \]

TABLE 4.1: Estimates of voting by ethnic group, New York presidential and mayoral elections, 1932-1937. Jewish, Italian, and Irish estimates are compiled from Ronald Bayor’s ecological analysis in *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941* (Urbana, 1988, 2nd ed.), 130, 137, 147. The estimated “Black vote” is based upon a simple ecological analysis: the cumulative vote of every election district wholly contained within a health area with a “non-white” population of ninety percent or greater in 1930.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>FDR 1932</th>
<th>FHL 1933</th>
<th>FDR 1936</th>
<th>(Change)</th>
<th>FHL 1937</th>
<th>(Change)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>80.5%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
<td>-1.8%</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>75.7%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>-2.9%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was, in short, primarily Jews and African Americans, with newly mobilized women playing an especially important role, who extended Roosevelt’s New York coalition beyond the old Al Smith vote, and it was primarily they who turned La Guardia’s 40 percent plurality into a 60 percent majority. Of course, there were many reasons why Jewish and Black New Yorkers might break from their previous voting patterns to cast ballots for La Guardia in 1937. Particular segments of each group had benefited from Civil Service reform, which opened up comparatively desirable public sector jobs to those who possessed education but not political connections. La Guardia wooed both groups with symbolic appeals to equality and tolerance. Like Roosevelt, he appointed an unprecedented number of Black men and women to positions of authority and visibility. New York’s version of Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet” included Tax Commissioner Hubert T. Delaney, Magistrate Myles Paige, Industrial Relations Board member T. Arnold Hill, and Jane Bolin, the first Black woman ever to sit on the American bench. To a group that had long been deemed incapable of contributing to civic life, appointments like these could be symbolically powerful. (“Have a colored man sit in judgment on the taxes upon 18 billion dollars in property?” Roy Wilkins wrote after Delaney’s appointment, as though the very thought of full civic participation were audacious.) And like national figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Harold Ickes, the Little Flower partook of what the historian David Levering Lewis has called a “New Deal propaganda of racial equality,” making small, symbolic gestures intended to signal the full and equal worth of African Americans as part of the American community.

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invited Joe Louis to City Hall before his first title fight and gave the boxer “one of the most cordial welcomes ever accorded an athlete in New York City,” the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote.\footnote{60} Early in his second term, he insisted on taking the son of his family’s African American cook, whom he considered part of his extended family, to visit the Roosevelts at Hyde Park—an action which was considered uncouth in certain quarters but which delighted the first lady.\footnote{61}

But these electoral realignments were also largely motivated by the ways in which New Yorkers responded to the intergovernmental state the Roosevelt and La Guardia administrations had forged during their first terms. Ethnicity proved the primary determinant of voting behavior not because New Yorkers were especially tribal (though they sometimes were, and the city’s politicians knew them to be).\footnote{62} Rather, the concept of ethnicity summated a great number of politically salient social and economic characteristics: what neighborhood they lived in; what job they worked; whether or not they were on relief, owned a home, belonged to a union, paid income taxes, held municipal bonds; whether they had a strong commitment to a particular political party. It also frequently entailed membership in particular communities of opinion. For this reason, ethnic group membership tended to overlap with immersion in distinctive political cultures. What the historian Deborah Dash Moore has written of second-generation Jewish New Yorkers is equally apt for many of the city’s ethnic groups:


\footnote{60} *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1935.

\footnote{61} Lawrence Elliott, *Little Flower: The Life and Times of Fiorello La Guardia* (New York, 1983), 228.

through their encounters with the city and its politics, they “evolved a . . . political style, affiliation, and program that was distinctively Jewish,” rooted in the neighborhoods and responsive to the urban experience and to perceived group interest.63 These ethnic political cultures, reproduced and developed through a host of neighborhood- and city-based institutions, fostered common ways of interpreting the political world which guided the voting decisions of members of the group. The New Deal shook up electoral politics in New York because it intersected with these social structures and political cultures in powerful ways.64

Unlike their Italian neighbors, solidly Democratic in national elections and just as resolutely behind La Guardia in municipal elections, Jewish New Yorkers collectively entered the New Deal years without a strong commitment to either major party. Though Tammany’s ward politicians did have some success organizing first-generation Jewish immigrants, Democratic candidates for mayor and president, aside from Woodrow Wilson, had never garnered majorities in the most heavily Jewish precincts of Harlem and the Lower East Side. They did better following the collapse of the Socialist Party in the early 1920s, especially once the emergence of Al Smith, Herbert Lehman, Franklin Roosevelt, Robert Wagner, and Jimmy Walker gave credence to the idea that the Democratic Party was the party of progressive social legislation and ethno-religious tolerance. Concurrently, some second-generation Jewish lawyers had begun joining the Democratic clubs of the outer boroughs as a means of professional advancement.65 Yet

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at the end of the 1920s, Democratic strength among Jews was concentrated in the inner-
city tenement neighborhoods that had been organized by effective district organizations. 
In 1932, Roosevelt polled an overwhelming percentage in older Jewish neighborhoods 
like the Lower East Side and Williamsburg, from which the more radical and upwardly 
mobile had already migrated; in working-class outer borough districts he lost as much as 
ten percent of the vote to Norman Thomas, and in more affluent areas like Eastern 
Parkway he lost a similar share to Hoover. In the municipal election of 1933, the “Jewish 
vote” had split about the same as the electorate as a whole.66 There was, additionally, 
widespread non-participation: as late as 1925, the historian Thomas Kessner has 
estimated, only twenty percent of first-generation Russian Jews were registered to vote.67 

Many Jewish New Yorkers still labored in the garment industry (where they were 
very likely to be union members). Others were unemployed: tenement neighborhoods 
such as the Lower East Side, Williamsburg, and Brownsville had a density of relief cases 
as high as anywhere in New York save Harlem. Many more had moved into managerial, 
proprietary, and professional positions. One contemporary study found that Jews owned 
two-thirds of New York’s industrial factories and were the proprietors of two-thirds of its 
wholesale and retail establishments; another found that thirty-four percent of Jewish 
heads-of-family were employed as proprietors or managers, compared to fifteen percent 
of non-Jews (and that only three percent were employed as unskilled or service workers,

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2 (Dec., 1981), 232-233 (Table IV).
compared to nineteen percent of non-Jews). Many members of the second generation had earned undergraduate and professional degrees.  

Despite their rapid ascent out of the industrial workforce, New York Jews partook of the labor politics of the 1930s with great gusto – an indication of the way ethnic political culture continued to influence voting decisions after the social context within which that culture had been constructed had begun to change. Ethnic political values formed by New York’s tradition of Jewish socialism and Jewish unionism gave rise to a collective affinity for New Deal liberalism and municipal labor party reform. Jewish socialism (or Yiddish socialism, in its prewar, Yiddish language variant) was an organic creation of the first-generation Jews of the East Side – a product of the mingling of Jewish intellectuals with German socialists; of turn-of-the-century experience of class conflict, particularly in the garment industry; of the persistence of religious emphasis upon learning and a belief in charity and “social justice” as matters of right; and of a collective emphasis on individual enlightenment. Not a doctrine or a program, it was, rather, “a whole climate of opinion that cemented, both socially and intellectually, a

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Jewish world in turmoil.” Simultaneously a youth movement (later augmented by the influx of Eastern European radicals after the failed revolution of 1905) and an enlightenment project through which “individuals could make themselves into better human beings – menschen – as they struggled to improve society,” Yiddish socialism aimed to build a new, more moral society “freed from poverty and bigotry.” It took much of its energy from the conditions that met the immigrants in New York – the long hours, low pay, and poor working conditions of the garment lofts, the squalid tenements. “In the socialist movement,” one garment union leader recalled, “you heard for the first time language which meant to us that we were regarded as human beings with human rights.” Though Yiddish socialism developed for the most part outside the bounds of electoral politics, by the end of the First World War New York’s Jewish neighborhoods had elected Socialists to Congress, to the State Assembly, and to the Board of Aldermen. More enduringly, the first-generation Yiddish socialists had created a network of social institutions – newspapers, unions, the Workmen’s Circle, the Young People’s Socialist League, various public forums and lectures – which reinforced each other, forming a distinctive rights-oriented political culture at odds with both Tammany paternalism and New Era Republicanism.

Jewish socialists “retained their ideals but slowly shed their militancy” as they entered the New Deal coalition, often by way of the ALP. “Abandoning formal socialism,” Irving Howe writes, “they seemed to feel they were preserving something of

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72 Ibid., 72.

73 Ibid., 255.
its original moral intent.”

The trajectory from Yiddish socialism to New Deal liberalism was most visible in the conversions of men and women of the first generation like Abraham Cahan, the longtime editor of the *Forverts*, the socialist daily which became the nation’s most-read foreign-language publication and a key institution of Yiddish socialism. La Guardia and Cahan were friends of long standing, but in spite of that, Cahan had denounced La Guardia during the 1933 campaign as an agent of “the rich and the landlords.” But already in the fall of 1933, Cahan was lauding Roosevelt (whom the *Forverts* had likewise spurned in 1932) as having “earned the gratitude of every thinking man in the country. He should be a Socialist[,] if anybody is entitled to membership in our party he is.” In 1936, the *Forverts* endorsed Roosevelt, and the following year it endorsed La Guardia.

For those who had followed Cahan on the arc from immigrant radicalism to labor socialism to what seemed the incipient social democracy of the New Deal, the historian Beth Wenger aptly writes, Roosevelt’s policies “marked their coming of age as legitimate participants in mainstream American political culture.” Perhaps Cahan preferred to see it from the other perspective: if the Wagner Act and the creation of the welfare state in the nation and the blossoming of urban progressivism in the city constituted the trading of revolution for reform, it also marked a triumph of the values, if not the full transformative vision, of Yiddish socialism. La Guardia remarked pitch-perfectly to Cahan during a 1941 campaign event:

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74 Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 351.

75 Mann, *La Guardia Comes to Power*, 155.


You and I have grown together in this city. We started to make this a better city, to improve the condition of the workers, to have better homes, to educate our children, to have our rights recognized, to gain the respect of our fellow citizens. We started all this 25 and 30 years ago. We were pioneers – you and I, Mr. Cahan. I am sure you are as gratified as I am, notwithstanding the many heartaches and sometimes periods of discouragement, that what we set out to do has been accomplished. Today your people have acquired their place in this community. They do not need to be patronized by any stranger. They do not care to hear that some candidate now tolerates them. They are entitled to the rights that they have acquired. Today your people are respected in this community. They are part of this community. They are part of the very life of the city itself.78

Black New Yorkers, who comprised a much smaller share of the city’s population, embraced Roosevelt and La Guardia with even greater enthusiasm. Roosevelt’s share of Central Harlem’s vote climbed by more than thirty percent between 1932 and 1936 (compared to eight percent citywide); La Guardia’s shot up by thirty-three percent (against a little under twenty percent citywide). And nowhere else in the city did the mobilizing effects of New Deal policy prove more powerful. The number of ballots cast in New York’s two predominantly African American assembly districts (Manhattan’s 19th and 21st A.D.s) grew by forty-two percent between 1932 and 1936, against twenty-five percent in the city as a whole; between 1933 and 1937, voting rose by eighteen percent, against 3.6 percent citywide. All of this occurred despite the fact that neither Roosevelt nor La Guardia could boast of any significant civil rights achievements, beyond the simple and painless act of appointing highly qualified men and women to public office; despite the fact that both the White House and City Hall had avoided

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78 [Transcript of radio broadcast, “Sunday, 11 a.m. through WVED”], FHL Mayoral Papers, 1941 Campaign Series, Box 4142, NYMA.
specifically racial questions on the pretense that to do otherwise would be a distraction from the more immediate problems of economic recovery and municipal reform; despite the fact that the dominant discourse in Harlem about both Roosevelt and La Guardia, especially amongst community leaders, had been one of protest, not approval.

Like Jewish New Yorkers, Black New Yorkers were in but not of the local Democratic Party. Mayors Hylan and Walker were gracious toward the rapidly-growing Black populace, making regular visits to Harlem and undertaking symbolic acts of courtesy – for instance, demanding the excision of the most objectionable scenes from D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* as a condition of its being shown in New York. Appointments to the municipal workforce expanded significantly, particularly under Walker. But Black Democrats were also confined to a parallel party organization, the United Colored Democracy, a “powerless segregated institution whose primary tasks were winning votes for Tammany and isolating blacks from positions of real political influence.” As a result, the Democrats tended to carry Harlem in mayoral elections without integrating Harlemites into the Democratic Party in any substantive way. At the national level, Black New Yorkers tended to vote Republican, though the Party of Lincoln had so nearly defaulted on its historic goodwill that the predominantly African American precincts in Harlem had nearly given Roosevelt a majority in 1932.

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81 Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 3-33.
A very small number of Black New Yorkers had attained significant wealth; a larger but still modest group had achieved stable prosperity and could be called a “middle class.” A small entrepreneurial class was concentrated in a relatively narrow range of enterprise (mostly storekeepers, ice and coal dealers, restaurateurs, undertakers, pharmacists, and proprietors of pool rooms and cabarets). But most Black New Yorkers were workers. A significant number possessed the job skills and in some instances the professional or technical training of a “middle class” but were consigned to working-class occupations, or worse, by discrimination in employment markets and in the unions: they constituted a kind of Black middle class-in-waiting, the presence of which was one of the outstanding (but often ignored) features of interwar Harlem. (The size of this group might be gauged by noting that the average number of school years completed by Harlem residents, as of 1940, was generally well above that attained in the older immigrant neighborhoods; in the more prosperous parts of Harlem, the figure was considerably higher than the city average. An understandably bitter dictum rang true: “Turn a machine gun on a crowd of red caps . . . and you would slaughter a score of Bachelors of Arts, Doctors of Laws, Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Dental Surgery.”) Others survived on low-paying domestic work, menial labor, and other undesirable jobs, or on government relief. Because African Americans were overrepresented in the occupations hardest hit by the Great Depression, and because they faced discrimination when hiring resumed (as well as competition from displaced white workers being pushed down the occupational ladder), Black communities suffered catastrophic levels of unemployment.

By the New York Urban League’s estimate, 60 percent of Harlem was unemployed in 1935.83

In this context, the advent of government relief was of tremendous importance. The historian Nancy Weiss has presented convincing evidence that the New Deal relief programs were the primary contributing factor to the realignment of the Black vote at the presidential level.84 Likewise Roy Wilkins of the NAACP wrote after the 1937 mayoral election: “Thousands of Negroes voted for Mayor La Guardia because they thought he and his entourage were responsible for the continuation of relief. They did not know or care about Mr. La Guardia’s alleged ‘good government.’”85 The local administration of relief was hardly unimpeachable: if the kind of wholesale discrimination present in many local relief offices was notably uncommon in Gotham (though not altogether absent), unequal treatment did result from relief officials’ initial failure to account for conditions caused by racial discrimination. African Americans, for instance, were more likely to have difficulty proving their residency and their past income, which made it harder for them to qualify for relief; their cost of living was likely to be higher because their rents included what amounted to a tax on dark skin, a fact relief authorities did not account for.


84 Weiss, Farewell to the Party of Lincoln, 210-216.

when calculating family budgets. And yet federal employment and city relief kept families together and rent paid; and WPA and relief checks “constitute[d] a considerable part of the community life-blood,” rescuing small business owners as well as the unemployed.

These were not inconsiderable accomplishments. But in some instances work relief meant much more. For many Black workers, accustomed to exploitation by private employers, WPA jobs represented a distinct step up in terms of pay, hours, working conditions, job security, and dignity. Despite the stinginess of government relief, WPA wages and even home relief payments often amounted to more than Black workers (particularly Black women) could earn in the discriminatory private job market: the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that the average unskilled Black worker earned $630 per year compared to the WPA’s minimum rate of $720; the story was similar for semi-skilled and skilled workers. And if the WPA too often placed Black New Yorkers in menial jobs, whatever their skill level and previous occupation, it at least attempted to do what private employers rarely had: provide Black New Yorkers with something like “a white man’s chance” in the workplace. A Harlem woman named Norma Mair recalled how her husband, an engineer, had had trouble finding a job in his profession.

In the meantime he drove a cab. It was no living at all as a taxi driver. . . . Those things I did resent, because he had more to offer. He met so many people on the cab line. . . . He met professors who were driving cabs and couldn’t get a job. First it was color. Then it was color and Depression. . .

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86 Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?”, 146-151.
87 Federal Writers’ Project, New York Panorama (New York, 1938), 142.
89 Ibid., 156-160.
When the WPA came in, that was the first time he got to work in his profession. He worked on theaters, schools. They did everything, and it meant a lot that he was finally able to work in his field.\textsuperscript{90}

The \textit{Amsterdam News} reported in 1939 that many educated Black men and women had enjoyed “the best jobs they’ve ever had in their lives. Thousands of Negro clerks and other white collar relief workers found the kind of employment they were trained for.”\textsuperscript{91}

In this fashion, public employment lifted a portion of Harlem’s submerged middle class to a position more commensurate with their education and abilities.

In voting for Roosevelt and La Guardia, Black New Yorkers were also responding to what the New Deal public investment programs had produced in Harlem. Inadequate though it was in quantity, the PWA had constructed the best housing for its price in the city in Central Harlem. The WPA had built new school buildings, had opened a massive state-of-the-art swimming pool in Colonial Park, had doubled the physical capacity of Harlem Hospital, had staffed health centers, recreational facilities, and nurseries, and had assigned trained personnel to church and community centers. The WPA adult education programs had offered free courses on forty-five subjects in Harlem; 30,000 people had participated regularly in at least one “arts or education program.” The Federal Theater Project had been responsible for reopening Harlem’s only legitimate theater, the Lafayette Theatre. Harlem artists employed by the Federal One arts projects had produced work of enduring value – the Federal Theater Project’s “Voodoo Macbeth,” the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{90} Jeff Kisseloff, \textit{You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890s to World War II} (New York, 1989), 326-327.

\textsuperscript{91} Naison, \textit{Communists in Harlem During the Depression}, 194. Cf. Christopher G. Wye, “The New Deal and the Negro Community: Toward a Broader Conceptualization,” \textit{JAH}, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Dec., 1972), 621-639, a case study of Cleveland, which found that in that city, the New Deal public employment programs maintained or even exacerbated an inequitably occupational pattern “by employing Negroes in occupational categories below those which had been opened to them in the private sector of the economy.”
\end{footnotesize}
sketches of Black life in New York in the *WPA Guide to New York City* and *New York Panorama*, and the seminal Harlem Hospital murals, among many others. All told, no section of New York, WPA officials believed, had given “greater support to the [WPA’s] culture, recreational and vocational projects than . . . upper Manhattan.” Community advocates such as the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (the future congressman and son of a staunch and influential La Guardia supporter) pushed La Guardia to direct more New Deal money to Black neighborhoods. But by the fall of 1937 what had been accomplished in Harlem was not inconsiderable.\(^92\)

V

“There were two gods in my house in the ’30s and ’40s: F.D.R. and La Guardia,” one son of Depression-era New York has recalled.\(^93\) This was how many New Yorkers came to view their political leaders: they were men of singular powers, uniquely capable of guiding the city and the nation through crisis and, in the process, rendering them more just. It seemed a blessing of providence that they should appear when they could be most useful, and when they were needed most.

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Roosevelt and La Guardia did possess outstanding personal qualities. But this does not fully account for how they came to loom so large in the public life of the nation and the city. We are accustomed to thinking about political leadership in personal terms – as something that inheres in an individual’s character, or ability, or capacity to learn. But leadership is also a social phenomenon, and its presence depends largely on structural features outside the individual’s control. As we have seen, Roosevelt and La Guardia acquired charisma because events rendered them capable of accomplishing governmental feats that seemed beyond the ability of ordinary mortals. Their emergence as mass leaders was facilitated by patterns of communication: they were able to forge close relations with the public in part because they could speak to their constituents through the mass-circulation newspapers, the newsreels, and particularly the radio.

And crucially, when they spoke, they did so to mobilized and relatively informed publics. In New York, as elsewhere, the 1930s were a period of unusually high popular political mobilization. This was distinctly true of New York’s Jewish and African American communities – which were extensively organized by unions, political clubs, consumer and tenant groups, civil rights organizations, community uplift organizations, churches and synagogues, and highly local community groups, to name only a very few. These organizations varied widely in the scale on which they organized, the identities they sought to mobilize, the political ideologies they espoused, and the objectives they pursued. But each, in one way or another, mobilized and articulated ethnic and neighborhood values; and the discourses they fostered were reproduced as their members read the newspaper, listened to the radio and to street corner debaters, and talked politics with their neighbors. As a result, many New York neighborhoods were rich in social
capital of a specifically political sort: “organizational memberships, networks, structural positions, and attitudes that explicitly build opportunities and capacities to participate in politics,” and which provided a social basis for robust political action.94

Roosevelt and La Guardia were able to garner much electoral support by winning the support of the leaders of these organizations, some of which – like the ALP, which had a ballot line and a campaign organization, and the Communist Party, which commanded a significant bloc of votes – had real electoral clout. But community organizations also played a less obvious, but equally crucial, role in the electoral politics of Depression-era New York. As the historian Cheryl Greenberg has emphasized in her study of 1930s Harlem, organization leaders often followed broader community sentiment at least as much as they shaped it.95 In doing so, they converted powerful but amorphous community aspirations into political demands that were recognizably in tune with community values. Collective mobilization around a set of demands provided a social basis for community engagement with the state.

In 1945, after La Guardia announced he would not seek a fourth term – the announcement had come shortly after Roosevelt’s sudden death in April – notes of gratitude started arriving at City Hall. One of those moved to write was C. T. Nesbitt, an African American from Jamaica, Queens, who headed a community organization with the motto “A Job for Every Citizen.” Nesbitt wrote to La Guardia:

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94 Ester Fuchs, et al., “Social Capital, Political Participation, and the Urban Community,” in Susan Saegert, et al., eds., Social Capital and Poor Communities (New York, 2001), 290-305 (quoted at 305). See especially Wenger, New York Jews and the Great Depression, chap. 5; and Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?”, chap. 4. In Harlem, the church was a particularly important source of political social capital, particularly among women. The Harlem ministry had mostly supported Hoover in 1932 and supported La Guardia only tepidly in 1933; in 1937, La Guardia received “overwhelming support” from Harlem ministers, many of whom had “led the campaign for Roosevelt” in Harlem the previous year. (Welty, “Black Shepherds,” 320-327.)

95 Greenberg, “Or Does It Explode?”, 94.
Kindly take this letter as a way of giving you thanks for everything that your office has meant to my people since you taken office in City Hall. (I mean colored people) My race has made greater progress while you was in City Hall then we have in all the History of this great City. and I wants to tell you while you are [y]et in office that there are colored people that do give thanks to you for the wonderful fight that you has put up for the under dog (oIored people) And my organization wants to know that we thank you.

You and the Hon; F.D. Roosevelt ment more to my people then all the Presidents, and all the Mayors that held office before you. And we wants you to know that we are not a sleep, for it was my organization that went to you and beged you to clean up our schools. and I went back and beged for a park for our children to play, I went back to you and beged you to give my people a chance to work among our own people on releif, by making them investgatores, Clerks, and case workers. It was my organization that asked you for a releif station in Herlem. My organization asked you to [put] milk stations in Harlem. . . .

These or just a few of the things that we asked you for, and did get them and more than we ask you for. . . . But what we wants you to know is there are colored men and women in my race that can,t forget you and F.D. Roosevelt.96

Nesbitt’s letter is full of revealing bits: its premise that a good government was one which permitted “the race” to make progress; the inextricable link between race and class embodied in his equation of “the under dog” and “colored people”; and the close association many New Yorkers made between Roosevelt and La Guardia. But it also illustrates the role community leaders and community organizers played in the development of leader-follower relationships in Depression-era New York. Some community leaders, like Nesbitt, perceived themselves to be actively working with the President and the Mayor on a shared project, each with responsibilities to the other – “[W]e wants you to know that we are not a sleep.” Other activists, particularly the more

96 C. T. Nesbitt to FHL, Aug. 27, 1945, FHL Papers, Series II: Mayoral Correspondence, Reel 45, NYPL.
radical ones, thought of elected officials in more adversarial terms. But each served the same function. By defining a goal and mobilizing their members in pursuit of it, they helped to make possible the leader-follower relation that played so large a role in Depression-era New York politics. When matched to the extraordinary governmental capacities made possible by the New Deal, it proved a potent mix.

VI

The campaign itself was mostly uneventful. Neither Mahoney nor La Guardia had much difficulty in their respective primaries. Thenceforth, La Guardia, his own election all but certain, spent much of his time “mumbling statistics” (as one reporter put it) about the money saved and efficiency achieved by the city departments and pleading for the election of a Fusion Board of Estimate.97 La Guardia’s campaign rhetoric revolved primarily around the merits of good government against odious Tammany corruption; Mahoney’s speeches seemed to yearn for the lost paradise of Irish New York, a city without Communists where law and order had reigned.98 The only moment of real tension was manufactured by the German American Bund, an organization of Nazi partisans, which requested a permit to march through Yorkville several days before the election. La Guardia, whose anti-Nazism was by then well known, took the side of free speech and free assembly and allowed the permit to be granted; the Democratic Yiddish

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97 *NYP*, Oct. 29, 1937.

98 Transcripts of La Guardia’s campaign speeches and broadcasts are in SF, “Municipal Government – Lessons on,” NYMA. Mahoney’s campaign statements are best documented in the daily press.
newspaper Der Tog argued in response that a Democratic mayor would have “stood firm against anything that might arouse race hatred in the city.”

On the eve of New York’s municipal elections, La Guardia, clad in a well-worn dark grey overcoat, stood at the intersection of Lexington and 116th – the “lucky corner” on which he had closed his campaigns since the early nineteen twenties – and addressed a crowd of some eight thousand supporters. The mood was buoyant, and La Guardia was ready to proclaim victory. “Never mind what the opposition has told you,” he said. “The campaign is over and the election is won.” The following day New Yorkers gave him the largest mayoral vote in the city’s history (though in percentage terms his victory did not match Walker’s 1929 landslide). His running mates nearly ran the board, winning the comptrollership, the presidency of the City Council, four of five borough presidencies (losing only the Bronx), and the Manhattan district attorney’s office – the latter a crucial defeat for Tammany Hall, which had held the post for twenty-eight years and stood ill-suited to lose either the jobs or the favorable prosecutorial treatment. All told, the Republican ballot line supplied fifty percent of La Guardia’s total and the ALP some thirty-six percent – 482,459 votes – with the remainder coming from the Fusion and Progressive parties. He had become the first reform mayor ever to win reelection in New York City.

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99 NYT, Nov. 2, 1937.

100 Ibid.
Part III:

War and Postwar
Chapter Five: The Battle of New York: Urban Politics and the Warfare State

“Gentlemen: This is a war budget!” So began La Guardia’s April 1942 message to the Board of Estimate, transmitting his yearly requests for the city’s departments, agencies, commissions, courts, and cultural institutions. The Police, Fire, and Hospitals departments – on call should the Axis powers breach the five boroughs – were spared deep cuts; but the agencies that had expanded their output most rapidly during the New Deal years – and had seen their municipal appropriations grow quickly as the WPA was rolled back in the late nineteen thirties – were forced to make do with less in the interest of conserving national resources for the war effort.1 Together with the ongoing withdrawal of WPA manpower from the city departments, these cutbacks reflected a larger shift in American public-sector spending away from the production of public goods and services and toward the production of the implements of war. New Deal-style public investment would be suspended for the duration.

The Second World War would see the rise of a new cluster of national state activities – a “warfare state” that contracted for the production of military supplies, raised vast amounts of revenue through taxation and borrowing, managed the allocation of national resources and manpower, and sought to minimize the economic and social dislocations produced by national mobilization.2 Local governments would be enlisted as partners in some of these undertakings. But because the state-building project of the nineteen forties entailed the expansion of governmental functions in which municipalities

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1 “Text of Mayor La Guardia’s Budget Message Putting the City’s Finances on a Wartime Basis,” NYT, Apr. 2, 1942.

had never been much involved – and because nationalization enjoyed a legitimacy in war that it had not in peace – the “sweeping transformation in the foundations of national government”\(^3\) that occurred during the war years did not implicate local governments to nearly the same degree as had the New Deal state-making efforts of the mid-thirties. The collaborative federalism upon which the New Deal’s public investment and employment programs had been built withered as corporate contractors replaced municipal governments as Washington’s primary partners in production. The New Dealers had built a federal state; wartime officials would build a national one.

Even so, policy innovation at the national level continued to stimulate local governmental action. In order to supply the armaments and materiel needed to fight the war, Washington created a vast centralized procurement bureaucracy – the first incarnation of the military-industrial complex which would be such a vital component of the American economy in the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond. In so doing, it encouraged localities to develop means of competing effectively in the political economy of war and defense production.

The Roosevelt administration’s efforts to limit inflation and provide for the equitable distribution of wartime sacrifice on the home front had even farther-reaching effects. By galvanizing a grassroots- and labor-led movement for “fair prices,” these national policies helped to produce a vibrant cost-of-living politics which fed back into the municipal arena. La Guardia would mobilize the city government to address these popular concerns – using his own offices to enforce federal price regulations, providing valuable market information to the city’s purchasers, leading consumers in informal boycotts of expensive goods, pushing the national Office of Price Administration to

extend its policies, and orchestrating the campaign that would bring rent control to New York City.

La Guardia’s third term is almost universally regarded as his worst, and not without ample reason. Physically and emotionally worn down and increasingly irritable, he cut corners more frequently, asserted power arbitrarily and unfairly, made more bad appointments, and generally lost interest in the day-to-day challenges of municipal government. Yet his efforts to bring wartime employment to the city and to stabilize the cost of living stand among his most creative work; they neglected episodes in his career and a largely forgotten passage in the development of New York City’s politics and government.

I

Beginning in 1940, when the federal government started to spend heavily on defense, industrial America emerged, at last, from the Great Depression. But New York missed out on this economic revival. As late as mid-1942, with the American economy growing more rapidly than at any other time in its history, fifty thousand more men and women were registered as unemployed in New York than had been in the depression year of 1939.

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One source of New York’s wartime economic blues was an infestation of German U-Boats, which had settled in the Lower New York Bay and were sinking American vessels by sighting them against the illuminated skyline. As a result, shipping had been temporarily diverted from the New York port, depriving work to stevedores, truck drivers, and others whose jobs depended on port activity – about one hundred thousand people in all. But more important, the city was getting passed over for government war production contracts. New York was left far behind the big industrial metropolitan areas of the Midwest and the burgeoning cities of the Sunbelt (see TABLE 7.1); it was also faring poorly compared with the other dense, highly unionized cities of the Eastern Seaboard. The New York metropolitan area had garnered $136 per capita in war supplies contracts compared with $286 in Boston, $350 in Philadelphia, $650 in Newark-Jersey City, $700 in Cleveland, $715 in Buffalo, and $952 in Baltimore.

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<th>NYC</th>
<th>Chicago</th>
<th>Detroit</th>
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<td>Supplies contracts</td>
<td>$136</td>
<td>$143</td>
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<td>$617</td>
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<td>Facilities contracts</td>
<td>$30</td>
<td>$101</td>
<td>$169</td>
<td>$65</td>
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* Includes Westchester and Nassau counties.

TABLE 7.1: War supplies and war facilities construction contracts per capita in selected metropolitan areas, June 1940-February 1942. (Compiled from M. P. Catherwood and Meredith B. Givens, “The Problem of War Production and Surplus Labor in New York City,” May 13, 1942, RG 211, Entry 94, Box 2, NA.)

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6 See esp. see Mike Wallace, *Gotham II* (New York, forthcoming).

The roots of these disparities were primarily structural. First, New York’s manufacturers, far more than those of other Northern industrial cities, specialized in nondurable consumer goods—items that were intended to last three years or less, like clothing, newspapers and other printed items, and food products. They lacked the durable-goods facilities readily adaptable to the mass production of implements of war. (By one analysis, only 23.5 percent of New York City manufacturing employees worked in industries “closely allied” to war production, compared with fifty-seven percent in upstate New York.\(^8\)) Second, the practices of the military procurement bureaucracy worked against small manufacturers; and the city’s manufacturing sector had long been populated primarily by small-scale, highly specialized plants which relied on external economies and proximity to consumer markets for competitive advantage—not by the large assembly-line factories that characterized a Fordist city like Detroit. New York’s manufacturing sector averaged twenty workers per factory, compared to forty-three in the nation as a whole and 113 in the Motor City.\(^9\)

Some defenders of small business, including La Guardia, were convinced that the large corporations’ hold on war contracts—by one count, seventy-three percent of contracts let in the two years following the invasion of France went to the nation’s one hundred largest corporations\(^10\)—was the work of the dollar-a-year men those corporations had loaned to the War Production Board. No doubt personal influence of this sort did play a role. But small producers also faced formidable structural obstacles, for they often

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\(^8\) Catherwood and Givens, “Problems of War Production and Surplus Labor,” RG 211, Entry 94, Box 2, NA.


\(^10\) *NYT*, Aug. 27, 1942.
lacked the engineering staff required to convert their equipment, the legal personnel needed to handle complicated contracts and subcontracts, and the accountants and expeditors required to pursue government contracts.\textsuperscript{11} For its part, the military procurement bureaucracy, administratively thin, lacked the capacity to seek out smaller firms; and moreover its functionaries were reluctant to depart from the practice of “giv[ing] contracts to big companies with a reputation for performance” for fear that a newspaper or congressional committee would reveal that they had overpaid.\textsuperscript{12}

As a result of this mismatch between the military procurement process and the structure of New York’s manufacturing sector, an acute unemployment problem persisted within the five boroughs even in the midst of national labor shortages. Unemployment, which had nearly disappeared in many areas of the U.S. between July 1940 and July 1942 (declining by seventy-one percent), fell by only sixteen percent in Gotham over the same period; hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers had been drafted for service, and yet there remained more than 368,000 registered jobseekers and probably as many as 400,000 unemployed altogether. With curbs on civilian production, high wartime taxes, and bond savings drives in the offing, some analysts predicted joblessness in New York would rise as high as six hundred thousand.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} Brian Waddell, \textit{The War Against the New Deal: World War II and American Democracy} (DeKalb, 2001), 96-98.

\textsuperscript{13} Sloan, “New York City Attends to Its Own Business,” 26; “Effects of Curtailment Orders on Employment in the Metropolitan New York Area, July 1, 1942-January 1, 1943”; “Report of Inter-Departmental Staff Meeting on New York City Unemployment Situation . . . July 16, 1942 . . .”; both in RG 211, Entry 94, Box 2, NA; “Minutes of the Regional Labor Supply Committee Meeting, June 29, 1942”; J. J. Joseph to Louis Levine, June 4, 1942; both in RG 211, Entry 91, Box 1, NA; \textit{NYT}, July 10, Sept. 20, Nov. 10, 1942; “Remarks by Mr. Jacob S. Potofsky . . . ,” Feb. 11, 1942, SF, “War Contracts – N.Y.C.,” NYMA. Estimates on the distribution of unemployed workers by sector were as follows: 55,000-60,000 in building and construction; 70,000-80,000 in the needle industries; 80,000 in other
For more than a decade, as New Yorkers had watched their city’s private capital stock decline and its central-city areas lose ground (in both population and commercial activity) to its suburbs, they could take comfort in the fact that practically every other large city of the Northeast and Midwest was suffering similarly – and in most cases more acutely. Now, New York’s divergence from the national urban trajectory produced considerable collective anxiety. Newspapers and public officials dreaded the prospect that New York’s manufacturing sector would never recover from the migration of industry during the war. La Guardia’s own statement was representative:

The factories . . . that can keep going and can keep their personnel intact because they are working on war orders will be the ones who will be able to resume peacetime production without interruption. Unless we can get more war contracts in this city the result may well be, that a large proportion of the manufacturing that we normally do in New York will be permanently diverted. . . .

The sense that war production was rearranging America’s industrial geography to New York’s detriment was widespread. The Herald Tribune ran a series of long articles urging optimism and predicting that what the city lost in industry and blue-collar workers

manufacturing industries; 55,000 in service industries; 5,000 in transport and communications; and 135,000 in trade (retail and wholesale), finance, insurance, and real estate.


15 New York City Department of Commerce, “Available Facilities for War Production in New York City, 1942,” 2, copy in Henry A. Wallace Papers, Box 42, FDRL.
it would gain in corporate headquarters and cultured, middle class managers. But this perspective, though anticipatory of the attitude assumed by politicians, business people, real estate owners, and newspapers after the war (when unemployment was low and property values more stable), was a distinctly minority one in 1942. The Post noted with alarm that federal money was going to capitalize non-union factories in Southern “cow pastures and cotton fields” – “rank union busting,” its editors cried – which would continue to undercut New York industry after the war. Some New York newspapers raised the specter that Gotham might become a “ghost town.”

One of the reasons New York had been so successful in its implementation of the New Deal works programs was that, at the time those programs were created, it had already possessed strong institutional bases in the fields of social welfare and public works: the charity organizations and the social work profession, the Gibson and Prosser committees, the local relief bureaucracy that had developed after Roosevelt created the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, the departments and their engineering staffs, and Robert Moses’s network of engineers, architects, landscape architects, and managers. In comparison, there existed very little organizational capacity and little knowledge upon which the city could draw in seeking to improve the competitiveness of its private manufacturers. There had existed no local equivalent of the “associational state” Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover had pioneered at the national level in the 1920s; New York’s Department of Commerce dated to late 1939 and consisted of a small staff on loan from other city agencies working out of donated Rockefeller Center offices,

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17 “What’s the Matter with New York?,” NYP, July 1, 1942.
a large share of its “shoestring” budget paid out-of-pocket by the commissioner.\textsuperscript{18} And there existed remarkably little policy-relevant knowledge – not only within the city government, but also among New York’s business and manufacturing elites. “In discussions with leading business men during recent weeks,” a 1943 study initiated by Governor Dewey concluded, “the committee has found that the representatives of a particular industry were aware of the problems of their own industry, but that in very few cases was there adequate understanding of the total problems of all business and industry in the community.” The same study judged that New York City was “far behind” other localities in its efforts “to attract business and to safeguard the interests of existing enterprises”\textsuperscript{19} – in large measure, one concludes, because its industrialists and public officials had long been able to take the city’s prosperity for granted.

To create an organized means of aiding New York’s private manufacturers, La Guardia assembled his own group of dollar-a-year men, led by George A. Sloan, a director of U.S. Steel and Goodyear Tire and Rubber, to serve as the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Business. (Sloan also became the commissioner of the recently-born Department of Commerce.) Neither the Advisory Committee on Business nor the Department of Commerce became particularly strong agencies – it would be decades before New York’s municipal government developed any real capacity in the realm of economic development policy – but their creation did ensure that at least one high-ranking figure was working full-time to bring war contracts to the city and had responsibility for assembling a picture of the overall industrial situation in New York.

\textsuperscript{18} August Heckscher with Phyllis Robinson, \textit{When La Guardia Was Mayor: New York’s Legendary Years} (New York, 1978), 293.

\textsuperscript{19} “Committee’s Report to Gov. Dewey.”
Sloan’s office went to work playing matchmaker between corporate prime contractors and small New York shops and attempting to create pools of smaller plants which could engage the engineering consultants they so desperately required to convert their machinery for war production.\textsuperscript{20}

La Guardia and Sloan also sought to persuade federal officials to intervene in the contracting process on behalf of small businesses. They made an alliance with rural and small-town congressmen, who were pushing for the creation of a federal agency tasked with helping small enterprises secure government contracts.\textsuperscript{21} These efforts bore fruit in June of 1942, when Congress created the Smaller War Plants Corporation, capitalized at $150 million (an underwhelming sum) and authorized to take prime contracts and subcontract them to small plants. La Guardia began to take the city’s concerns to leading Washington war bureaucrats: War Production Board chairman Donald Nelson, War Manpower Commission director Paul McNutt, and Office of Price Administration head Leon Henderson. Until June of 1942 he received sympathy but relatively little in the way of cooperative action.\textsuperscript{22} “It is most discouraging,” La Guardia wrote to Roosevelt in March, “to keep on writing and phoning, appealing, begging and pleading to use existing

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\textsuperscript{20} E.g., \textit{NYT}, Nov. 30, 1939; June 9, 12, 1940; Sept. 14, Nov. 27, 1941; Jan. 30, June 14, 1942. See also correspondence in SF, “War Contracts – N.Y.C.,” NYMA.
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\textsuperscript{22} FHL to Floyd Odlum, Feb. 21, 1942; FHL to Donald Nelson, Mar. 16, 1942; FHL to Nelson, Apr. 6, 1942; Nelson to FHL, Apr. 7; Sloan to FHL, Apr. 8; FHL to Nelson, Apr. 28, 1942; FHL to Nelson, May 8, 1942; FHL to Paul McNutt, June 30, 1942; in SF, “War Contracts – N.Y.C.,” NYMA; FHL to Leon Henderson, June 25, 1942; FHL to Lou Holland, July 18, 1942; in SF, “Correspondence with Federal Officials,” NYMA.
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facilities in New York City for war production. This is only a small part of what we can do here. We [have] hundreds of thousands of skilled people out of work.”²³

In early June, La Guardia and Governor Lehman asked Roosevelt to convene a conference to discuss what could be done to alleviate unemployment in New York City. They found the President receptive. The under-utilization of Gotham’s manpower, manufacturing facilities, housing stock, and transportation system (during a period of gasoline and rubber rationing) represented a significant waste of resources. Moreover, Thomas Dewey stood poised to make political capital of the unemployment problem in the fall gubernatorial election. Roosevelt agreed to convene a high-level conference per Lehman and La Guardia’s request. McNutt, Nelson, Henderson, Henry Morgenthau, Jesse Jones, Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson, Undersecretary of the Navy James Forrestal, and Vice Admiral Emory S. Land of the Maritime Commission attended.²⁴

The conferences ultimately produced a series of agency-based efforts directed at particular sectors of the New York workforce. In order to provide jobs for beleaguered construction workers, whose skills were readily adaptable to shipyard work, Navy Secretary Knox and Undersecretary Forrestal agreed to expand work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard – the city’s largest manufacturing establishment. The Maritime Commission likewise gave more construction contracts to New York shipyards. Construction workers were soon being hired at a net clip of six hundred per week. Employment at the yard would peak in 1944 at 71,000 men and women; from Pearl Harbor through the end of the


²⁴ Lehman to FHL, May 28, 1942, SF, “War Contracts – N.Y.C.,” NYMA; Lehman and FHL to FDR, June 2, 1942; FDR to Lehman and FHL, June 10, 1942; FDR to FHL, July 22, 1942; in OF 335-N, FDRL; NYT, May 29, 1942.
war, they built seventeen ships, including two large battleships (a third, the USS North Carolina, had been commissioned in April, 1941) and five aircraft carriers.  

Other policies were aimed at New York’s largest industry – the garment industry. New York, the center of American clothing production, might have seemed a natural supplier of Army uniforms. But the city’s garment shops, producing mostly higher-end clothing of superior styling and workmanship, employed relatively highly-skilled and well-paid workers. It was often less costly for the procurement agencies to capitalize new factories in low-wage states than it was to meet the cost of New York’s skilled, unionized labor. New York manufacturers, the garment unions determined, produced forty percent of the nation’s men’s pants, yet as of the spring of 1942 they had received only three percent of the contracts let for woolen Army trousers. La Guardia, pushed by the unions, petitioned for higher minimum wages on war contracts to cut the advantage of low-wage producers. The War Production Board responded with a directive allowing the procurement agencies to negotiate contracts at prices above the lowest competitive bid, permitting bid differentials of up to fifteen percent; this was raised to twenty-five percent as a result of the summer conferences.


27 FHL to Sidney Hillman, May 10, 1941; Jacob S. Potosky to Sloan, Feb. 16, 1942; Sloan to Potosky, Feb. 18, 1942; Sloan to FHL, Feb. 19, 1942; FHL to Douglas C. MacKeachie, Feb. 19, 1942; MacKeachie to FHL, Mar. 3, 1942; FHL to Donald Nelson, Apr. 5, 1942; FHL to Nelson, Apr. 6, 1942; Sloan to FHL, Apr. 8, 1942; “Memorandum to Mr. Sloan, April 8, 1942”; Sloan, “Memorandum to Mayor La Guardia,” Apr. 11, 1942; Sloan to FHL, Apr. 17, 1942; FHL to Nelson, May 8, 1942; FHL to Julius Levy, July 7, 1942; in SF, “War Contracts – N.Y.C.,” NYMA; “Minutes of the Regional Labor Supply
To La Guardia’s consternation, the garment companies still did not submit bids: profit margins on government contracts were too small to entice garment firms to bid for military contracts so long as the civilian market remained open. In response, La Guardia used his personal power to create a kind of informal corporatism: under mayoral suasion, the unions and the garment manufacturers each made concessions in the interest of the broader aim of defending New York’s share of the garment industry. La Guardia sought wage concessions from the unions to induce the manufacturers to enter more bids, which the unions justified as a way of providing steadier employment for their members. La Guardia then put pressure on the manufacturers to bid for less-than-attractive contracts. “We are both seeking the same objective,” he wrote the head of the New York Clothing Manufactures Exchange; “that is we do not want to have the clothing industry taken away from New York after the war. . . . Now I can’t perform miracles nor can I go down to the shops and sew these pants but I do expect cooperation especially when I am being used as the shock troop in this matter.” When Sloan notified La Guardia that the Quartermaster Depot was seeking bids for more than three million pairs of cotton khaki trousers and that the Amalgamated and the manufactures had told him they could not

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28 La Guardia wrote to Donald Nelson: “It appears a certain amount of cooperative organization on the part of both our manufacturers and the labor unions is necessary if we are to play our full part in this business. For that reason I would appreciate it very much if your office would let me know a couple of weeks or more in advance when the War Department or Navy Department are preparing to let the next batch of pants contracts. As soon as I have this word from you I shall call the industry together and you may be assured that New York will be prepared to manufacture everything that we are capable of handling.” The procurement authorities placed La Guardia’s office on the bidders’ list, which provided fifteen days’ notice when advertised bids were to be let and thus gave La Guardia and Sloan time to urge New York’s manufacturers to place bids. (FHL to Donald Nelson, Apr. 26, 1942, Nelson to FHL, July 21, 1942, SF, “War Contracts – N.Y.C.,” NYMA.)

meet the government asking price without negotiating a special rate, he got this response: “By all means, New York City is to bid. . . . They must bid. Tell them I said so.” And they did.30

The effort to boost war production in New York never quite came together as Gotham’s advocates wished. New Yorkers were particularly disappointed in the performance of the Smaller War Plants Corporation (SWPC), the failure of which left the city without an effective means of aiding its small metal and woodworking shops. Even so, the New York economy recovered rapidly in the second half of 1942 and into 1943. The value of war contracts let to New York manufacturers grew from a little over $77 million in the month before Roosevelt’s intervention to nearly $222 million three months later; the total between July and December of 1942 was more than $1.5 billion. War Manpower Commission regional director Anna Rosenberg estimated that half of the 400,000 unemployed at the beginning of the summer were placed in jobs between July and the end of September, and by spring of 1943 the Department of Commerce declared that, with the exception of woodworking and metal shops, unemployment in the city had reached an “irreducible minimum.”31 These numbers were bolstered by seasonal


The Amalgamated Clothing Workers agreed to drop their rates from ninety-five cents a pair to eighty-five cents for the purposes of making Army trousers, and though the Ladies Garment Workers announced no general policy, they privately indicated their willingness to help out contractors on an individual basis. In most cases the difference came out of wages, not profits.

31 Haber to Arthur Altmeyer, Aug. 6, 1942; Reynolds to Haber, July 18, 1942; both in RG 211, Entry 94, Box 2, NA; Problems of American Small Business, 1070-1073; “Excerpts from Sloan’s Remarks – New York Building Congress, November 25, 1942”; Lou Holland to Sloan, Dec. 5, 1942; FHL to Nelson, Dec.
employment in the garment industry, by out-migration\textsuperscript{32}, and perhaps most of all by the steady removal of workers into the armed services; but a net gain of three hundred manufacturing plants in the first quarter of 1943 indicated that industry was also reviving.\textsuperscript{33} As early as November of 1942, Roosevelt believed enough had been accomplished to declare political victory. When Dewey, newly elected as governor, appointed a commission to study industrial conditions in New York, FDR sent a note to his administrative assistant David Niles: “Please check supervision over unemployment in New York City. . . . Between Fiorello and the U. S. Government we have decreased unemployment from 400,000 to 280,000 and we are progressing rapidly. I think we can show Dewey up in this first attempt of his to make political Kudos.”\textsuperscript{34}

Tens of thousands of New Yorkers owed their wartime employment to this extraordinary intervention into the political economy of war production. But the very singularity of the episode portended trouble: New York’s public officials had been able to capitalize upon the city’s demographic and economic centrality, the relative weakness of

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\textsuperscript{32} Recognizing that affirmative measures could not in themselves end unemployment, Lehman in particular also sought to help New York workers who could find jobs elsewhere relocate, especially by supplying State loans to help workers with transportation costs, union dues, and living expenses until they started drawing paychecks. It was not that easy: many New Yorkers simply did not desire to leave the city, and those who were willing to look for work elsewhere often discovered that they were unwanted. War Manpower Commission officials found that employers in upstate New York and Connecticut, though faced with labor shortages, refused to hire New Yorkers because of “prejudice against aliens, Jews, and blacks, and fear of unionization.” (“Technical problems of recruitment and placement,” the report noted, “appear to be secondary to the problem of discrimination.”) Discrimination notwithstanding, many New Yorkers did follow economic opportunity out of the city. The best estimate is that New York State lost 223,000 civilians to out-migration between April 1940 and November 1943. By May, 1942, the metropolitan area had lost 365,000 residents, according to the assistant director of the Bureau of the Census. (“Minutes of Meeting . . . July 17, 1942”; Lloyd Reynolds to William Haber, July 29, 1942, RG 211, Entry 94, Box 2, NA; Philip D. Funigiello, \textit{The Challenge to Urban Liberalism: Federal-City Relations during World War II} [Knoxville, 1978], 9; \textit{NYHT}, June 27, 1943.)
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\textsuperscript{34} \textit{PL}, 1368.
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a military-industrial complex still in the early stages of its development, and the sympathy and responsiveness of key federal officials. (If ever there was a time when reality matched Roosevelt’s image of La Guardia “wangling” millions of dollars out of the federal government through a skillful presentation of his city’s problems, this was it.) In later years, when these conditions were attenuated or absent, New York would be all but shut out of the defense economy – and thereby precluded from one of the most important sources of local economic growth in postwar America. But in 1942, New Yorkers had marshaled their ample political resources effectively; and thus did the Great Depression finally come to an end in New York, more than two years after prosperity had returned to the rest of urban America.\textsuperscript{35}

\section{II}

As New York’s economy recovered, the cost of living replaced joblessness and economic decline at the center of the city’s politics. Government spending enabled the American economy to operate at full capacity, which raised the cost of labor and other factors of production; the curtailment of consumer production and the disruption of international trade on the one hand and growing consumer purchasing power on the other opened up an inflationary gap between the supply of consumer goods and civilian

\textsuperscript{35} Freeman, \textit{Working-Class New York}, 144-145.
demand for them.\textsuperscript{36} Beginning in earnest in 1942 and 1943, the Second World War arrived in New York in the form of shortages, rising prices, black markets, rationing, lease termination notices, and lower-quality consumer goods.

Both the range of actions open to local officials to meet these conditions and the incentives for them to do so would be shaped by the development of the national government’s anti-inflation program. Roosevelt and his policy advisers did not build their own program upon the capacities of local governments, as they had done with the New Deal works programs in the nineteen thirties; in fact, they made a reasoned decision to avoid doing so. But as conditions forced them toward a more interventionist policy, and as congressional opposition narrowed the range of approaches available to them, they developed a program whose features gave local officials an informal role in its enforcement and which also stimulated the development of a vital, neighborhood-based consumer movement – in turn providing local constituencies for vigorous municipal action in defense of “fair prices.” La Guardia, his own activities deriving from and responding to the national government’s anti-inflation efforts, would partake of a kitchen-table politics with few parallels in modern American political history, insinuating the city government still further into New Yorkers’ daily lives in visible and traceable ways. “People who used to think of the mayor as a colorful fellow who rushed around to fires and meetings kicking up a fuss about this and that,” one wartime essayist wrote, “now

\textsuperscript{36} On inflation during World War II, see Lester V. Chandler, \textit{Inflation in the United States, 1940-1948} (New York, 1951); and Seymour E. Harris, \textit{Price and Related Controls in the United States} (New York, 1945).
know him much more intimately as someone who can and will help them solve their everyday problems.”

Inflation became a major concern of the national administration above all because Roosevelt feared its power to de-harmonize the American economy. “If the vicious spiral of inflation ever gets underway,” he warned in a fireside chat, “the whole economic system will stagger.” Once prices were out of joint, resources would be misallocated and social groups rendered discontent; if costs became unpredictable, businesses would be shy to enter into war production contracts and speculators would be tempted to withhold “essential raw materials.” “Economic chaos,” as Roosevelt called it, would threaten to disrupt war production, to increase the cost of the war, and to demoralize the home front by the depreciation of wages, savings, and pensions.

The experience of the Great War, he believed, had illustrated both the necessity of a vigorous anti-inflation policy and the incapacity of the federal government to pursue such a policy. “Most of us went through the World War period and we [saw] a very vicious upward spiral,” he told reporters two weeks after the invasion of France. “Well, it was caused by a lack of knowledge of how to do things on a big scale. We, none of us, knew. We were completely inexperienced during 1917 and 1918.” In May of 1940, he enlisted the New Deal economist Leon Henderson and the consumer advocate Harriett Elliott to monitor wholesale and retail prices, respectively. This was, in Roosevelt’s eyes, primarily an effort to build knowledge – Henderson and Elliott would be doing

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37 Amy Porter, “Butch Says Cut It Out,” Collier’s, Apr. 28, 1945, 44.


39 CPPC, May 23, 1940.
“more a statistical job than anything else for the time being.”

But as inflationary pressures continued to build, Henderson’s agency obtained operational powers.

From the fall of France until shortly after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt’s anti-inflation program entailed selective administration of wholesale prices. Henderson’s Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply (OPACS, later simply OPA) focused more on ensuring “smooth production” than on restraining the cost of living. Because the OPA lacked statutory authority, compliance with its price schedules was voluntary, attained by moral suasion, the prospect of bad publicity, and the threat of withholding government business. The agency’s lack of enforcement mechanisms “limited the field of enforceable price control to those basic commodities which were dealt in by a relatively few buyers or sellers” (most notably steel); the OPA exercised as yet no direct control over consumer goods. Henderson and his top aides (who were primarily economists) resisted the idea of a general freeze – proposed most prominently by the financier Bernard Baruch – because they thought it overly “simplistic” for their task: they were reluctant to surrender the use of market pricing as a means of matching supply and demand, and they believed discretionary price increases were useful for boosting output. Fiscal policy aimed at curbing consumer demand, Henderson believed, should do the heavy lifting in the anti-inflation effort.

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40 CPPC, May 23, 30, 1940.

After Pearl Harbor, the OPA gained statutory enforcement powers, consumer goods came under its purview, and the idea of a general price freeze gained ground.\textsuperscript{42} Prices had risen steadily from the fall of France through Pearl Harbor and continued rising in the early months of 1942, and they promised to climb faster as America went on total-war footing and the remaining Depression-era slack was taken out of the industrial economy. In January 1942, passage of the Emergency Price Control Act (proposed by Roosevelt the previous July) gave the OPA legal authority to control prices and rents, ending the period of voluntarism, consultation, and persuasion. Shortly thereafter the agency initiated its first rationing program, encompassing mostly goods rendered scarce by the disruption of international shipping and justified as a way of assuring the “equitable distribution of commodities in short supply.”\textsuperscript{43} Three months later, Roosevelt held a series of inter-departmental meetings “in order to map out a full scale Administration program against inflation.”\textsuperscript{44} The results were made public in April, when the President asked in a message to Congress and a fireside chat for a broad anti-inflation program encompassing general price and wage stabilization as well as fiscal measures such as high taxes, restrictions on credit and installment buying, and an aggressive (but voluntary) savings program to curb civilian demand.

The OPA responded immediately, placing price ceilings on many consumer goods – under its General Maximum Price Regulation (“General Max”), retailers were to take the highest price they had charged for an item in March 1942 as the ceiling price for that


\textsuperscript{43} Mansfield, \textit{A Short History of OPA}, 145.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 42.
item. The National War Labor Board followed suit several months later, when it issued its “Little Steel” decision, which made it federal policy to prevent industrial wages from rising more than fifteen percent above their January 1941 levels. But the fiscal measures Roosevelt requested of the Congress would not materialize; it was October before Congress passed the Revenue Act of 1942, and even then it provided for less than half of the $7.6 billion in new taxes Roosevelt had deemed necessary. The political failure of Roosevelt’s tax program forced the administration to rely more heavily than it had wished upon price and wage controls; in turn, the systems of controls developed after Roosevelt’s April, 1942 messages proved inadequate to the task. With many farm products effectively exempted from price control coverage, food prices continued to rise.

So did wages – for the National War Labor Board had jurisdiction only in cases where wages were disputed. The Stabilization Act of 1942, passed at Roosevelt’s insistence in October, addressed these problems by extending price controls to ninety percent of food products and giving the President the authority to stabilize all wages. And yet prices continued to climb – at least in part because shoppers, not knowing exactly what a particular retailer had charged for a given item in March 1942, did not know when they were being asked to pay above-ceiling prices.

Beginning in earnest in early 1943, key White House allies made it clear to Roosevelt and his administrators that General Max was not meeting the standards they sought in a price-control program. The War Labor Board’s Little Steel policy had made the cost of living an issue of primary importance to the labor movement: with the pay envelope practically fixed, increases in the cost of living steadily ate away at the wage gains workers had made in the first two years of the defense production boom. In March
of 1943, AFL President William Green and CIO President Philip Murray visited Roosevelt at the White House and asked him to abandon the Little Steel policy, presenting “protests from their members in all parts of the country covering complaints of high prices, the presence of black markets and the apparent lack of action by Federal authorities to prevent the sale at high prices of bootleg items.”

International Ladies Garment Workers Union President David Dubinsky did likewise. And it was the failure of General Max that first focused La Guardia’s attention on federal price control policy. At the end of 1942, New York experienced an acute meat shortage, with black markets springing up across the city. La Guardia formed a committee (which he chaired) to “ascertain the facts from the time the animal arrives in New York . . . right through to the moment it is sold to the consumer.”

The committee found that violation of OPA regulations was “the rule and not the exception” and that, as a result, consumers were practically defenseless against high wartime prices. La Guardia sent the findings to the OPA and the Department of Agriculture and hastened to Washington to confer in person with their principals.

The accumulation of pressure forced Roosevelt to revise the federal price control program once more. On April 8, 1943, the President issued what became known as his “Hold-the-Line” order, severely limiting the authority of both the OPA and the War Labor Board to grant further price and wage increases. “The practical consequence,” the

45 NYT, Mar. 20, 1943.

46 Ibid.


48 Ibid., Jan. 21, 1943.

49 NYT, Jan. 11, 25, 31, Mar. 1, 3, 28, 1943; “Text of Mayor La Guardia’s Sunday Broadcast to the People of the City of New York . . . Feb. 28, 1943. . . .”
OPA’s official historian writes, “was to strengthen the hands of stabilization officials, especially in OPA and NWLB, by reducing their discretion. . . . The ‘Hold-the-Line’ Order marked a turning point in OPA operations, legally, psychologically, and administratively.”50 The Hold-the-Line order coincided with two other major changes in OPA policy. First, the agency introduced rationing for many domestically produced food products by concocting a system of “point rationing.” Under this system, each person received forty-eight ration “points” each month to spend however he or she liked on goods which were assigned point-values based on their scarcity. To a large degree, this demonetarized the purchase of many basic consumer goods. Second, the OPA established standardized, dollar-and-cents community ceiling prices for each item. Under dollar-and-cent ceilings (for which La Guardia had been pushing since the meat inquiry), there would no longer be any confusion as to what the legal price was: armed with ceiling-price charts – posted in stores and distributed to individual shoppers by consumer councils and later by the OPA itself – consumers could more easily enforce the ceilings by simply refusing to pay more than the legal price.51

By April 1943, Roosevelt’s anti-inflation program looked very different from what had been in place at the time of Pearl Harbor. The combination of fiscal management and technocratic price administration Henderson had envisioned had been replaced by a regime that froze market prices and wages as they reflected supply and demand at particular moments in the past and used ration coupons rather than private

50 Mansfield, *A Short History of OPA*, 55.

purchasing power to apportion many consumer items. Hold-the-Line proved remarkably successful at preventing inflation – prices remained essentially flat from mid-1943 through the end of the war – but by suspending market mechanisms in order to hold down the cost of living and allocate goods more equitably, it created new problems. How would ceiling prices actually be enforced? What could be done to help consumers live with the dislocations and frustrations that resulted? Could the agency sustain popular support for a program predicated on sacrifice?

Unlike the New Deal works programs, the OPA was not intergovernmental by design; in fact, OPA officials, fearing that subnational governments would be “drawn into a competition in leniency when supply shortages grew acute,” had sought to minimize reliance on states and localities for enforcement. And yet the Hold-the-Line regime was designed in such a way as to open up a broad terrain for local governmental action. Two of the OPA’s most pressing tasks under Hold-the-Line, enforcement and what might be called consumer empowerment, had historically been local functions. By assuming local functions without displacing them, Hold-the-Line enabled local officials to tinker with, articulate, and elaborate upon the basic structure the national government had put in place.

The Hold-the-Line regime also helped to mobilize a powerful constituency for local governmental action: grassroots consumer organizations. The simple fact that the federal government had finally created a strong price control system served to organize grassroots activism that had previously been unorganized and diffuse: by making effective collective action seem possible, the Hold-the-Line regime provided consumers with incentives to organize. An official in a Bronx consumers’ group explained to

52 Mansfield, A Short History of OPA, 261-262.
reporters how her club had sprung to life as she and her neighbors were sitting in a local park with their baby carriages: “The main topic of conversation was the high cost of living and how our food dealers were failing to observe ceiling prices. We got so mad we decided to do something about it, and the Mosholu Consumers Group was the result.”

At the end of 1943, Brooklyn boasted thirty-five neighborhood consumers’ councils, “not one of which was in existence two years ago,” the chairman of the Crown Heights Consumer Council noted. Similar sentiments impelled housewives to join one of the 135 consumer interest committees organized by New York’s Civil Defense Volunteer Organization. This grassroots mobilization elevated the cost-of-living to the center of urban politics and created a constituency not only for the OPA, but for anyone who would work effectively on these issues. Parallel to this, the War Labor Board’s wage-stabilization policy had made the cost of living a key issue for organized labor. The social-democratic and Second Popular Front labor unions aligned with the CIO especially made “the control of living costs” their top priority. Union workers and the broader labor-left joined housewives to form a strong alliance in support of cost-of-living politics.

It was “not the function of the City of New York” to enforce federal price control regulations, La Guardia admitted – but he resolved to do so anyway. In the aftermath of the meat inquiry, the Little Flower wrote the OPA and the Department of Agriculture offering to have his Department of Markets enforce price ceilings in New York, and

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53 NYT, Feb. 15, 1944.

54 Ibid., Dec. 31, 1943.


56 NYT, May 17, 1943.
federal officials, who did not yet have a viable enforcement system of their own, did nothing to dissuade him. In the early months of the Hold-the-Line regime, local enforcement required a degree of ingenuity. The city did not yet possess the legal authority to enforce ceiling prices, but it did have a law protecting consumers against short-weighting and short-measuring. La Guardia explained over the radio that shoppers could lodge complaints with the Bureau of Weights and Measures against merchants for selling too little at a given price rather than overcharging for a given quantity. Complaints started coming in, and the city began issuing summonses – 1,370 on a particularly busy Saturday – and collecting fines; a group of Bronx merchants promptly subjected the city to an injunction action. Shortly, the State War Council (which had an enabling grant from the legislature to enact emergency war measures) rescued the city from legal limbo by giving OPA regulations the force of state law, which permitted the city to use the magistrates’ courts for cases involving retailers. The city adopted a three-strike policy: the Department of Markets first issued a warning, then sought a fine, and finally pursued a jail sentence. (Cases involving wholesalers were referred to the OPA.) Later, La Guardia posted the names and addresses of three-time offenders in the Department of Markets and invited civic organizations to come and copy them down. By the end of 1944, the city was placing market inspectors on the premises of repeat offenders, just as it stationed police officers in hotels suspected of being houses of ill repute. All things considered, New York’s Commissioner of Markets claimed proudly


58 See esp. NYT, Apr. 12, 22, 27, 30, 1943; Nov. 27, 1944; Hearings Before the Committee on Banking and Currency . . . on S. 1764, a Bill to Amend the Emergency Price Control Act of 1942 . . . , Senate, 78th Cong., 2nd Sess., 657-658; “Text of Mayor F. H. La Guardia’s Sunday Broadcast . . . April 23, 1944. . . .”
that Gotham “was the foundation on which OPA modeled its enforcement throughout the
country,” though in fact few cities came close to matching New York’s enforcement
effort.\(^{59}\)

La Guardia also encouraged consumers’ groups that provided the first line of
enforcement (and which were later enlisted en masse by the OPA to serve as volunteer
price wardens). Like most liberals with sensitive political antennae, La Guardia was
wary of allying with the more militant consumer groups, which had been stigmatized (in
transparently misogynistic fashion) as “snoopers.” (OPA Deputy Administrator John
Kenneth Galbraith, who favored paid inspectors, once remarked that he hoped price
regulation would not be enforced by a “Gestapo of volunteer housewives.”)\(^ {60}\) But by
1944, La Guardia was encouraging the neighborhood consumer councils by publicizing
their successes at getting repeat offenders punished.\(^ {61}\) To the councils, which devoted
great effort to showing their neighbors that price control could be effective (staging
parades and other such events to celebrate victories in the magistrates’ courts\(^ {62}\)),
garnering mention during La Guardia’s weekly radio broadcast was both a source of
validation and a powerful recruiting tool.

La Guardia also mobilized the local government and his own informal political
power to help New Yorkers negotiate consumer goods markets. In so doing, he took
advantage of the rise in price-consciousness the OPA had wrought. This price-

Short History of OPA*, 262.

\(^{60}\) D’Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, 1984),
67.

\(^{61}\) Betty Traunstein (Bensonhurst Consumer Council) to FHL, Jan. 27, 1944, SF, “Food . . . ,” NYMA;

\(^{62}\) *NYT*, Feb. 15, Mar. 23, Apr. 1, 1944.
consciousness was, in part, a direct byproduct of the design of the Hold-the-Line policy – what political scientists refer to as an “informational” policy feedback effect. It was also fostered by the OPA’s efforts, particularly under Chester Bowles (who had a considerably better understanding than did his predecessors of “the ability of the average citizens to help him carry out his program”\footnote{Michael Darrock, “What Happened to Price Control?: The OPA vs. the Inflationary Tide,” Harper’s, July, 1943, 124.}) to involve, educate, and empower housewives, workers, and the salariat – its natural constituencies. Beginning in late 1943, the OPA recruited hundreds of thousands of housewives to serve as volunteer price-checkers in their communities. High-profile figures, beginning with Eleanor Roosevelt, lent visibility to the anti-inflation effort by signing pledges to pay no more than ceiling prices. The OPA’s Division of Information undertook the dissemination of information through pamphlets, brochures, and public programs (“Economics on the Home Front,” “Home Maker’s Course in Wartime Food Buying”) which aimed to help families live under Hold-the-Line and to convert people into what the historian Lizabth Cohen has termed “citizen consumers” – consumers who understood the impact of their purchasing decisions and who bore in mind larger social objectives when making their purchases.\footnote{See esp. Jacobs, Pocketbook Politics, 202-209; Jacobs, “‘How About Some Meat,?’” 921; Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic, 18-19 and passim.}

As in the 1930s, grassroots mobilization and local state expansion worked symbiotically. Searching for ways to deal with wartime dislocations, consumers looked to the government for information of use in their everyday lives. La Guardia directed his commissioner of Markets to have “all of [his] personnel devote all of their time to aid the consumer in the war food situation.”\footnote{“Text of Mayor F. H. La Guardia’s Sunday Broadcast . . . February 28, 1943. . . .”} With CDVO volunteers replacing the WPA
workers who had collected market data in the 1930s, the New York City Department of Markets continued to broadcast market information daily over WNYC and now augmented its reports with “rationing news and recipes for plentiful and seasonable foods,” information on OPA regulations, and, on Tuesdays, advice from nutrition experts on how to cook healthy meals using what was available and affordable. The New York CDVO, in conjunction with several of the labor unions, held courses in consumer education aimed at educating neighborhood leaders “so that they may pass the knowledge along to the community.” The Department of Markets also distributed recipe booklets and gave free cooking classes in which housewives were “advised on the use of their ration points . . . and the substitution of plentiful, reasonable foods in place of scarce and expensive ones.” In advance of the Jewish high holidays in 1943, department workers created an exhibition in the Essex Street municipal market to demonstrate to East Side housewives how less expensive saltwater fish could be used in place of the usual freshwater yellow pike and carp in the preparation of gefilte fish.

Above all, La Guardia used the radio to communicate directly with the city’s purchasers. Following his ouster from the OCD, frustrated by the editorial abuse he had taken, La Guardia stopped speaking to print reporters (sometimes for months at a time) and, in a Rooseveltian attempt to go over the heads of the newspapers, began a series of thirty-minute broadcasts that aired on Sunday afternoons over the municipal radio station WNYC. Slotted at 1:00 p.m. in the hope that families would listen to them together

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67 *NYT*, Sept. 12, 1944.


69 *NYT*, Sept. 28, 1943.
between morning church services and afternoon outings, he called them “Talks to the People.” He opened and closed each broadcast with a phrase he had apparently picked up during a meeting of the Permanent Joint Board on Defense: “Patience and Fortitude.”

Unlike Roosevelt, La Guardia was not a natural radio talent. His high-pitched voice could become shrill when he grew animated; when he tried to restrain himself, he tended to speak at a laboriously slow tempo and with a herky-jerky rhythm. The format and setting of the Sunday broadcasts, however, helped him find his own distinctive radio style: he was peppery, melodramatic, ebullient, and theatrical, and his talks were both informative and highly entertaining. The broadcasts seemed to satisfy a desire for a common civic culture in wartime, and to the dismay of New York Democrats – who tried to cut off funding for WNYC because it had become so effective a political tool for the Mayor – as well as some prim-and-proper Fusionists (one of whom lamented the Little Flower’s “radio exhibitionism”\(^70\)), La Guardia won a large and unusually responsive radio audience. (One Tammany district leader glumly reported that his own mother was a devoted listener.\(^71\)) By the spring of 1945, his broadcasts were drawing two million listeners each Sunday afternoon.\(^72\)

Along with news from the war fronts and his eternal crusade against vice and gambling, food became a fixture of La Guardia’s broadcasts. Only when he devoted the entire broadcast to a particular subject – the municipal budget, his city health insurance

\(^70\) Oswald Garrison Villard, “Mr. La Guardia and the Union,” *Christian Century*, Apr. 11, 1945, 462.

\(^71\) Reminiscences of Reuben Lazarus, CCOHC, 209

plan, the Atlantic Charter – did he not spend at least a few minutes discussing the price and supply of food in the city. Especially in the early days of point rationing, New Yorkers wrote in with questions about OPA procedures, and La Guardia answered them on air. He provided his audience with information on what was plentiful, what the ceilings were for various products, and what constituted good ration-point values. He collected recipes using ingredients that were low in cost and point value – *pasta e fagioli*, mutton pie – to read over the air. He was soon influencing kitchen-table fare across the New York metropolitan area.

The size and loyalty of La Guardia’s “following of consumers” (as the New Jersey state secretary of agriculture described the Little Flower’s regular audience\(^73\)) enabled him to intervene in markets in ways few other local officials could. In March 1944, for instance, he decided the OPA’s price ceilings for eggs were too high and enlisted the help of New York’s housewives to bring them down.

I told you about butter and eggs. Eggs should be selling about 7 c. below ceiling prices. By the way, do you see how we brought those egg prices down[?] That shows that you and I can work together. If we just hold off from buying, it will bring the prices down.\(^74\)

His radio following also provided a means of increasing the flow of food into the New York market – a way of offsetting the disadvantage he believed New York’s strenuous enforcement efforts created. In 1945, he dispatched a telegram to the South Carolina Peach Growers’ Association: “HOPE CROP IS BIG AND THAT YOU WILL SEE TO IT THAT

\(^73\) “La Guardia Assailed as Foe of Farmers,” *NYT*, May 10, 1944.

\(^74\) “Text of Mayor La Guardia’s Sunday Broadcast . . . March 5, 1943 . . . .”
YOUR REPRESENTATIVES, JOBBERS AND WHOLESALERS IN NEW YORK CITY WILL SELL AT LAWFUL OPA WHOLESALE PRICES. IF YOU DO THAT I WILL PLUG AND BOOST YOUR PEACHES AND CAN ASSURE YOU OF A GOOD MARKET.”\(^75\)

As he had during the New Deal, La Guardia frequently pressed the national administrators of the OPA to amend their policies to make the program function more smoothly and to relieve pressures in New York and the other big cities. He continued to view himself as someone with local knowledge who could troubleshoot federal policy and who bore the responsibility for making federal programs actually work; much as he had once written to Hopkins that he could not “carry the ball” for the WPA by himself, he now wrote to OPA director Prentiss Brown, “I am doing all I can but need help.”\(^76\) He was compelled to intervene, too, because the OPA created local political pressures and because New Yorkers had come to believe he could address problems which were by any reasonable calculation beyond the function of local government. (“Well, of course, the mayor is blamed for everything,” La Guardia quipped during a beef shortage. “I suppose I will have to go out West and start a social bureau and introduce some of the bulls to the mamma cows, if it keeps up at this rate.”)\(^77\)

He typically committed a minute or two of his Sunday broadcasts, usually following his market reports, to riffing on OPA policy and making minor recommendations to federal OPA officials. (“Here, Mr. OPA, is something for you, and we have the facts.”)\(^78\) “It takes them about a year and a half . . . to follow [my]...

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\(^{75}\) FHL to South Carolina Peach Growers Association, July 21, 1945, SF, “Food . . . ,” NYMA.

\(^{76}\) FHL to Prentiss Brown, May 15, 1943, SF, “Food . . . ,” NYMA.

\(^{77}\) Porter, “Butch Says Cut It Out,” 44.

\(^{78}\) “Text of Mayor La Guardia’s Sunday Broadcast . . . April 18, 1943 . . . .”
suggestions,” he chirped on one broadcast. In telegrams, letters, and personal conferences with the heads of the OPA, the Department of Agriculture, and the Office of Economic Stabilization, he made a number of more far-reaching suggestions: allocate food supplies by district; expand the subsidy program; allow the value of ration coupons to fluctuate according to market conditions; permit custom slaughtering so that meat retailers could bypass middle-men. Some of these larger suggestions were adopted, but they were more often found unworkable, for they were frequently conceived from the parochial vantage point of the city or else required disruptions to the standard channels of distribution in excess of what the OPA would tolerate.

III

Officially, the OPA was an emergency program tasked with preventing economic dislocation and assuring equitable wartime sacrifice that was intended to last for the duration of the inflationary period – the war and reconversion. But because many Americans viewed price control as a recognition by the government of their “right” to quality goods at fair prices, it also sparked popular claims on the state that imbued it with a more expansive purpose. From the beginning, many sympathetic liberal policymakers viewed the OPA as a means to work toward long-desired interventions in the market

79 “Text of Mayor La Guardia’s Sunday Broadcast . . . March 19, 1944. . . .”

80 The Mayor’s Office compiled a list of La Guardia’s policy recommendations, “48 Recommendations Made by Mayor F. H. La Guardia to Various Federal Agencies from Feb. 2, 1942 to Dec. 8, 1944,” SF, “Food . . .,” NYMA. See also the transcripts of his Sunday broadcasts, passim.
economy. As conservatives well recognized, what was officially a wartime economic stabilization program jumped the tracks to become a species of New Deal reform.

Seldom was this political aspect of the OPA on more vivid display than in the enactment of what would prove the agency’s most enduring legacy in New York: rent control. In most American cities, the OPA imposed rent control (capping rents at March 1942 levels) in order to meet the genuine housing crises that followed the inundation of war-boom cities by industrial workers. Labor unions and tenants’ organizations often pushed hard for the institution of OPA rent control (and property owners’ associations often fought it bitterly), but it was beyond question that the severe pressure on housing markets in the big cities put inflationary pressure on the national economy: whatever local passions it had stirred up, rent control could in most instances be justified in purely economic terms. This was not the case in New York.

The five boroughs had experienced a modest housing shortage since the mid-1930s, the result of slow construction during the Depression and the WPA’s demolition of old-law tenements. But because New York was not a war-boom city, the vacancy rate remained relatively high during the early nineteen forties, with overall rents rising only very modestly above their pre-war levels. Had the restraint of inflation been the only consideration, the OPA would not have been justified in extending rent control to New York – at least not when it did. The imposition of rent control in New York was essentially a political event; it occurred because local officials responded to and

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leveraged the desire of their constituents for the protecting hand of government in their relations with property owners.

Like the OPA’s retail price ceilings, the mere existence of a national rent control program served to generate popular demands upon local officials: because a potential solution existed, tenants and their supporters had something concrete to ask for. Most working-class New Yorkers had not actually been much affected by the war rental market; rather, they seized upon the OPA as an instrument for addressing long-time grievances. Few neighborhoods embraced the idea of rent control as fully as Harlem, which possessed strong traditions of both tenant activism and landlord dereliction. The best studies at the time suggested that federal rent control would have no real effect on Harlem, where rents had always been high but had not risen substantially during the war (and hence would not be affected by a program that capped rents at 1942 or 1943 levels). Even so, Harlem organizations such as Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s People’s Committee, the Consolidated Tenants League, and the National Negro Congress demanded rent control, moved by the sense that something good would ultimately come of government intervention in the landlord-tenant relationship. They were joined by union leaders (especially those affiliated with the CIO), by the American Labor Party, and by tenant groups in other working-class neighborhoods.

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83 “[T]o urge such control as a ‘cure’ or even as a palliative,” the housing reformer Charles Abrams suggested, “would simply be another extension of the type of measure that promises rather than performs and which, in the end, leaves the problem where it was before, or worse.” [Abrams, et al.], “Report of the Special Committee of the Citizens’ Housing Council on Rent Control for New York City.”

They were also joined by middle-income tenants, the only segment of the local housing market actually affected by the war mobilization. As unemployment dried up, as high wartime taxes prompted the affluent to relocate to more modest apartments, and as Army and Navy men and war bureaucrats moved into the city, housing became very difficult to find in middle-class areas such as the West Bronx, Bay Ridge, Flatbush, and much of Queens. Some small property owners, faced with rising property taxes and operating costs (and in many cases eager to make a return on investments which had taken a hit during the Depression), declined to adhere to the policy of voluntary rent control the real estate community had put in place to ward off government rent control. Increasingly, they deferred repairs, turned off boilers, raised rents, or issued eviction notices. Letters addressed to La Guardia’s office evinced a growing anti-landlord sentiment. Placed in a position of power, the writers charged, landlords had become “arrogant and arbitrary”; they held “a virtual sway of life and death over their tenants” and demanded higher rents for the continuation of basic services. “When in the name of Heaven is this dirty business going to stop[?]” one Brooklyn Navy Yard worker demanded to know.85

By mid-July of 1943, when La Guardia returned from a two-week tour with the U.S.-Canada joint defense board, the idea of rent control had broad popular support. In the months that followed, La Guardia said little to indicate that he aimed finally to make

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good on his long-held belief that housing should be regulated as a public utility; property
owners, then up in arms over high property taxes, might have been pushed into open
opposition by a landlord-baiting campaign. But he was nevertheless orchestrating public
opinion in order to convince the OPA to extend rent control to New York. On July 15, he
formally petitioned the OPA to do so\(^{86}\); OPA officials denied the request, citing Bureau
of Labor Statistics data that plainly showed no general rise in rents to justify it.\(^{87}\)

But the issue would not go away. On August 1, the shooting of an African
American serviceman by a New York City police officer in Harlem precipitated a wave
of property destruction, looting, and violence which ultimately cost six lives some
$5,000,000 in property damage. Most leftists and many liberals believed the high cost of
living to be a major factor in the unrest, and proposed rent control as a countermeasure.\(^{88}\)
Two weeks later, with the city’s traditional “moving day” of October 1 approaching and
two-thirds of the leases in the city due for renewal, La Guardia told the listeners of his
radio broadcast:

[All tenants who are receiving notices of termination of lease [so the
apartments could be rented to new tenants at higher rents] or who have
received notice of increased rent, please inform the Mayor’s Committee
on Rent, Department of Housing and Buildings, or if you cannot
remember that address, just write me a letter giving me the facts. . . . I
want to keep all the records up to September 1\(^{st}\), when I’ve arranged for
another conference with the OPA in Washington on the subject of rent. It
costs so much to move. . . . That is something I fear our friends in
Washington do not quite understand.\(^{89}\)

\(^{86}\) FHL to Prentiss Brown, July 15, 1943; FHL to Sylvan Joseph, July 15, 1943.

\(^{87}\) [Office of Price Administration], “Memorandum,” July 26, 1943.

\(^{88}\) In addition to press coverage, see Naison, “From Eviction Resistance to Rent Control,” 128-129; on
the 1943 riot generally, see Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., The Harlem Riot of 1943 (Philadelphia, 1977).

\(^{89}\) “Text of Mayor F. H. La Guardia’s Sunday Talk . . . August 15, 1943 . . . .”
At the end of September, following another round of meetings and the completion of two more surveys, the OPA announced that it would extend federal rent control to New York effective November 1. Landlords and renters alike understood that the decision did not entail simply a neutral effort to restrict national inflation. “The whole things smacks of a political pay-off – the New Deal owes the Mayor a few favors,” claimed the Taxpayers Association of Greater New York’s monthly magazine. One Brooklyn renter wrote: “I hope that you will not leave City Hall in 1945, as you are the only person to whom the plain people can look for guidance and protection.” This was how most of those moved to write La Guardia viewed the new federal policy the city government had secured – as a salutary source of government protection in the relationship between renters and owners.

Unlike price control, which would be phased out in 1946 and 1947 following a concerted attack by business and agricultural interests and the conservative coalition that ruled the 79th Congress, rent control would live on in New York after the war. In the context of a severe postwar housing shortage, Congress would enact the Federal Housing and Rent Act of 1947, continuing rent control for buildings constructed before February 1, 1947; two years later, it would pass another measure giving states the authority “to

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92 J. Adelman to FHL, Oct. 12, 1943; in SF, “Rent Control,” NYMA. See also transcripts of La Guardia’s Sunday broadcasts on Aug. 29 and Sept. 5, 1943.

assume administrative control” of the existing rent regulation program – thus devolving the function of rent regulation to the states. Under heavy pressure from downstate politicians and tenant, consumer, and labor advocates (and amidst a housing shortage considerably more acute than what had existed in 1943), the New York State legislature would enact a rent regulation program that closely followed the OPA’s. By the time the postwar shortage finally abated, rent regulation had become “politically sacrosanct.” It has been a feature of the New York City housing market ever since.94

Chapter Six: “I Hope Others Will Follow New York’s Example”: From Intergovernmental Experiments to Municipal Commitments

Beginning in earnest in mid-1943, when mobilization was far along and the war had begun to turn in the Allies’ favor, Americans engaged in a long, multi-phased debate about what should be done with the governmental legacies of the New Deal and the Second World War.¹ Policies such as work relief and price control had begun on an emergency basis; and yet many citizens had come to value them. Should they be continued once the emergency had passed? Should the government’s role as an employer of last resort, a producer of public wealth, a socializer of risk, and a protecting presence in the market place be extended into the postwar period? These questions were at the heart of the national discussion that began in 1943 and 1944 under the guise of “postwar planning” and continued through the fevered debates over the fate of the Office of Price Administration and the consideration of a group of progressive legislative initiatives which aimed, in effect, to extend the legacy of the New Deal.

It was a notable feature of La Guardia’s third term that he framed his municipal agenda with the intention of intervening in these national debates. He believed that if New York City, acting on the municipal scale, could demonstrate the feasibility and desirability of elements of the postwar liberal policy agenda, it could serve as an “example” to other political communities – including the nation itself. Encouraged by Roosevelt and other leading national progressives, he planned a slate of postwar public works projects meant to soak up unemployment during the reconversion period while

¹ For a similar framing, see Gary Gerstle, “The Crucial Decade: The 1940s and Beyond,” JAH, Vol. 92, No. 4 (Mar., 2006), 1292-1299.
laying down the physical infrastructure he believed necessary to the city’s future as a
global capital. He also put in place a local health insurance program intended to give
New Yorkers access to comprehensive health care and protection from devastating
medical expenses. Through these municipal undertakings, he sought not only to shape
the contours of the postwar national state, but also to carve out a role for subnational
governments within the postwar liberal project. In short, he envisioned a progressive
federal polity built upon the intergovernmental cooperation of the New Deal era.

The political contests of the nineteen forties and fifties would preserve some
essential features of the New Deal political order whilst rolling back others – in the
process, narrowing the scope of national social and economic policy and constraining the
social-democratic elements present in the New Deal coalition at the beginning of the
Second World War. The social insurance and categorical relief programs created by the
Social Security Act would, for the time being, be accepted by the political mainstream.
Congress would make only a modest frontal attack on the trade union movement where it
already existed (though the sanctioning of state “right to work” laws would render the
unionization of previously unorganized regions all but impossible). Stewardship of the
national economy would become an accepted function of government. But other uses of
national state power would not outlive the emergency period – including those which had
been most central to the formation of New York City’s local politics and government
during the Roosevelt years, namely, intergovernmental public spending and national price
control.²

One of the consequences of the postwar adjudication of the New Deal legacy was a withdrawal of federal resources from local public sectors. The postwar national state, like its New Deal predecessor, spent vigorously in pursuit of domestic social objectives, but quite differently: it would direct resources to different geographic areas, through different channels, and toward different ends. In an important sense, the urban New Deal died just as the suburban New Deal— with its complex of subsidies and middle-class entitlements, divvied out not by governments but through contracting and by way of the federal tax code— was poised to take off. National social spending would go increasingly to the supply of private goods (such as private housing, family insurance plans, and the like), provided not by governments but by private organizations.3

The New Deal had transformed New York City’s local polity in ways that had left it stronger yet also vulnerable. In the short term, the withdrawal of federal resources stimulated the development of the city’s local state: as the national government ceased to build public markets, to renovate parks, to staff health clinics and public libraries, and to regulate rents, local and state officials would move to fill the vacancy. The rise and fall of the New Deal intergovernmental state had thus prepared the way for a robust local social politics which, sustained by the political forces the New Deal had brought into being and underwritten by the city’s immense postwar affluence, would continue to shape

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New York’s public life for decades after Roosevelt and La Guardia passed from the scene. But because subnational governments cannot act countercyclically, the contraction of national state involvement in urban governance left New York’s local state vulnerable to economic shocks. Ironically, perhaps, the age of public ambition born of the Great Depression would draw to a close amidst the economic upheaval of the nineteen seventies.

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Christmastime of 1940 saw the dedication of the Fort Greene Health Center, one of the last PWA-financed public buildings opened in New York before the war. Addressing the city officials, borough notables, and curious neighborhood residents gathered for the occasion in the building’s auditorium, La Guardia made note of the fact that the ribbon-cuttings and cornerstone-layings which had been so much a part of the city’s civic life in the thirties would soon be stopped on account of the war. It was “a pity,” the Mayor said, referring presumably to the Axis dictators and not the congressional conservatives, that the progress of the nation and indeed of the world had been halted by the “rash, unnecessary and irresponsible acts of just a few individuals.” But already he was thinking of ways in which the march of progress might be jumpstarted following the war.

While we have no illusions as to the possibility of continuing the vast public works program in this or other cities, we have learned a lesson from
the last war and plans should be made now as to what exactly we must do after the national defense program is completed . . . so that when this unhappy period is over all that will be necessary will be to reach out and go to work. At no time must the growth and the development of progress end in our country.⁴

From the time the war turned in the Allies’ favor in 1943, few subjects engaged the attention of the American home front as fully as “postwar planning” – the ubiquitous term for making all manner of preparations for the reconversion period. Some who urged national planning, including La Guardia, were moved by the memory of the end of World War I, which had been followed by a period of economic dislocation and, several years later, by a deep recession; some feared that a demobilized economy would simply return to its prewar doldrums. But the planning impulse also drew energy from the nearly universal conviction that the postwar world, whatever it would look like, would be very different. With so much seemingly up for grabs, groups ranging from the National Association of Manufacturers to the CIO viewed the postwar planning moment as an opportunity to present the best arguments for their own visions of how American society should be organized: what kind of economy would best ensure prosperity, security, and freedom and what kind of society would best reflect and conform with American values.⁵

The idea of postwar planning appealed deeply to La Guardia’s sense of himself as a visionary – someone who could see past the concerns of the moment and anticipate the needs of tomorrow. The exercise of postwar planning satisfied his urge to participate in the solving of great national problems despite being shut out of the war effort. It also

⁴ NYT, Dec. 20, 1940; FHL to Lee Thompson Smith, Aug. 20, 1943, SF, “Postwar Problems,” NYMA.

gave him an opportunity to build a legacy. After Pearl Harbor, the Little Flower formed a blue-ribbon study group to survey the entire question of postwar reconstruction, including under that rubric a wide variety of subjects – employment, infrastructure, tax policy, transportation, housing, immigration, education, health care, and problems relating specifically to industry, manufacturing, and small business. He aspired, he said, to prepare a postwar program which would furnish his successors for two or three administrations with “a complete, well studied, well-rounded planned public improvement program covering every civic, social, health, traffic and safety requirement insofar as intelligent planning and predictable funds make it possible.”

New Deal-style public investment came to dominate La Guardia’s postwar program, for several reasons. First, he feared that demobilization would see the return of mass unemployment. “I tell you now,” he wrote Florida Senator Claude Pepper in mid-1942, “that unless we are ready and know exactly what to do after the war, all the effort, all the sacrifice, all the loss of life will not have been worth while. Hell will break loose in such a way that it will take generations to recover.” These were widely held concerns, particularly in the early years of the war, before deferred purchasing power had accumulated. “When war contracts are withdrawn, the danger is that the entire edifice will topple over,” a Senate committee under the chairmanship of Harry Truman concluded. “Unless an economic substitute is found for war contracts, mass unemployment will become a serious threat, and the number of unemployed men and women . . . could easily surpass anything that was dreamed of during the last

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6 FHL to Jerome Frank, et al., June 15, 1942; Robert Moses to FHL, June 4, 1942; FHL to City Planning Commission, Sept. 15, 1942; in SF, “Post-War Building Program,” NYMA.

7 FHL to Claude Pepper, June 4, 1942, SF, “Post-War Building Program,” NYMA.
depression.” Wartime morale studies found that workers expected demobilization to plunge the nation back into economic stagnation. “[They believe everything] is going to be worse after the war,” one study reported. “There won’t be any work, people will be crippled, and in hospitals, and on welfare. Factories will close up, there’ll be nothing to produce.”

Second, the idea of public investment continued to hold strong appeal. As the major world city least stricken by the war and the largest city in the nation that was already beginning to organize the postwar world, New York stood poised to emerge as a truly global metropolis – the capital of the nascent “American century.” The city crackled with energy and anticipation as perhaps at no other point in its history, and New Yorkers were quick to conceive of ways to take advantage of the opportunities that lay at their doorstep. “What we are going to build will be vital to the continuance of the largest and most dynamic city in the world,” La Guardia suggested.

We want to make it an even better City than we have now. We want the workers and their children, the mothers and old people to live more healthful, wholesome lives, and to enjoy more advantages than the present generation. And we want business and industry to operate more efficiently and economically. . . . We have a big program, but it is not too big for the New York which is going to emerge from this war.

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8 Quoted in Milwaukee Journal, Dec. 18, 1944.


10 This end-of-war atmosphere is perhaps best recaptured in Jan Morris, Manhattan ’45 (New York, 1987), 6-12 and passim; also Joshua Freeman, Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II (New York, 2000), 7.

11 La Guardia, “New York’s Postwar Program” (May 1, 1944), SF, “Post-War Building.” NYMA.
La Guardia’s program divided the city’s civic and economic elite. The Citizens Budget Commission fought it tooth-and-nail, arguing that La Guardia’s “grandiose” proposals “threatened the City with financial chaos.”\textsuperscript{12} The Times, on the other hand, lauded the Mayor for “look[ing] forward confidently to great days coming for the community and for America.”\textsuperscript{13} For ordinary New Yorkers, the program represented a way of investing in communities at the neighborhood level, much as the New Deal had done. Once the city began publicizing the program, many New Yorkers learned that the plans included schools within walking distance of their homes and other such contributions to neighborhood life – now presented as community-level rewards in recognition of wartime sacrifice.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, and not least importantly, the idea of a New Deal revival held out a solution to a local problem which seemed all but insoluble: the inadequacy of municipal revenues. In 1941, the Federal Works Agency (into which the PWA and other federal public works agencies had been consolidated) had begun financing the development by local governments of blueprints and working plans which could be activated at the first sign of a postwar downturn to provide jobs and PWA-style stimulus to heavy construction industries. This particular initiative had proven short-lived; Congress defunded it in July 1942 in the interest of devoting more resources to the war effort.\textsuperscript{15} Even


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{NYT}, May 2, 1944.

\textsuperscript{14} See, e.g., Jesse Lewis to FHL, Sept. 2, 1944; FHL to Lewis, Sept. 8, 1944, SF, “Post-War Building,” NYMA; also, Jon C. Teaford, \textit{The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985} (Baltimore, 1990), 39-40.
so, it had seemed to signal the administration’s commitment to the financing of postwar public works. Though he never quite said as much, La Guardia clearly viewed a postwar works program as a way of reinitiating the fiscal relation between the federal government and the municipalities that had existed during the 1930s. He became so committed to the idea of federal spending that he assumed its inevitability when formulating the city’s own budget despite the fact that the national government had supplied funds only for the preparation of blueprints – as an act of prudence, not as a promise. The city’s 1945 capital budget would anticipate federal grants-in-aid nearly equal in many cases to what the city itself planned to spend – ninety-seven percent of the amount allocated by the city for the Board of Higher Education, ninety-two percent for the Department of Health, ninety-one percent for the Department of Hospitals, and so forth.16

Some scholars have viewed this grasp for intergovernmental revenues as an indication that New York had become “addicted” to federal funding during La Guardia’s first two terms.17 And yet it is also the case that intergovernmental aid offered a solution to a vexing structural problem the development of which long predated La Guardia’s mayoralty. The inadequacy of municipal revenues was a product of forces more fundamental than municipal budgetary policy or the exigencies of the Great Depression; its sources belonged to the *longue durée* of American urban political development. Until the early twentieth century, the expansion of municipal governments had been financed

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16 “What This City Expects from Washington for 1945,” *New York Sun*, Nov. 27, 1944.

primarily from revenue produced by property taxes – which is to say, the growth in government was paid for by the growth in urban land values. In the early twentieth century, two developments combined to produce a divergence between urban land values and municipal spending commitments. First, new transportation technologies and capital investment patterns allowed city dwellers to escape the crowded tenement districts and industry to locate outside the city core, producing a downward pressure on central-city property values that became evident as soon as the hot-house metropolitan development of the early twentieth century had ceased. At the same time, the scope of municipal government expanded rapidly during the Progressive Era and beyond; the revolution in how people conceived of the functions of government pushed municipal spending higher even as the course of urban development ate away at what the inherited revenue structure could supply.18

Rapid economic and population growth within the big cities’ political boundaries had obscured the extent of this problem in the teens and twenties; then the Depression had laid it bare. Once the immediate threat of default had passed, city officials had begun to ask more philosophically how they could govern their cities under modern conditions. City dwellers, remarked New Orleans Mayor T. Semmes Walmsley in his presidential address to the 1934 meeting of the Conference of Mayors, demanded “well lighted streets, proper electric traffic regulation, libraries, adequate parks and playgrounds and swimming pools and even zoos” as well as public welfare and public health programs and

18 The New Deal, as we have seen, contributed to the structural expansion of municipal expenditures – through the growth of the parks and recreation system, the municipal hospital system, et cetera. The expansion of the public sphere during the 1930s was also a significant (but secondary) contributing factor in the attenuation of the tax base: the increase in tax-exempt property in New York between FY 1935 and FY 1946-1947 accounted for 13.1 percent of the decrease in the assessed value of taxable property during that period.
many other services and amenities besides. And yet the very basis upon which those services would be provided was deteriorating. “The crying need of the hour,” Walmsley proclaimed, “is **stable revenues** for municipal governments” – a source of financing that would enable cities to meet the demands imposed upon them by the modern social conception of city government in the face of the decline of urban property values.\(^{19}\)

The New Deal work relief and public works programs had acted as a surrogate for urban fiscal reform. By channeling resources through municipal departments, they had enabled local governments to continue to grow as they had in the pre-Depression decades – had allowed some departments to grow much *more* quickly – despite the stabilization or decline of urban populations and the attenuation of municipal revenue bases. Once those programs were phased out, it became evident how dire New York City’s fiscal situation was. The strong economic recoveries of the mid-1930s and the 1940s did not spell relief for New York; the assessed valuation of the city’s real estate continued to fall, declining every year of La Guardia’s mayoralty but one, and dropping by a cumulative total of nearly thirty-eight percent during La Guardia’s twelve years in office.

Given this reality, how was a modern city government to be financed? La Guardia, and the mayors of many other older Northeastern and Midwestern cities facing similar conditions, could choose from among three options: they could reduce expenditures to fit with declining revenues; they could raise new revenues by increasing local taxes or creating new ones; and they could seek to bring in more revenue from state and federal governments. Beginning in Fiscal Year 1942-1943, his first budget after Pearl Harbor, La Guardia did reduce municipal spending sharply. Leaves of absence

taken by civil service workers to join the war effort and rapidly falling expenditures on relief, capital improvements (curtailed because of war priorities on building materials), and education (a product of the remarkably low birthrate during the worst years of the Great Depression) allowed La Guardia to cut deeply into the budget. As a result of this wartime economization, New York’s first budget in the postwar era was more than nine percent smaller in real terms than La Guardia’s first budget. But in a larger sense, La Guardia did not really seek to restrain municipal spending. Though his was not a high-spending administration by latter-day standards – indeed, the low cost of labor in the Depression decade enabled him to provide progressive government on the cheap – he did not jettison municipal functions; rather, he added to them. It was simply antithetical to La Guardia’s vision of progressive municipal government to cut too deeply into the functions and activities of city government.

The Little Flower had only mixed success convincing the state legislature to bestow new taxing powers upon the city. In 1941, the state permitted New York to use surplus funds gathered from the emergency relief taxes for welfare functions other than relief, such as hospitals, old-age assistance, child welfare, and veterans’ pensions. But La Guardia promptly squandered this new revenue source, requesting in advance of the 1941 municipal election that the sales tax be cut in half, from two percent to one percent (a suggestion which prompted one Democratic assemblyman to remark that he did not trust the Little Flower “as far as I can throw a piano”).

In 1943, when La Guardia went back

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20 The fact that New York’s budget shrank substantially in real terms during La Guardia’s mayoralty has escaped some historians. Fred Siegel, for instance, notes that city expenditures grew in absolute terms by more than forty percent during La Guardia’s mayoralty; he does not note that, during the same period, inflation decreased the value of the dollar by more than fifty-five percent – an omission best described as sleight of hand. (Fred Siegel, The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and the Fate of America’s Big Cities [New York, 1997], 27.)
to Albany to plead for the restoration of the two-percent sales tax and additional taxing powers, “[a]ssertions were made to the effect that the Mayor had . . . repeatedly hoodwinked the legislature,” and the request was denied. 22 Thereafter, local taxes became enmeshed with the question of the subway fare. Full municipalization of the subway system in 1941 bestowed upon the city an annual deficit that by the mid-1940s had reached $40 million. Liberals and leftists argued that the subway should be fully socialized, financed out of the property values it did so much to improve rather than operated from user fees; conservatives, among whose ranks were numbered many of the original Fusionists, argued that the system should be placed on a self-sustaining “business” basis. La Guardia refused to advocate for a higher fare, noting that the vast majority of city residents opposed it. But his alternative, an elaborate package which included a controversial commuter tax (in the form of a payroll tax on workers who lived outside the city), got nowhere. 23 “It is easier to exchange prisoners of war with an enemy country,” the Mayor lamented to a congressional committee on postwar planning, than it was to negotiate revenue reform in Albany. 24 Only after the war, during the mayoralties of William O’Dwyer, Robert F. Wagner, Jr., and John Lindsay, would the state legislature authorize extensive new local taxation.

21 Quoted in Kessner, Fiorello H. La Guardia, 556.


23 See esp. Heckscher, When La Guardia Was Mayor, 295, 343-345, 377-379; also NYT, July 3-4, 1944, Feb. 12, 1945. For a general overview of subway policy during and shortly after La Guardia’s mayoralty, see Clifton Hood, 722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York (New York, 1993), 224-248. For the liberal-left position on subway finance, see, e.g., “Our Town’s Living Room,” NYP, July 5, 1944.

This left the alternative of intergovernmental revenue – La Guardia’s preferred alternative, not only because it was politically the easiest, but also because he preferred it as a matter of policy. He believed that the social problems that drove the cost of modern government were national in origin and local in effect, and that it was therefore the duty of the national government to protect what he called the “enlightened” states and localities from the risk of capital disinvestment that came with heavy state and local taxation. Beginning in the early 1940s, he called for the federal government to collect all taxes and “then proceed to allow due credit to each State” – a policy of centralized collection which faced insurmountable political barriers.\textsuperscript{25} There remained the compelling memory of the New Deal, and this was what guided La Guardia as he made his plans for the postwar city. The New Deal had permitted La Guardia to realize his own vision of progressive city government, and he could not in the end imagine any viable alternative.  

In September 1941, La Guardia tasked the City Planning Commission (under Moses’s direction) with assembling a shelf of blueprints and working drawings. The city prepared plans so vigorously that it was accused of “hoarding” technicians needed in the war effort.\textsuperscript{26} By mid-1942, the City Planning Commission had collected plans for $628 million in construction projects. The program included ninety-four playgrounds, 6,600 acres of park land, sixty new elementary and secondary schools (as well as additions to many existing ones), ten new health centers and nine substations, three new hospitals and several laboratories, a new science building for Queens College and a new student center.


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{NYP}, Aug. 7, 1942.
and auditorium for Brooklyn College, a large wholesale produce market to be located on the lower west side of Manhattan, six Hudson River piers and a new terminal facility at the foot of Atlantic Avenue, thirteen public housing projects (to be financed by the state’s housing program), the completion of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel (which had been started in 1940 but had been stalled by the war), and an assortment of highways, including early plans for Robert Moses’s Cross-Bronx, Midtown Manhattan, and Lower Manhattan expressways.27 (The largest public works project La Guardia launched during the war, Idlewild Airport, proceeded independent of the City Planning Commission’s oversight.) La Guardia and Moses rushed the plans along, paying little heed to urban planners who urged them to relate the program to a comprehensive plan for the city’s future growth. By V-J Day more projects had been added and the cost of the program had grown to $1.25 billion.

By that time, La Guardia had become the leading voice in the nation for a postwar public works program. In mid-1942 he had told those he invited to serve on his postwar planning committee that he “plan[ned] to have committees in other cities organized, taking up the same problems. . . .”28 This, of course, was beyond his power, but the Little Flower could and did use the U.S. Conference of Mayors and his own contacts with other mayors (a great many of whom shared his worries about postwar unemployment) to form a strong lobby in support of federal financing for a postwar public works program.29


28 FHL to Jerome Frank, et al., June 15, 1942.

Roosevelt, who was committed to domestic postwar planning but did not wish to devote much time or political capital to it, used La Guardia as a spokesman – much as he once had done with the New Deal works programs. When the city circulated an illustrated magazine in early 1943 depicting the new schools, public health facilities, parks, and highways it expected to build in the postwar years, Roosevelt wrote La Guardia expressing his hope that other cities and states would “follow New York’s example,” and that “upon the basis of the pioneering done in New York in this field, the Congress will be more inclined” to supply federal aid for detailed plan preparation.\footnote{FDR to FHL, Mar. 1, 1943.} La Guardia read the letter on his Sunday radio broadcast, printed it in city publications, quoted it in correspondence with congressmen, and espoused its contents before numerous congressional hearings.\footnote{FHL to New York Congressional delegation, et al., Dec. 9, 1944; FHL, “New York City’s Postwar Program,” in City Planning Commission, Proposed Post-War Works Program (May, 1944); all in SF, “Post-War Building,” NYMA; Harry R. Betters, ed., City Problems of 1943-1944: The Annual Proceedings of the United States Conference of Mayors (Washington, 1944), 31; Stephen Early to FHL, Mar. 5, 1943, PPF 1376, FDSL; \textit{SB}, Mar. 7, 1943.}

As victory in the war began to appear imminent, La Guardia testified repeatedly (and increasingly stridently) in favor of federal appropriations, not only for blueprints, but also for construction. Before Pearl Harbor he had told a Senate subcommittee: “Ask me who is going to finance these public works afterwards – I am probably as well informed as anyone in this country, and the answer is, ‘I don’t know.’ Nobody knows, gentlemen; nobody knows.”\footnote{\textit{Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor . . . on S. 1617 . . .}, Senate, 77\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., 143.} By the last year of the war, his position was that the
federal government would have to pay seventy-five percent of the cost of working plans and fifty percent of the cost of construction.\textsuperscript{33}

These arguments proved less than compelling to the majority of the 79\textsuperscript{th} Congress. Some members of the congressional conservative coalition that exercised an effective veto on taxation and spending policy during the war years doubted that postwar public works would be necessary (and some believed that public construction would compete with private construction for scarce building materials). Others believed that cities and states would emerge from the war “in better fiscal shape than the federal government,” which would bear the burden of paying down the war debt. But above all, they, like La Guardia, saw a postwar works program as an opening wedge for a restoration of the New Deal intergovernmental spending state they had fought so resolutely to dismantle.\textsuperscript{34}

As it happened, mass unemployment did not materialize after the war; inflation rather than unemployment emerged as the central problem of the reconversion period, removing the basic premise upon which Roosevelt, La Guardia, and others had pitched their appeals for a federal public works program. Ultimately, Congress provided only categorical grants for the construction of particular types of local public works projects – highways, hospitals, public health facilities. When federal urban spending did return in the 1950s, it would be directed at “urban renewal” projects meant to assist local officials in their efforts to create facilities and institutions capable of anchoring the middle classes in their cities. The New Deal works programs had increased the public wealth, operating outside the sphere of private capital; prior to Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, postwar

\textsuperscript{33} Hearings Before the Special Committee on Postwar Economic Policy and Planning . . . Pursuant to H. Res. 408 and H. Res. 60 . . . Part 6 . . . , House, 79\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., 1710-1711, 1718, 1722.

federal urban policy would seek to employ private capital as a partner to produce both
private goods (e.g., private housing) and quasi-public ones (facilities for “third sector”
institutions such as private hospitals, universities, and performing arts venues). But as
New Deal-style public investment dwindled, state and local officials would be prepared
to move into the vacancy.

II

The same desire to kindle national policy innovation was evident in perhaps the
most novel undertaking of La Guardia’s final term – his establishment of a quasi-public
system of prepaid medical care. National health insurance, tabled during the
deliberations of the Committee on Economic Security in 1934-1935, emerged during the
war years as a major front in the progressive fight for social and economic security, in no
small measure because medical costs were climbing so rapidly that serious illness now
threatened middle-class as well as working-class family budgets. Health care appeared
prominently in Roosevelt’s famous 1944 message to Congress articulating a “second bill
of rights” – among which he enumerated the “right to adequate medical care and the
opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health”35 – and there is good evidence that
Roosevelt was “ready to go on health insurance,” as Hopkins wrote an acquaintance, as
soon as the exigencies of war permitted. In the interim, Senator Wagner had introduced a
national, comprehensive, government-directed program of prepaid medical care as one

part of the Wagner-Murray-Dingell social security bill of 1943. And pending national action, state and local officials launched public health insurance experiments of their own – notable among them, California Governor Earl Warren’s proposal for a compulsory program of prepaid health coverage for families of workers making $2500 or less (about two-thirds of California families).36

La Guardia had been studying public health insurance since at least 1928, when, like scores of American social policy progressives before him, he had made a personal study of the German health insurance system.37 In April 1943, two months before Wagner introduced his bill in the U.S. Senate, La Guardia appointed a committee of city officials, health policy experts, unionists, businessmen, doctors, and health industry representatives to develop recommendations for the city’s own health care program. As with Wagner-Murray-Dingell, the primary motive was economic security: a serious illness or a major operation, La Guardia explained in the radio talk announcing the formation of the committee, “sets the average family’s budget back not only months but sometimes for years.” Estimating that the cost of medical care had gone up between 350 and 400 percent during his tenure in office, he cited studies which showed that thirty percent of small, high-interest loans in the city went toward medical bills and another which estimated that sixty percent of families that went into debt did so for health-related


reasons. But La Guardia also made a rights-based argument for a public health care program. Everyone, he said, was entitled to the best medical care available; he believed it was a function of government to develop a “sufficiently economical distribution” of care such that everyone could have access to it.  

La Guardia’s committee designed a program of voluntary prepaid comprehensive coverage on the group-practice model, to be administered by a non-profit organization. The program’s contours reflected both its designers’ policy preferences and the many constraints they faced. La Guardia liked the idea of comprehensive coverage, and health policy experts liked the fact that prepayment encouraged preventive medicine, because subscribers did not have to pay an extra charge for physicals and routine checkups. The Mayor would have preferred an “open-panel” system, perhaps sensing that people preferred to be able to visit whatever physician they liked; but the opposition of the county medical societies to government health insurance precluded the possibility. Making a virtue of necessity, La Guardia embraced what he called “team-work medicine”: group practice on the model of the innovative Mayo Clinic, organized not around individual providers but around teams of general practitioners and specialists (akin to modern health maintenance organizations). These groups of physicians were compensated according to the “capitation” model: their pay was based on the number of patients in their care, rather than the number of services they provided – a payment structure that tended to contain costs. Individuals were required to join as part of a group

– a union, a fraternal lodge – in order to ensure that high-risk people did not flood the pool.39

Health insurance was a new policy frontier for municipal government. But as La Guardia presented it, the plan represented a logical extension of the New Deal public investment state. Now, rather than investing public money, the city was enabling families to invest in their own health. “[A] man earning $2,500 to $3,000 a year would pay $4 or $5 a month and would know that his whole family could get, whenever needed, the services of a general practitioner either in the home, office, or hospital; all specialist services, X-rays, laboratory tests, and other diagnostic procedures; major and minor surgery; maternity care, pediatrics; hospitalization; and, perhaps most important of all, continuing preventive medicine to keep the family healthy.”40 As it had in the 1930s, the government was making available a useful service private industry had failed to provide.

The plan had only one group of opponents, but it would turn out to be an important one: the county medical societies. These organized providers opposed the plan in part because it proposed to vest operational control in a board of directors, among whom laymen would outnumber physicians, and in part because they opposed any challenge to traditional fee-for-service medicine. They also feared the plan would make their compensation subject to political pressure. Because La Guardia’s plan had no precedent, no data existed to establish the actuarial tables; the four-percent deduction figure La Guardia had proposed was in this sense arbitrary, and with that number already


40 FHL to the Editors, Fortune, Jan., 1945, 10, 18.
fixed, physicians feared their income would become “the unknown $x$ in the equation,” as one New York practitioner put it.\footnote{“La Guardia versus Organized Medicine,” \textit{Medical Economics}, June, 1944, 50-51; Starr, \textit{The Social Transformation of American Medicine}, 299.}

In the short term, La Guardia had little difficulty surmounting the opposition of organized providers. When the county medical societies attempted to limit participation in the program to those earning $2500$ a year or less, which would have restricted participation to the working classes, La Guardia went public with his own figure of $5000$ – which permitted the program to reach well into the middle classes. He unveiled the plan in April, 1944, in a brilliant radio talk; it quickly gained strong public support as well as backing from newspapers, big businessmen, financiers, most of the unions, medical schools, and the public health profession. Albany approved the charter, and the Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York (HIP) was incorporated in September of 1944 by an assemblage of labor leaders, civic reformers, liberal big businessmen, and financiers, joined by the Catholic prelates, by Henry J. Kaiser (whose own prepaid group practice plan, Kaiser Permanente, was something of an analogue to HIP), and by leading politicians (including Wendell Willkie and Al Smith, neither of whom would live to see it in operation).\footnote{“Meeting in Mayor’s Office, April 24, 1944”; David Dubinsky to FHL, May 8, 1944; Michael Neylan to FHL, May 5, 1944; FHL to Arthur Hays Sulzberger, May 2, 1944; John J. Lamula to FHL, May 29, 1944; in SF, “Health Insurance Plan,” NYMA; \textit{NYT}, Sept. 4, 1944. Lamula, a state assemblyman from Brooklyn’s 1st A.D., made a survey of his district and found only two out of five hundred people asked about the plan disapproved of it.}

La Guardia conceived of HIP as a stopgap until national compulsory health insurance was passed: in this sense, the program represented an instance of what scholars have recently taken to calling “compensatory federalism” – a scenario in which
subnational officials dissatisfied with national policy are able to “step into the breach.”

But he also intended HIP to be a demonstration of how government-sponsored health insurance could work. Thus the program also embodied a Progressive Era conception of subnational units as “laboratories” whose experiments could provide information to other governments. New York City could do for health insurance, La Guardia seemed to suggest, what Wisconsin had done for unemployment insurance and what New York State had done for work relief: it could demonstrate the feasibility and the desirability of comprehensive, government-sponsored health insurance, perhaps insulating federal officials from the claim that government health insurance was impractical, radical, or unwanted. “Everything must have a beginning,” he explained; “I am perfectly willing to be guinea-pigged if only we can get it started in this country.”

Though quick in many instances to note that local voluntary health insurance was not the same as national compulsory health insurance, proponents of national health insurance, especially liberals and unionists, understood La Guardia’s plan the same way the Mayor did. Brooklyn Congressman Emanuel Celler wrote that he hoped HIP would “needle” the federal government into “responding more quickly to the demands of the people. . . .” HIP accorded with the national CIO’s policy of encouraging local medical cooperatives and non-profit insurance plans, and so trade unionists and American Labor Party leaders were quick to speak of La Guardia’s program as “the beginning of a nationwide movement,” a “stepping stone” to national health insurance, and the “stimulus that

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43 On compensatory federalism, see Martha Derthick’s essay in Barry G. Rabe, *Greenhouse Governance: Addressing Climate Change in America* (Washington, 2010), chap. 3.

44 “Medical Care Plan of the City of New York”; *NYT*, Oct. 6, 1944; FHL to the Editors, *Fortune*, Jan., 1945, 10, 18.

45 Celler to FHL, May 6, 1944, SF, “Health Insurance Plan,” NYMA.
will make the Wagner-Murray-Dingell Social Security Bill the law of the land.” The *American Journal of Public Health* wrote that La Guardia’s plan represented “the first large-scale attempt to work out in detail the local machinery which is essential to the success of any state or federal program of prepaid care.” Both organized labor and the medical societies took to referring to HIP as “the ‘baby Wagner bill.’”

In retrospect, one is struck by the distance between these statements and the reality of what La Guardia had proposed. HIP never was a “baby Wagner bill”; it differed in kind from the national compulsory health insurance envisioned in Wagner-Murray-Dingell, not least because a voluntary program of its type could do relatively little to socialize the cost of medical care. And even had HIP gotten underway smoothly, which it did not, one might just as easily have viewed it as an alternative to the Wagner bill rather than a stepping stone to national compulsory insurance – as an illustration of the adequacy of voluntary non-profit prepaid insurance. In fact, HIP more closely resembled the compromise proposals put forward by liberal Republicans (including a young Richard Nixon) in 1947 and 1948 which would have created “a locally controlled, government-subsidized, private nonprofit insurance system, with premiums scaled to subscribers’ incomes” than it did Wagner and Truman’s proposals for a full national health insurance program.

And yet if HIP was not, strictly speaking, a government program, it was decidedly public: its goals and structure had been established by an elected official, who created an

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46 “La Guardia versus Organized Medicine,” 48; James V. King to FHL, May 18, 1944; Martin Cody to FHL, May 8, 1944; Samuel Neuberger to FHL, June 22, 1944; in SF, “Health Insurance Plan,” NYMA; Klein, *For All These Rights*, 160. See also Health Council Digest (a publication affiliated with the ALP), Vol. 1, No. 4 (Fall, 1944); Hyman Blumberg to FHL, May 3, 1944; Joseph Curran and Saul Mills to FHL, May 3, 1944; and an undated press release of the New York City Consumers’ Council; all in SF, “Health Insurance Plan,” NYMA; and “Our Town,” NYP, Sept. 12, 1944.

organizational structure which gave public interests precedence over those of organized providers and private insurance corporations. As such, it represented one of the most ambitious of a series of labor- and community-based efforts in the 1930s and 1940s, of which Wagner and Truman’s proposals were the apogee, to “remove health care from the realm of corporations, insular elite professional control, and private markets.”

This public character stood out in the 1940s, when medical societies and private insurance companies were hastily creating voluntary, private insurance plans to head off a governmental program. Together with the city’s singular system of municipal hospitals and its new network of community health centers, HIP gave New York a remarkably broad (quasi-) public health provision system. Together with the health centers created by the city’s unions, these institutions would give health provision in postwar New York a distinctive profile – more group-based, more committed to preventive medicine, less governed by private markets and the profit motive than that which was developing in the nation as a whole.

By the time Roosevelt was sworn in for the fourth and final time in January 1945, New York was aflutter with speculation about La Guardia’s intentions to seek a fourth

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48 Klein, *For All These Rights*, 118.

term of his own. La Guardia pronounced himself bemused by the newspapers’ earnest analyses of the cryptic signals the impish mayor was feeding them. “[If] I say I must repair my glasses since they are getting loose, and I am going to need them for a long time, the next day they say ‘Mayor indicates he is going to run for office,’” he quipped. “Or, if I reach over and say I do not have much tobacco but it will do, they say, ‘Mayor indicates he may not run for office.’”

In fact, La Guardia’s prospects for a fourth term were dimming: his coalition was falling apart. By the end of March it was clear that he could not win the Republican nomination. Dewey might have been willing to run La Guardia again in order to help the party maintain control of the state in 1946, but local party leaders believed that even the Governor’s endorsement could not get the Little Flower through the Republican primary. After surveying his assembly district leaders, New York county chairman Thomas Curran, a Dewey ally, explained that his organization could not hold the lines well enough in a primary to offset the likely deficit in vehemently anti-La Guardia Queens. Thus did La Guardia’s stormy career as a Republican finally come to an end, not because the organization had rejected him, but because he could not survive a Republican primary – the very institution he had first broken with the party to defend.

La Guardia might still have launched a third-party bid but for the scission of the American Labor Party. The divisions between anti-Communist and Popular Frontist elements that had racked the party since the late 1930s exploded in 1944 when Sidney Hillman, who had not been heavily involved in the party’s affairs since 1936, proposed to reform the party’s institutional structure with the objective of broadening its membership.

50 Heckscher, When La Guardia Was Mayor, 388-389; NYT, Jan. 15, 1945.

51 NYT, Mar. 15, 22, Apr. 14, 22, 1945.
Hillman was moved by a desire to staunch the rightward turn of the early war years; the 77th Congress had presided over the dismantling of much of the mid-1930s New Deal – the WPA, the National Youth Administration, the Farm Security Administration, the National Resources Planning Board – and had also passed the Smith-Connally Act, the first successful conservative attack on the labor regime created by the Norris-La Guardia Act and the Wagner Act. This drift away from the “social democratic vistas of the mid-1930s was alarming in the extreme to Hillman,” his biographer Steve Fraser writes, and it launched him into a frenzy of political organizing as he sought to mobilize the “latent political and electoral strength of the CIO into a mighty machine for the salvation of Roosevelt and what was left of the New Deal.”

Hillman proposed that all trade unions in New York State be invited to affiliate with the party “and to pay it a per capita tax based upon their membership within the State. All matters of party policy [would] be determined by the vote of representatives of the participating trade unions, based upon their per capita tax payments to the party.”

By increasing the representation of the CIO unions in the state party machinery, the “Hillman plan” would have elevated some Communists and fellow travelers to positions of power, for these elements were powerful within the Greater New York CIO and its member unions. Right-wing union leaders understood the Hillman plan as a threat to non-Communist control of the party. Convinced that the ALP would lose both its independence and its broader liberal appeal were it to “merge” with the Communist

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52 Fraser, Labor Will Rule, 500-506.
53 NYT, Aug. 30, 1943.
54 The following account is constructed primarily from daily press coverage: see esp. NYT, Jan. 8, 11, 13, 21, Feb. 18, Mar. 2, 4, 10, 14, 23-24, 28-31, 1944; also, Garrett, The La Guardia Years, 293-294.
Party, they rejected the Hillman plan – which in turn prompted the left-wingers to declare their intention to oust the anti-Communists from control of the state committee in a March 1944 party primary.

Both the White House and City Hall were alarmed at the prospect of a split, and both sought to arrange a compromise. A week before the primary, La Guardia announced his own plan “for restoring peace within the American Labor Party,” the core of which was a repudiation of “any [form] of organization based on numerical membership” and a compromise slate of non-Communists for the state executive committee, to which all candidates running in the primary for election to the state committee would be pledged. Despite this repudiation of his own plan, Hillman accepted the compromise unconditionally; the right-wing leaders David Dubinsky and Alex Rose, considering it an evasion of the paramount issue of Communist infiltration of the state committee, rejected it. The left-wingers scored a smashing primary victory, carrying eighty percent of the state committee seats and securing control of the Bronx County organization, the anti-Communists’ last stronghold within the five boroughs. Dubinsky fumed that La Guardia was “in large measure responsible.”

The next day the right-wingers withdrew from the ALP. They soon formed their own party, the Liberal Party, taking with them a disproportionately Jewish, disproportionately middle-class section of the ALP. The scission of the ALP cost La Guardia a certain number of votes; barring a dramatic about-face, the Liberal Party and the Ladies Garment Workers would align against him. But it also had a broader impact on the organizational landscape of city politics. By splitting the needle trades unions’

55 NYT, Mar. 23, 1944.
56 NYT, Mar. 31, 1944.
organizational strength, it made a labor-based coalition, difficult to begin with, practically impossible. And it provided crucial organizational support to the Democratic Party. By making it possible for the Democracy to claim some labor party support, it allowed a party which had topped out at about forty-five percent of the city vote to forge a majority coalition, thereby changing the basic arithmetic of electoral competition in the city.57

La Guardia, then, had been cut off from the Republican Party and the Liberal Party. He had only the ALP, the remnants of the deteriorated Fusion movement, and his own personal popularity with which to confront a Democratic opposition rendered far more potent by the labor party split. This was the situation when Roosevelt died in April, struck by a massive brain hemorrhage as he was sitting for a portrait in Warm Springs. News of the President’s death reached New York just before six in the evening, as the city was on its way home from work; many people learned of it as they ascended the stairs of the subway. Disbelief was followed by an outpouring of public grief and a period of bereavement and eulogizing (including La Guardia’s own, a short extemporaneous tribute over WNYC).58 Three weeks later, La Guardia, aware of the odds against him, tired of the mayoralty, and increasingly worried about his health – he was suffering constant pain in his lower back and now kept a bottle of pain pills on his


58 E.g., NYP, Apr. 13, 1945; NYT, Apr. 13, 1945.
desk at City Hall\textsuperscript{59} – announced over WNYC, to the city’s surprise, that he would not seek a fourth term. The announcement, the \textit{Herald Tribune} wrote, epitomized La Guardia’s time in office – “it was annoying, it was gracious, it was entertaining and courageous.”\textsuperscript{60}

La Guardia’s coalition split three ways in the 1945 campaign. The “New Deal” component – most of the unions, the ALP, the CIO-PAC and its sister organization the NCPAC, the \textit{New York Post}, and national figures like Henry Wallace, Henry Morgenthau, and Eleanor Roosevelt – endorsed the Democratic candidate, William O’Dwyer, who had emerged in the months before Roosevelt’s death as something of a presidential favorite. Some, like Sidney Hillman, saw in O’Dwyer “a fitting successor to Mayor La Guardia”\textsuperscript{61}; others, like Eleanor Roosevelt, viewed the 1945 mayoral election as “a fight for control by the people as against control by certain powerful groups.”\textsuperscript{62} The Republican Party and the Liberal Party nominated the reputable and popular Court of General Sessions Judge Jonah Goldstein, an Al Smith protégé and a Walker appointee, thus finally consummating the nearly decade-long flirtation between Tammany and the GOP – though Goldstein’s nomination evidently owed less to the ideological conservatism that had underpinned the GOP-Tammany link in the late-thirties than it did to Dewey’s desire to make a gesture to Jewish voters before the 1946 state campaign.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{59} Ickes diary, Feb. 26, 1944 (p. 8676); Reminiscences of Reuben Lazarus, CCOHC, 207; Chris McNickle, \textit{To Be Mayor of New York: Ethnic Politics in the City} (New York, 1993), 54; Newbold Morris, \textit{Let The Chips Fall: My Battles Against Corruption} (New York, 1955), 204.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{NYT}, May 7, 1945; \textit{NYHT}, May 7, 1945.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{NYT}, June 27, 1945.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{NYT}, Aug. 10, 1945.
La Guardia considered endorsing O’Dwyer but instead encouraged City Council President Newbold Morris, a moderate silk-stocking Republican who had served frequently as acting mayor during La Guardia’s absences from the city and had emerged as something of a Fusion heir apparent, to run on a third-party ticket – dubbed by a less-than-inspired Little Flower the “No Deal” ticket. La Guardia made several stirring radio broadcasts on Morris’s behalf, conjuring up the city as he had found it in 1933: “hospitals without supplies, blackboards without chalk; judgments for millions against the city for land sold by politicians; assessments high and services low; incompetency in office, political clubs assessing payrolls, hungry people in lines before political clubs for an okay in order to obtain food stamps that could be cashed only at politically selected grocery stores at ten to fifteen per cent discount. . . .”\(^{64}\)

O’Dwyer triumphed with fifty-seven percent of the vote (forty-four percent on the Democratic line and thirteen percent on the ALP line) to Goldstein’s twenty-two percent (fifteen percent Republican, six percent Liberal, and one percent City Fusion) and Morris’s twenty-one percent. Morris ran strongest in Midtown Manhattan, on the Upper East Side, and in Flatbush, his support coming overwhelmingly from the affluent good-government element of La Guardia’s coalition. O’Dwyer’s vote was an amalgam of Roosevelt’s from 1932 and 1940, resembling the former more than the latter. He ran strongest in the working-class Irish and Italian neighborhoods that had been the backbone


\(^{64}\) Quoted in “Text of Mayor’s Talk for Morris,” NYT, Oct. 17, 1945. See esp. NYHT, Nov. 7, 1945; Morris, Let the Chips Fall, 207; NYT, Sept. 28, 1945; Garrett, The La Guardia Years, 295-296; Kessner, Fiorello H. La Guardia, 571; Moscow, Politics in the Empire State, 28.
of the Democratic Party before the New Deal but which by the 1940s had begun to leave the Roosevelt coalition – Greenwich Village, East Harlem, the South Brooklyn waterfront, and Mott Haven. He ran twenty or thirty points behind Roosevelt’s 1944 vote on the Upper West Side and the Lower East Side, in Coney Island and Bensonhurst, Midwood, Brownsville, East New York, the Grand Concourse, Hunts Point, Morrisania and Tremont – all strongly pro-Roosevelt, pro-La Guardia neighborhoods, where large minorities cast their ballots for the (Jewish) Liberal Party candidate, Judge Goldstein or, in the case of the more affluent Upper West Side, for Newbold Morris.\textsuperscript{65}

The La Guardia biographer and one-time New York City Parks Commissioner August Heckscher has described the 1945 campaign as an unworthy end for New York’s Fusion movement.\textsuperscript{66} But Fusion by 1945 was a ghost; and given what had developed in its place – an extraordinarily disparate coalition of laborite social democracy, good-government reform, and Republican partisanship, forged during the New Deal and held together by La Guardia’s leadership – could it have ended any other way?

V

On New Year’s Day, 1946, control of City Hall passed into Democratic hands for the first time in a dozen years. There it would remain for the next twenty. The depth of institutional and political change enabled by the New Deal ensured that there would be no

\textsuperscript{65} Spinrad, “New Yorkers Cast Their Ballots,” though its methodology is both flawed and unsophisticated, remains the best analysis of the 1945 returns.

\textsuperscript{66} Heckscher, \textit{When La Guardia Was Mayor}, 400.
simple restoration of the old Democratic regime; instead, O’Dwyer and his successors would move to accommodate many of the political forces which had been central to La Guardia’s coalition – organized labor, professional civil servants, reform-minded liberals. (Democrats would also take advantage of the postwar anti-Communism hysteria to marginalize the most powerful independent leftist forces in city politics, including the ALP and the Communist Party.) Though riddled with fault lines and plagued by defections, this postwar Democratic coalition would hold together until the nineteen sixties, serving as the primary vessel for what came to be called “New York liberalism.”67

There would be no postwar revival of the New Deal intergovernmental public investment state. Direct federal-municipal relations of the sort pioneered in the early thirties would endure; and co-functionality across the federal system would remain a basic feature of American governance. But notwithstanding a few targeted grant-in-aid programs, the national government would withdraw its fiscal resources from local governments. At the peak of the New Deal, federal spending on projects sponsored by New York’s municipal departments had totaled more than thirty percent of the city’s annual budget.68 In the postwar decade, that figure fell dramatically; as late as Fiscal


68 See TABLE 3.3, chap. 3.
Year 1965-1966, federal contributions would make up only 6.8 percent of the city’s yearly expenditures.\textsuperscript{69}

Probably never again would New York’s elected officials command as large a share of the city’s resources at they had in the thirties. Figure 8.1 illustrates the municipality’s control of one basic resource: labor. During the heyday of the New Deal, more than one in eleven New York City workers had worked for the city – either directly, or on a WPA project. By the mid-fifties, that number would be about one in seventeen. This reallocation of manpower from the public sector to the private sector would impoverish the former even as the latter flourished; it was surely with the baseline of the nineteen thirties in mind that the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, in one of the signal works of the postwar era, pointed to the decay of New York’s municipal services as a conspicuous symbol of “public squalor” amidst “private opulence.”\textsuperscript{70} Even at the height of postwar prosperity, the passing of the New Deal would be evident in the shabbiness of New York’s parks, in the cracks proliferating in its sidewalks, and in the languishing of the social and cultural community improvement projects which had been as central to the urban New Deal as La Guardia Airport and the Triborough Bridge. Many New Yorkers might have shared the Italian American educator Leonard Covello’s 1958 lament: “It is ironical but true that the years of the great depression and immediately following were the most productive in our Benjamin Franklin [High School] experiment. Because of the unemployment situation, many capable WPA workers worked without cost to us on our

\textsuperscript{69} [Staff of the NYHT], \textit{New York City in Crisis} (New York, 1965), 78.

\textsuperscript{70} John Kenneth Galbraith, \textit{The Affluent Society} (Boston, 1958), chap. 17.
numerous community programs. Bitter irony indeed! Workers in a depression made possible what today is practically out of the question."\(^{71}\)

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**Figure 6.1:** Total municipal workers (including WPA workers) in New York City per thousand residents, 1937-1956. Municipal personnel data, which exclude teachers, may be found in Clarence Ridley, Orin Nolting, et al., eds., *The Municipal Yearbook*, published annually. WPA data may be found in Federal Works Administration, Work Projects Administration, *Report on the Progress of the WPA Program, June 30, 1939* (Washington, 1939), 158-159; and FWA, *Report on the Progress . . . , June 30, 1941*, 103.

And yet even as the alphabet agencies of the 1930s faded into memory, New York’s local New Deal would seem to continue. Forced to build alliances with organized labor and the third parties and to appeal to an electorate whose conceptions of the local state had been shaped by the experiences of the 1930s and 1940s, the Democrats who governed postwar New York would continue to extend the city’s public sector, following

the blueprint drawn by Roosevelt and La Guardia. During his 1949 reelection campaign, O’Dwyer would point to the number of new schools, housing units, hospitals, day care centers, health stations, parks, and playgrounds his administration had built. Four years later, when Vincent Impellitteri sought the Democratic nomination, he would emphasize his public construction record and his efforts to eradicate social diseases and limit water pollution. Wagner, whom the Democrats chose over Impellitteri that year, would build his campaign around the cost of rental housing, accusing the Republican Party of being too lax in its administration of rent control. Drawing upon the wealth that accrued in the city as the postwar “headquarters economy” developed – per capita personal income (in 1967 dollars) would grow from $2422 in 1940 to $3722 in 1965 – the city and state would construct and open new schools, hospitals, middle-class and low-rent housing units, day care centers, health stations, and parks and playgrounds; expand the city’s public health programs and extend its municipal broadcasting system; and protect rent control. In so doing, they would fill, at least in part, the social-political vacancy left by the withdrawal of federal resources in the late thirties and early forties, sustaining in New York a public sector which stood apart in the American experience, the very symbol of American urban liberalism.

The institutional, political, and cultural legacies of the New Deal had left a profound tension at the heart of the city’s politics. In the postwar decades, as New Yorkers utilized the city’s immense wealth to extend the state the New Deal had helped

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72 McNickle, *To Be Mayor of New York*, 76.

73 *NYT*, July 10, 18; Sept. 12, 1953.


build, the conviction that no important problem was outside the sphere of municipal
government helped sustain as ambitious a social politics as urban America has ever seen.
But it also ensured that New York’s political leaders would overextend themselves,
making promises they could not keep. New Yorkers had learned to love a kind of
government that had come into creation under the extraordinary conditions of the New
Deal and which had developed under the singular conditions of mid-century – when New
York was, as never before or since, an exceptionally wealthy city possessing a thriving
port and manufacturing sector, high land values, a remarkably broad middle class, and a
residential population roughly coextensive with its political boundaries. Even in the
postwar decades, the tension between “endless ambitions” and “finite resources” had
been evident in the annual agony of the budget-making process, in the fact that highways
and sidewalks went unrepaired even as new schoolhouses and public apartments
proliferated. When the conditions of affluence that had sustained New York’s local
public sector through the 1960s yielded to the painful restructuring of the 1970s, much of
the remaining political legacy of the New Deal would be undone. In the decades to
come, New York’s civic leaders would seek an alternate model for public investment,
enlisting private partners to fill the role the federal government had abdicated and in
some instances to displace the municipal government itself.

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The period between O’Dwyer’s election and his swearing in offered an opportunity for those whose lives and work had been touched by La Guardia’s mayoralty to pay tribute to the outgoing mayor. Among those who did so were the members of the United States Conference of Mayors, which held its annual meeting in New York in December. At the close of the conference the incoming executive officers presented La Guardia with a new Packard automobile to replace his official city coupe and passed a resolution expressing their gratitude to their outgoing president, whose “matchless knowledge of all levels of government,” “immense prestige in the nation’s capital,” and “willingness to pioneer new modes of government administration” had, they believed, helped America’s big cities weather “a period of incomparable trials and difficulties.” After adjourning, the group made a pilgrimage to Roosevelt’s Hyde Park estate, where La Guardia and Chicago Mayor Edward Kelly placed a wreath on Roosevelt’s grave.  

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