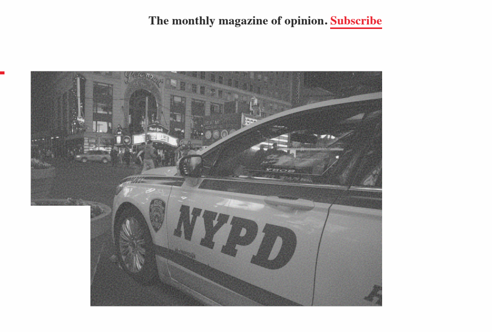


MARCH 2020 POLITICS & IDEAS

Bright Lights, Blighted City

A journey through the mayors culminates in the de Blasio disaster

by Edward Kosner

THERE IS A MOMENT TOWARD THE END OF EVERY FLIGHT WHEN the pitch of the engines changes slightly and the plane seems momentarily suspended in air, then eases onto its downward path. Sure enough, the flight attendant comes on the intercom to report, "We've begun our initial descent. Check that your seatbelts are fastened."

I feel that way about New York City these days under the feckless hand of its 109th mayor, Bill de Blasio. I was born not far from the George Washington Bridge in upper Manhattan, when "The Little Flower," Fiorello La Guardia, flourished in City Hall, and I've lived in the city ever since, with excursions overseas and to woodsy retreats and beaches. I wrote about dough-faced mayor Bob Wagner in the late 1950s and early '60s as a kid rewrite man on Dorothy Schiff's *New York Post*. I confected cover stories about the great WASP hope, Mayor John Lindsay, for *Newsweek* in the mid-1960s. I was the editor of *New York* magazine during the harum-scarum 1980s and early '90s of Ed "How'm I doing?" Koch and courtly David Dinkins, and I was running the city's (then) biggest tabloid, the *Daily News*, during September 11th, with Rudy Giuliani's mayoral heroics, and later with Mike Bloomberg, who came into office vowing to market New York "as a luxury good." I know the city—at least, its cosmopolitan core—and its mayors as well as anybody.

Life here has always been fraught. The Dutch found that out in the early 17th century when they rowed ashore from what became the Hudson River to be greeted by the Lenape Indians. The locals thought the Dutch smelled awful, but not so bad that they wouldn't sell them their Manahatta (Island of Drunks) not once but twice. During the Revolution, the British anchored warships off Turtle Bay on the East River and threatened to fire broadsides that would have consumed the wooden settlement in flames. New York's first policemen were so corrupt and unreliable that rich citizens had to hire bodyguards to escort them around town. Civil War draft rioters burned down the Colored Orphans Asylum on Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street. More than 20,000 New Yorkers died in the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic. In the 1930s and '40s, New York detectives liked to hang recalcitrant suspects by their ankles from three-story back windows of precincts until they squealed. The South Bronx was indeed burning as the Yankees won the 1977 World Series in the House that Ruth Built.

Real New Yorkers have realistic expectations. They know there will be traffic jams and crammed subway cars at rush hour and that finding a cab in the rain has always been a sodden long shot. A movie ticket will cost twice as much as it does in most towns and so will a jar of Orville Redenbacher's popcorn in the supermarket. The fire engines, patrol cars, and ambulances screaming past your windows can jolt you awake at 3 a.m., and the traffic agent will ticket your car even if the sign listing the no-parking hours is hidden by a plane tree. Shows on and off Broadway, the New York City Ballet, and the Metropolitan Opera are so expensive that audiences routinely leap to standing ovations because a performance that costs so much must be memorable.

Still, New Yorkers didn't bargain for what they're seeing these days. They don't want the subways to break down so often or to spot a rat scurrying along with a pizza crust or to get slugged on the platform or shoved on the tracks by some mumbling paranoid nut. They don't want to hurry under the construction platforms that leave the sidewalks permanently in gloom, and they don't want pieces of buildings to fall on them or their grandchildren. They don't want to be confronted by a phalanx of panhandlers on the prime shopping blocks of Fifth Avenue or groped by a moocher costumed as Captain America in Times Square. Or see men peeing on the sidewalk.

The Manhattan skyline is now disfigured by the needle skyscrapers of Billionaires Row along 57th Street, money-laundering machines full of unsold apartments or vacant pied-à-terre of Ukrainian oligarchs and Malaysian Midases. (A legacy, as it happens, of Bloomberg's zoning revisions.) Parents don't want to wait on line for hours in the vain hope of getting their smart kid into a good middle school or to have to shell out more than $50,000 a year for a spot in a private school, if they can even secure one.

Whatever the statistics might show, there's a creeping feeling that New York under de Blasio is raveling around the edges, that a kind of grimy decay is setting in. The hot restaurants are still jammed, Broadway is booming, Central Park still a wonder of manicured nature. But the empty storefronts on the avenues all over town are inescapable—even as the last stage of the building boom of luxury condominiums with swimming pools, hair salons, wine cellars, and yoga studios staggers on. Symbolically, perhaps, Barney's, New York's signature fashion hub, just went bankrupt.

Other cities have bigger problems. Homelessness is now endemic in Los Angeles and, especially, San Francisco. Violent crime rates in St. Louis, Detroit, Memphis, and other places dwarf New York's. Indeed, the city doesn't even appear on the 2019 list of the 25 most dangerous cities in the country. But New York was less dangerous than most cities in statistical terms even at the height of the 30-year national crime spree, and so what? New Yorkers don't really care what goes on elsewhere. That Saul Steinberg *New Yorker* cover with the city towering in the foreground and everything beyond the Hudson scrunched into inconsequence didn't become an icon by accident.

I grew up in a different New York. At 10, I began traveling around the city on my own on the A train downtown and on Fifth Avenue buses to the Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art. I had a free education at a public elementary school—where specialists from Barnard College and the Bank Street School of Education ran special programs for us—then junior high, then the Bronx High School of Science and City College. At CCNY, I had a state regents scholarship that paid for my textbooks and student fees and left me enough to buy button-down shirts and rep ties at Brooks Bros. University Shop. The rent on my first apartment, on 12th Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, was a week's salary at the *Post*. I took the subway down to Rector St. at midnight for my lobster shift at the paper and never got hassled.

Obviously, economic and cultural forces beyond the sway of any mayor or governor—or president, for that matter—shape the lives of New Yorkers, then and now. Still, the persona and performance of the mayor of New York have a real effect on how the city runs and how New Yorkers and the rest of the world feel about it. Some history helps to understand the New York state of mind these days. Over the past half century and more, New York has had a succession of charismatic and pallid, energetic and languid, charming and churlish, honest and less so, competent and hopeless men in charge.

La Guardia was in tune with the scrappy spirit of FDR's New Deal. Bill O'Dwyer, a genial Irishman from County Mayo, was so sketchy that President Truman had to shuffle him off to Mexico City as U.S. ambassador one step ahead of the law. All you need to know about his successor, Vincent Impellitteri, is that his election symbol was a light bulb. Robert Wagner, the phlegmatic son of a revered New York liberal senator, presided for a dozen years over a placid city and managed to build more public schools and public housing than any mayor while not seeming to do anything. "He's Fresh and Everybody Else Is Tired" was John Lindsay's not-so-subtle campaign slogan, and it worked. He was in the reform-Republican tradition but was thwarted by the entrenched unions and Democratic machine pols. New York was dubbed "Fun City" in his reign, although fun was scant and he wound up with one of the biggest police-corruption scandals in history and busted the budget.

Lindsay's successor, the hapless accountant Abe Beame, a Brooklyn machine Democrat, almost presided over the bankruptcy of the city when the federal government refused to intervene, prompting the famous *Daily News* headline FORD to CITY: DROP DEAD. At the last minute, a municipal bailout was contrived. City payrolls were slashed, garbage piled up on the sidewalks, and Central Park turned into a sylvan slum. Prime co-op flats on Fifth and Park Avenues that later sold for $10 million and more went for a pittance.

Next, the feisty, ego-driven Ed Koch made New York renowned as the brassy Big Apple even as the crack epidemic unleashed a crime wave so ferocious that the cops were reduced to triaging the daily onslaught. For example, a perp had actually to fire a gun while committing a robbery or assault before detectives would get on the case. After a dozen tumultuous years, Koch was succeeded by David Dinkins, New York's first black mayor, a well-intentioned municipal bureaucrat who was often overwhelmed by the job. Racial incidents triggered boycotts and riots on his watch. Citywide murders spiked at 2,234 in 1990, Dinkins's first year in office. The city was shocked when a Mormon family from Utah in town for the U.S. Open tennis tournament was attacked and robbed on a subway platform and the 22-year-old son stabbed to death. DAVE, DO SOMETHING! beseeched the front page of the *Post*.

Rudy Giuliani, the celebrated crime-busting U.S. attorney, took over City Hall on January 1, 1994—and the revival of New York got under way. A Republican, Giuliani was even more abrasive than Koch, but he mastered crime in a city that was living in fear. He instituted the "broken windows" approach in which cops cracked down on minor offenses—such as subway turnstile-jumping—as if they were more serious, and he used computer data to track crime trends. "Squeegee Men," the panhandlers who extracted tips by wiping motorists' windshields with greasy rags, had become the symbol of shambolic New York. Now, they were banished. Violent crime began to ebb dramatically, and New York became one of the safest cities in America. It helped that the crack epidemic with its attendant robberies and shootings had burned itself out. Giuliani loved to pick fights with nearly everybody, but nobody wondered who was in charge of the city, especially after 9/11.

The safer streets of New York began to pulse with revitalized energy. And Giuliani's unlikely successor was the man to bring the city all the way back and more: Michael Bloomberg, a short, divorced, Democrat-turned-faux-Republican billionaire originally from the Boston suburbs. He had made his money creating and selling state-of-the-art computer terminals for financial traders, and he had a vision for New York. He didn't mean to slight the boroughs outside Manhattan, but he focused on restoring the city again as the artistic, media, corporate, and banking capital of the world. Bloomberg used his fortune to subsidize the arts and other worthy causes in the city, and to recruit a staff superior to any of his predecessors.

Seven years after 9/11, the financial crisis paralyzed markets and prompted a devastating recession, but Bloomberg's New York cruised through the worst of it and gained momentum. Over the next five years, the city achieved an unmatched level of polish. Slum neighborhoods across the city gentrified, sleek new buildings went up all over, the streets got cleaner, the subways more reliable. Even the public schools began to perform better. Limited by law to two terms, the mayor used his clout—and his wallet—to wangle four more years in City Hall. Critics complained that income inequality had worsened on his watch. By the end of his 12 years, many New Yorkers were ready for change.

And change they got. The new mayor, Bill de Blasio, sworn in on January 1, 2014, was the polar opposite of Bloomberg: 6′ 5″ to Bloomy's 5′ 8″, a career politician rather than a mogul, worth perhaps $2.5 million not $55 billion, a gentile and not a Jew, a Brooklynite and not an Upper East Sider, and—most to the point—an aggressively progressive Democrat with an African-American wife with whom he'd honeymooned in Castro's Cuba. About the only thing the two mayors had in common is that both were Boston transplants.

De Blasio had been the city's public advocate, a sort of juiceless municipal ombudsman and parking spot for City Hall wannabes. He'd won the Democratic mayoral primary, the ticket to election in years without a unicorn Republican like Giuliani or Bloomberg in the race. Only a sliver of the 4.3 million registered New Yorkers bothered to vote in the general election; de Blasio's 73 percent margin amounted to 17.5 percent of the eligible voters. He claimed a mandate for his progressive agenda anyway. Just before he took office, I found myself at dinner with a savvy city pol familiar with de Blasio and the public advocate's job and asked what kind of mayor he'd be. "He's lazy and disorganized and he'll be a disaster," came the prescient reply.

A "tale of two cities" had been de Blasio's stump slogan, signaling that he'd right the balance skewed by the plutocrat Bloomberg. He pushed through his prime campaign pledge—free pre-kindergarden classes for all children in the city, a boon to working parents paying for day care for their kids. But otherwise, de Blasio lived down to the advance billing. He turned out to be chronically tardy for meetings and official engagements—most egregiously missing the moment of silence at a Queens memorial service for the 265 victims of the 2001 crash of American Airlines Flight 265. Where billionaire Bloomberg would ostentatiously take the subway to City Hall, man-of-the-people de Blasio chose to be ferried around town in a big, gas-guzzling SUV. His penchant for being chauffeured to his old YMCA gym in Brooklyn for a long workout most days won him scorn. And it turned out he was a Red Sox fan. A *New York Post* columnist took to calling him "Mayor Putz."

Controversy dogged De Blasio from the start. The FBI, the U.S. attorney, the Manhattan DA, and his own Department of Investigation opened five different probes into the fundraising activities and other shenanigans of two of his biggest donors. His Campaign for One New York, a piggy bank filled by labor unions and real-estate developers ostensibly to promote his policies, came under scrutiny and folded up. More scandals and bad news followed—flagrant grade inflation at public schools, the appointment of a federal monitor for the deteriorating mammoth public-housing system, unprecedented delays and breakdowns on the subway system that carries 5.7 million New Yorkers each day (although, in fairness, the subways are run by the mayor's antagonist, Governor Andrew Cuomo).

It turned out that the mayor had put his wife, Charlene McCray, in charge of a $1.8 billion mental-health program called ThriveNYC, but the streets seemed to be filled with more distressed souls than ever, and there was little accounting for the $900 million already spent. He earmarked $773 million of public money for a program to revive failing public schools without visible improvement in student performance. More money was pumped into his ballyhooed plan to create and preserve 300,000 units of affordable housing. Even so, a survey found one out of 10 public school pupils had no permanent address.

De Blasio's approval rating cratered except among African-American New Yorkers. Still, city politics being what they are, he easily won reelection in 2017. He savored the idea of being mayor if not leaning hard into the job and had delusions of future political grandeur, perhaps as senator from New York. Unlike Lindsay, Koch, Dinkins, Giuliani, and Bloomberg, who loved the Gotham limelight, de Blasio was a social ghost in his adopted city. A reporter asked him what he and his wife liked to do at night. "Watch reruns of *The Wire*," replied the mayor.

He isn't short on ego. In the midst of it all, he decided to join the swarm of Democrats running for president. His literally quixotic crusade took him to primary states where he was greeted politely by a few bewildered voters and generally ignored. He appeared in two televised debates and then slunk back to City Hall amid general derision.

He's earned it. Contributing to the unease are "social justice" démarches by the mayor and his progressive allies on the City Council to stop policing quality-of-life offenses and to cheer new state rules freeing more defendants without bail before trial. The papers are full of dystopian stories, including anti-police radicals swarming subways stations and Grand Central at rush hour brandishing banners and scrawling graffiti; a female architect killed by a slab of loose masonry falling from a midtown office building; an African-American woman released without bail after slugging three Orthodox Jewish women, then assaulting another woman the next day only to be freed again; a top deputy to de Blasio's education chancellor busted for trying to have sex with an underage boy; and a smelly homeless man grabbing prepared food with his bare hands at a midtown Whole Foods market. Giuliani blasted de Blasio as "possibly the worst Mayor in NYC" history for not doing enough to counter anti-Semitic incidents in the city and for not reinstating his "broken windows" approach to crime-fighting.

Toward the end of the year—nearly three decades after that Mormon tourist was fatally mugged on the subway—an 18-year-old Barnard freshman from Virginia was stabbed to death by barely teenage robbers in Morningside Park just a few blocks from the Manhattan campus. It was the kind of emblematic crime that confirmed to many New Yorkers that the dread bad old days might indeed be coming back. SAFE NO MORE, headlined the *Post*, right on cue. And early in the new year, police released statistics showing that, while murders and rapes remain low, a range of crimes, including shootings, robberies, burglaries, and car theft increased dramatically.

Early in my days editing *New York* magazine in the 1980s, we did a cover story illustrated by a graffitied wall that read "Wounded City." My successors at the magazine might find themselves recycling that cover sooner than they think.

We want to hear your thoughts about this article. Click here to send a letter to the editor.

Share via:

More

Edward Kosner, who edited *New York* and the *New York Daily News*, among other publications, is the author of *It's News to Me*, a memoir.

TRENDING NOW

Does Joe Biden Think the Taliban Lost?

The Worst Presidential Dereliction in Memory

Biden's Horrible Interview

The Biden Administration's Vision of a Woke Taliban

'You Chose Dishonor and You Shall Have War'

Fight the insanity. Subscribe to reason.

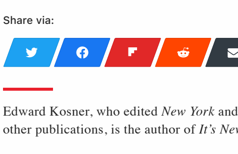
CHOOSE A PLAN

Listen to the best podcast anywhere, everywhere.

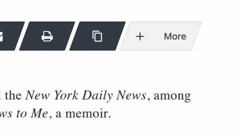
What's in the latest issue?

SUBSCRIBE

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE



All Things Politicized
by Christine Rosen



President Wise Guy
by Matthew Continetti

The Real Truth About the Temple Mount
by Meir Y. Soloveichik

SCROLL DOWN FOR THE NEXT ARTICLE

READ THE LATEST ISSUE →

Intelligent opinions since 1945.
Subscribe and support our efforts.

SUBSCRIBE DONATE