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Book Review: 'A Mayor's Life' by David Dinkins

Mayor David Dinkins was a dapper, genial presence around New York whose one term's achievements included keeping the U.S. Open in the city.

By Edward Kosner
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Despite the candidates' febrile rhetoric during this summer's Democratic mayoral primary campaign, New York City has experienced a golden age over the past two decades unmatched in the memories of even its oldest citizens.

Violent crime is down by more than 75% from the days of the crack plague. Once-forbidding neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, West Harlem and Williamsburg are reborn. Restaurants, theaters and museums are packed. Even the streets are reasonably clean.

Other cities, like Chicago and Detroit, have spiraled into crisis, but New York has thrived despite the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001, and the financial panic of 2008.

A MAYOR'S LIFE

By David N. Dinkins
PublicAffairs, 385 pages, \$29.99



Holding court | David Dinkins waves to supporters in Brooklyn in 1990. © LES STONE/SYGMA/CORBIS

Is there a connection between New York's resurrection and the fact that it has been run these past 20 years by two mayors—the pugnacious prosecutor Rudy Giuliani and the mega-billionaire Michael Bloomberg—utterly alien to the Democratic clubhouses and eyes-on-the-prize labor unions that ushered their predecessors into power?

The direct answer to that question won't be found in "A Mayor's Life," the earnest, sometimes sour memoir by David Dinkins, now 86, the man whose single term (1990-94) in City Hall paved the way for Mr. Giuliani. Still, Mr. Dinkins' story, pointedly subtitled "Governing New York's Gorgeous Mosaic," shows how a leader's disposition and sense of what he is supposed to be doing can shape the destiny of a great city.

Many New Yorkers think of Mr. Dinkins as a Gotham version of Jimmy Carter: intelligent, honest and plainly well-intentioned but ineffectual—more prone to moralistic homilies than the decisive action needed to tame a city on the brink. He is a historic figure as both New York's only African-American mayor and the last product of the once-invincible Democratic machine to make it to City Hall. (Bill de Blasio, the doctrinaire liberal from Brooklyn who got the most votes in last Tuesday's mayoral primary, is no cog in the surviving machine.) Equally fond of tennis whites and black tie, Mr. Dinkins was a dapper, congenial presence around town, in contrast to the ruffled, braying pol he unseated, Ed ("How'm I doin'?") Koch, and the man who defeated him, Mr. Giuliani, whose clenched smile could make Savonarola look like Ronald McDonald.

Yet by the time he left office, Mr. Dinkins had disappointed many of the black voters instrumental in electing him. Orthodox Jewish New Yorkers reviled him. So did the cops, who felt he truckled to mouthy minorities. Wounded and often defensive, the mayor strenuously defends his record in this book and tries to settle scores with Koch, Mr. Giuliani, Gov. Mario Cuomo, the New York Post and others he feels did him wrong. He has a point, but he often inadvertently reinforces his critics' objections.

Mr. Dinkins's back story is as poignant as it is inspiring—especially today, when the future for many poor black children seems so clouded. The son of a one-chair barber and a domestic, he was born in Trenton, N.J., then a thriving if gritty industrial city. His parents split when he was 6, and he lived in Harlem with his mother and grandmother, earning money buying shopping bags three for a nickel and selling them for two cents apiece. After a few years, he moved back to Trenton to live with his father, who had branched out into real estate and insurance and remarried.

The Dinkins lived in a mixed neighborhood. Young David made lifetime friends with boys who would grow up to be federal judges and cabinet officials. He fought Latin in school, worked as a busboy at a white country club, sorted mail and had to study his way past racial hostility into the Marines, although World War II ended before he could serve overseas.

The GI Bill and his stepmother's connections landed him at Howard University, where he discovered an affinity for what he likes to call the Queen's English. At Howard, he met Joyce Burrows, to whom he is still married 62 years later, and joined Alpha Phi Alpha, the oldest black fraternity in the U.S., whose rolls included the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall.

The young Mr. Dinkins easily segued from Howard to Harlem politics. His politically connected father-in-law encouraged him to go to law school and gave him a job clerking nights in his liquor store. Soon Mr. Dinkins was a \$25-a-week member of a black law firm and an eager foot soldier in the neighborhood Democratic club. Over the years, he toiled upward in the machine and got to know the rising generation of liberal African-American pols, like Percy Sutton, Charlie Rangel and Basil Paterson.

By the mid-1970s, he was about to be named a deputy mayor when it was discovered that he hadn't filed his income taxes for three years—the fault of a careless accountant, he claims. Instead, he settled into a happy decade as city clerk, a paper-shuffling sinecure where he oversaw, among other high-powered operations, the marriage bureau. Then in 1985, on the third try, he was elected Manhattan borough president, a satrapy with more sway than it has today.

In 1990, Mr. Dinkins finally reached the top of Gotham's greasy pole. A journey that started with paper bags on a Harlem street corner ended 7 miles south in the mayor's office of New York's shabby-chic City Hall.

The idea was that an African-American mayor would soothe the city's restive blacks and Hispanics and restore a degree of racial harmony after the contentious Koch era. It didn't work out that way. Time and again, Mr. Dinkins found himself preaching peace to crowds stirred up by the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who never met a racial flare-up they couldn't fan into a fiery protest march.

The mayor's first crisis erupted just a few weeks into his term, when a Haitian woman claimed she was beaten by a Korean grocer in Brook-lynd during a complaint over plantains and peppers. The incident was a metaphor for long-standing black complaints of exploitation in their neighborhoods by Asian shopkeepers and Jewish landlords. It quickly turned into an ugly boycott of Korean shops besieged by angry mobs. "I was the city clerk mayor," he writes, "folks were expecting this not to happen on my watch . . . and it got out of hand." The cops failed to restrain the crowds—and the mayor neglected to visit the threatened shopkeeper. "DAVE, DO SOMETHING!" heckled the New York Post—and Mr. Dinkins was indelibly branded a wimp.

Eighteen months later, a Hasidic Jewish man accidentally ran over two black children in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Rioters took over parts of the neighborhood and an Orthodox Jewish student visiting from Australia was stabbed to death by a black teenager. Undermanned and poorly led, the police lost control of the streets—prompting claims that the mayor had muzzled them.

The mayor rushed to the scene, hoisted a bullhorn and tried to pacify the crowd: "Will you listen to me for just a minute, please?" I asked. "No!" they responded. "I care about you—I care about you desperately," I said. "Arrest the Jews," they shouted back.

Crown Heights settled Mayor Dinkins's reputation the way the aborted rescue of the Tehran embassy hostages doomed Jimmy Carter's.

Mr. Dinkins's social-welfare plans for his administration were straight from the New Deal-Great Society playbook. "Social services to the homeless and publicly assisted families," he writes, "would include preventive care, reduction in the ratio of caseworkers to families, child care assistance, life planning and job development," and that's just the top third of his laundry list. Reality soon intervened: A plan to give the homeless priority in city-sponsored housing unleashed a tsunami of citizens who abandoned their homes to get in on the ground floor of the new program.

A budget shortfall bequeathed by Koch scuttled many other initiatives, but Mr. Dinkins can rightly claim credit for some of the first steps that led to the eventual revival of the wounded city. He scrounged up the money to hire thousands of new cops, and violent crime began to fall for the first time in years—although Mr. Giuliani gets most of the credit for the turnaround.

Even so, Mr. Dinkins devotes long chapters to two issues remote from the concerns of most New Yorkers but even closer to his heart than his other accomplishments. One was inducing the U.S. Tennis Association not to move the U.S. Open out of New York and to expand its Flushing facility instead. The other was using New York's fiscal clout to pressure the South African government to free Nelson Mandela and end apartheid. Released from Robben Island, Mr. Mandela made a triumphant tour of the city that included a mammoth rally at Yankee Stadium and a sleepover with David and Joyce Dinkins at Gracie Mansion.

Though decorous, Mr. Dinkins can't help scolding the blustery Koch and "America's Mayor," Mr. Giuliani. "For all his loud remarks," he writes, "Ed Koch had presided over a non-stop escalation of New York's crime rate and handed this mess to me on his way out the door." Rudy? "A cold, unkind person." Understandably, he is still seething that Mr. Giuliani stood by at an election forum in 1989 while the comedian Jackie Mason, using a Yiddish slur, called Mr. Dinkins "a fancy schvartzer with a mustache."

A clue to Mr. Dinkins's performance as mayor came in his concession speech after losing to Mr. Giuliani in 1993. "Never forget," he exhorted his supporters, "that this city is about dignity. It is about decency." From its inception as New Amsterdam nearly 400 years ago, polyglot New York has been less about dignity and decency than about striving—the relentless struggle for wealth and power. Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg instinctively understood that—and the city responded better to their touch.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, Esquire and the New York Daily News, ran New York magazine during the Dinkins years.

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