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## 'I Never Did Like Politics' Review: The Crusading New York Guardia Show

The fabled New York City mayor had an eye for the theatrical, boundless energy and a connection with the man on the street.

By Edward Kosner

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New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia. PHOTO: WILLIAM SHROUT/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/SHUTTERSTOCK

In our current dismal passage of American politics, it's exhilarating to read about a politician who exemplified all the qualities—courage, honesty, vision, energy, disdain for hypocrisy, concern for the downtrodden—that we were taught to revere. That this paragon was the half-Jewish son of Italian immigrants, born before the Statue of Liberty was completed and raised in the dusty barrens of Arizona, makes the story all the more remarkable.

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**I Never Did Like Politics: How Fiorello La Guardia Became America's Mayor, and Why He Still Matters**

By Terry Golway

St. Martin's Press

304 pages

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That man was Fiorello "The Little Flower" La Guardia, the 99th in a mixed bag of now 110 mayors of New York. Among La Guardia's other accomplishments, he's the only New York mayor ever to have a smash Broadway musical written about him or to build an airport later named after him.

Terry Golway, a journalist and an adroit author of books about New York's thieving Tammany Hall and the odd-couple relationship between the patrician Franklin Roosevelt and the classic Irish pol Al Smith, now offers "I Never Did Like Politics: How

Fiorello La Guardia Became America's Mayor, and Why He Still Matters." It's a crisp, fact-and-anecdote-rich account and analysis of the mayor's extraordinary career and a worthy addition to the packed shelf of books about the Little Flower, including his own posthumously published memoir, "The Making of an Insurgent" (1948).

Calling La Guardia an insurgent is like describing Michelangelo as a painter—accurate but inadequate. La Guardia, who was born in 1882, was an always-right-all-the-time dynamo. He flew as a combat pilot and bombardier in World War I, rising to the rank of major. Before that, he served as an American diplomat in Eastern Europe and as a translator on Ellis Island. His first foray into politics led to six terms as a Republican member of Congress, first from 1917 to 1919, then again from 1923 to 1933. After three terms in office as mayor, from 1934 to 1945, he became the director-general of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, the agency tasked with caring for the millions of starving, homeless civilian survivors of World War II. He died of pancreatic cancer in 1947, at the age of 64.

It's an irony of history that for many who remember him, the iconic moments of La Guardia's career were his reading of Dick Tracy, Little Orphan Annie and other Sunday comics on the radio during a newspaper deliverers' strike in 1945, the final year of his tempestuous mayoralty. (You can watch him at it on YouTube, and it's quite a performance.) "He was a leader," Mr. Golway writes, "because he was a man on a mission and a man with a vision, his head uncluttered with either the ambiguities of theory or the rigid certainties of dogma." He also had "the personality, energy, and ruthlessness it took to demand and win reform." La Guardia himself liked to brag that he could "outdemagogue the best of demagogues." He was never happier than when he was denouncing "idle, loafing, useless" politicians.

His exotic background for a 20th-century American politician gave La Guardia a sure feel for the continental nation—from the New York slums, teeming with Southern and Eastern European refugees and African-Americans fleeing the South, to the cowboy country of the Southwest. He knew the military from the inside: from the Army base in Prescott, Ariz., where his father was bandmaster and young Fiorello spent his boyhood, to the cockpit of a fighter plane. As a diplomat, he served near his parents' birthplace on the Adriatic, to which they returned with him for a few years when he was an adolescent. As a firebrand from New York, he bonded in Congress with Midwestern populist Senate titans like Robert La Follette. All this was a prelude to Gracie Mansion, the residence he eventually moved into after living for most of his time as mayor in a walk-up apartment nearby.

La Guardia stood barely 5-foot-2 but commanded attention. He crusaded relentlessly in his high, squeaky voice for his causes in Congress, in City Hall and on his top-rated Sunday-morning radio show, "Talk to the People." In the House, he promoted child-labor laws and other Progressive legislation. He railed against Prohibition, against immigration quotas that favored Nordic and Anglo-Saxon Europeans over people from the rest of the world, and against the flagrantly antisemitic Henry Ford's attempted purchase of a federal dam in Alabama that ultimately became the keystone of FDR's Tennessee Valley Authority. In New York, he opened up 17,000 units of public housing and gently pressured Met Life to allow black tenants in its Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village complexes on Manhattan's East Side. He unified the transit system, reformed the police and got major New Deal money for local Depression programs.

He was the ultimate showman, too: Twice during Prohibition he lured reporters and newsreel cameras to watch him brew beer by mixing two legal ingredients, then handled the tasty, foamy "illegal" quaff to the press gang. As the son of immigrants, he knew discrimination; and he knew tragedy, too: In 1921 his infant daughter died of spinal meningitis, and his first young wife, only 26, died of tuberculosis. By the end of the year, he had lost the Republican primary for mayor and was out of public office—temporarily.

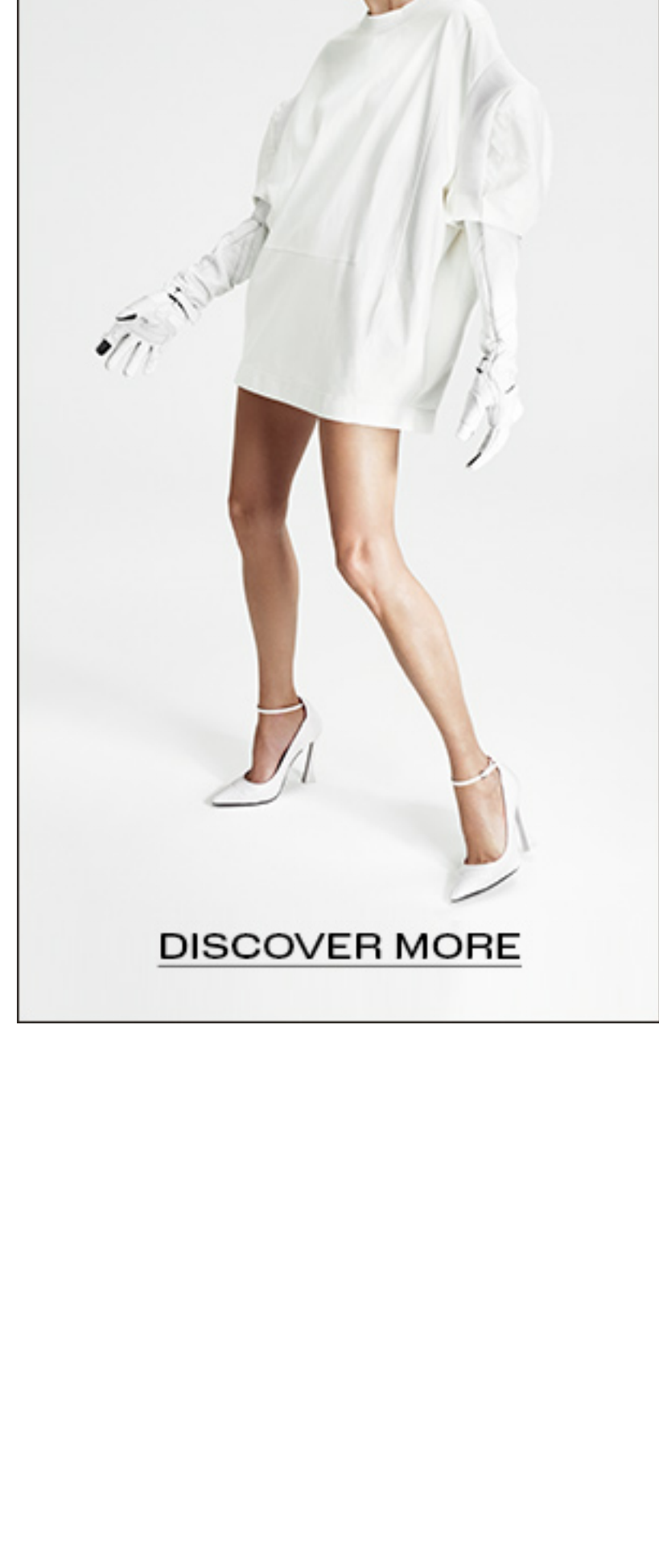
Rarely in "I Never Did Like Politics" do we hear a discouraging word about the Little Flower. Mr. Golway mentions La Guardia's strenuous but futile efforts to wangle the cabinet post of secretary of war from FDR or get a general's commission during World War II. And there isn't much on his failed tenure as the first head of the Office of Civilian Defense (with first lady Eleanor Roosevelt as his restive colleague). But the author evokes his subject so vividly and makes the case for his greatness so effectively that the book never feels like puffery.

Could a figure like La Guardia flourish in today's fraught political and hysterical media culture? Unlikely. Which tells you something about how America has evolved since the Little Flower narrated Dick Tracy to the kids over the radio.

*Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

Appeared in the February 20, 2024, print edition as "When the Mayor Was a Giant".

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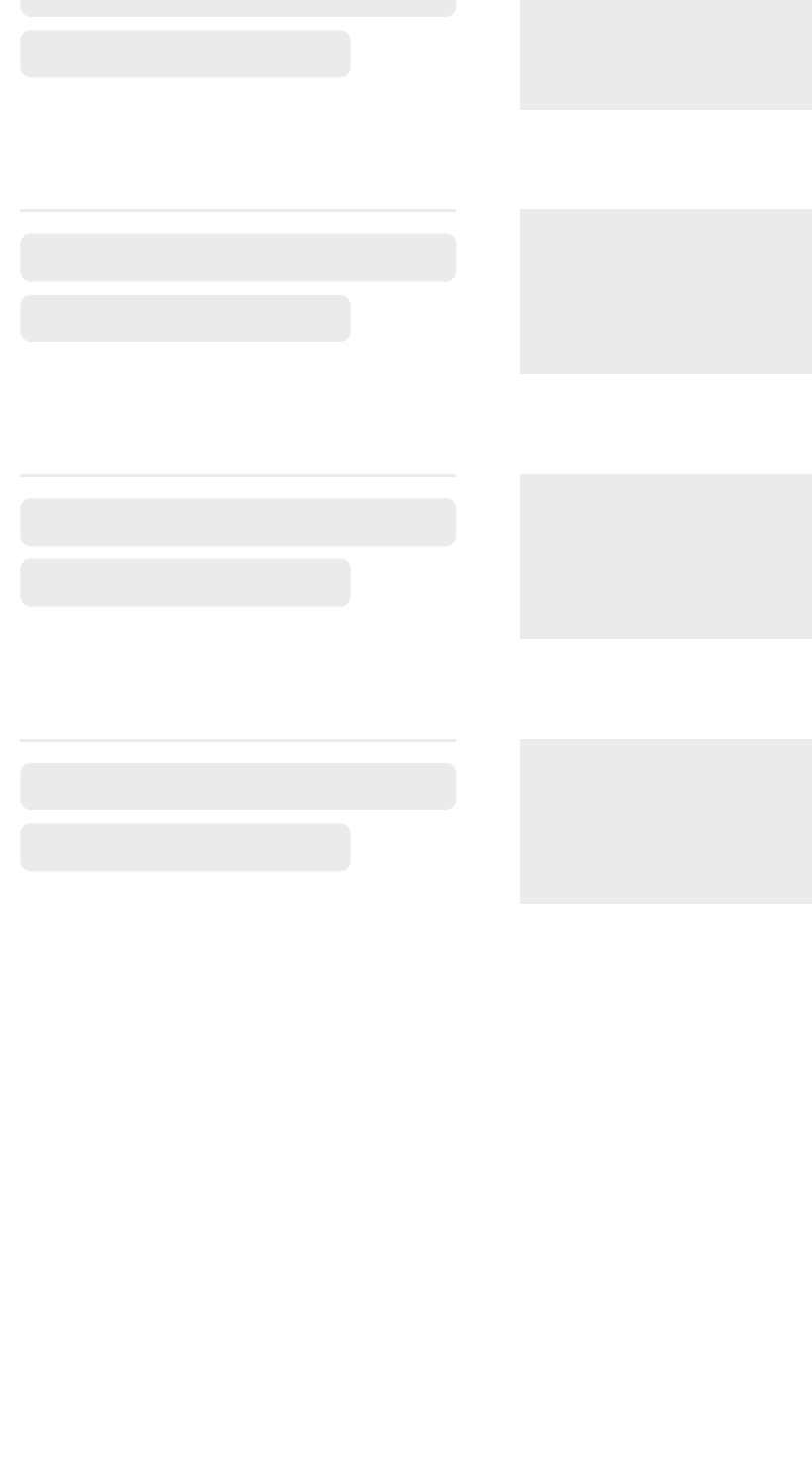
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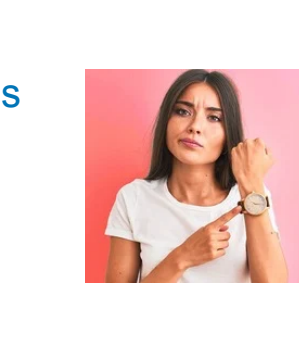
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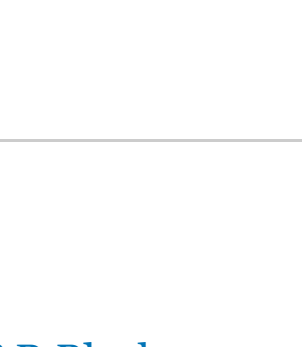
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