

David Dinkins (RIP) vs Rudy Giuliani: A Tale of Two Mayors

Jerry Krase (December 03, 2020)



In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* the French Doctor Manette, after spending 18-years in La Bastille in City # 1 (Paris) is released to live in City # 2 (London) with his daughter Lucie, whom he had never met. The story is used to warn the readers about the terrible conditions that led to the bloody French Revolution, and the even bloodier Reign of Terror. A similar, perhaps slightly less bloody, Tale is reflected in the inglorious record of New York City Mayors that has been a progression of mostly more, and less unflattering comparisons.

David Dinkins from his Mayoral Inaugural Address: "Flying into La Guardia at night, looking down at the city and you say to yourself, 'Wow. And I'm in charge of all that.'" "I stand here before you today as the elected leader of the greatest city of a great nation, to which my ancestors were brought chained and whipped in the hold of a slave ship."

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For soon to be ex-NYC Mayor, demi-Italian-American Warren Wilhelm, Jr. De Blasio the Tale was a slogan announced at his campaign kickoff in January 2013.

Referring to 3-term Mayor, and Big Bucks Billionaire, Michael Bloomberg, Bill said:

"On a whole range of other issues he simply neglected our neighborhoods and failed. And those who would seek to continue those policies are destined to fail millions of New Yorkers as well," ... "So, let's be honest about where we are today. This is a place that in too many ways has become a tale of two cities, a place where City Hall has too often catered to the interests of the elite rather than the needs of everyday New Yorkers."

My friend Joseph Scelsa, past Director of the John Calandra Italian American Institute at the City University of New York, and current President of the Italian American Museum, announced the passing of David Dinkins by noting "He was a friend to the Italian American community and during the 1992 Quincentennial Celebration of Columbus' arrival in the Americas he was quoted as saying, "Whether you came here on the top of the boat or on the bottom of the boat, we are all in the same boat now". May he rest in peace." Which immediately revived a prior Tale of Two Big Apples, One White and the other Black, with comments recalling the "many terrible days such as Crown Heights Riots," and unfriendly comments like "he was no friend to many. Let's not forget what he allowed this City to become, Worst Mayor after deBozo." One response was especially confusing: "Dinkins allowed Giuliani to become Mayor and we see what a Monster and Corrupt person Rudy is. They were both awful Mayors. Give us Fiorello La Guardia or Vincent Impellitteri. They were the best!" to which someone strongly disagreed asking "Just how do you believe Dinkins, 'allowed' Giuliani to become Mayor. How is he a monster? How is he corrupt?" Another unkind cut created a new aphorism: "A friend to all is a friend to none."

Like Dicken's Tale, these sad Tales of Cities of one or another color, have some nonfiction elements in which David Dinkins, in my opinion, tried to play a positive role. Relations between Italian Americans (sometimes referred to as merely white) and a wide variety of People of Color of African descent (often referred to as merely Black), as well as others with whom they had much to share as to history of struggle, took a major turn for the worse under the nasty tutelage of three-time NYC Mayor Edward I. Koch. Giuliani and other lesser politicians of many other persuasions learned his lesson on how to divide and conquer. Only some followers of these (to be honest, essentially fascist) tactics, were successful in getting elected. But, all of these mini-Steve Bannon's were successful in making the Big Apple, and by extension America, a much less pleasant to live in.

David Dinkins, although achieving a major political "First," will never be considered by historians as a Great Mayor in comparison to Fiorello LaGuardia (For i-italy.org of course!). He will never even surpass Rudy Giuliani's undeserved fame as "America's Mayor" --- which he garnered by an accident of 9/11 horror (we'll save that long, sad, story for another day). When I wrote a regular column in the Free Press (La Prensa Libre) I hardly ever had a kind word for Dinkins and, for me, Giuliani as "The Rude One." In fact, I seldom have many kind words for elected officials who tend to be exceptional only to the degree of being big disappointments (like half-Italian Bill DeBlasio). Here are some of my unkind reflections on Dinkins: "the ex-tennis playing-mayor feels besmirched by the misrepresentation of his glorious four years asleep at the helm." (Loving to Hate Thy Neighbor: New York Stories); As to why Liberal Jewish voters switched their votes to Giuliani after the Crown Heights Pogrom "We have to remember that B.G. (Before Giuliani), New Yorkers had become so fearful of crime that they literally begged for deliverance. How do you think Rudy got elected, on his personal charm or his good looks? Give me a break! After having that dapper sweetheart of a mensch David Dinkins in Gracie Mansion, even New York's famously liberal Jewish denizens cried out for the Cossacks." (My \$55 Contribution to the War on Crime); and "Unfortunately New York voters are cynics. How else can you explain the successive elections of Koch, Dinkins, and Giuliani; one worser than the other. (Can Sal Albanese "Make New York First Again"?)

Although not a great mayor, David Dinkins, beyond his basic human decency was for many a great inspiration. As Brigid Bergen wrote:



Dinkins was a mentor to many Black New Yorkers with their eye on public service. Dinkins joined the Marine Corps after high school, attended Howard University and then Brooklyn Law School. He then rose through the ranks of Harlem Democratic leaders, becoming a state assemblyman, president of the Board of Elections and Manhattan borough president. Dinkins's own rise is interwoven with a tightly knit group of powerful Harlem power brokers known as the Gang of Four, including Basil Paterson, the former New York secretary of state and father of former New York Governor David Paterson; Percy Sutton, the long-serving Manhattan borough president and first serious Black candidate for mayor; and former Congressman Charles Rangel, the only surviving member of the foursome.

Michael Powell, added some Italian spice to his "Appraisal" of Dinkin's Mayoralty. Those with sharp memories of New York City politics critiqued a tweet late Monday night from Rudy Giuliani, who extended his condolences to the Dinkins family, saying the ex-mayor's service "is honored and respected by all." That wasn't Giuliani's tone in the late 1980s when Dinkins narrowly defeated Giuliani, then a US attorney who would return to beat Dinkins four years later in 1993, inspiring a backlash that kept Democrats out of City Hall for 20 years. "Giuliani is to Dinkins what Trump was to Obama," said Christina Greer, an associate professor of political science at Fordham University and author of the book "Black Ethics: Race, Immigration and The Pursuit of the American Dream." "Someone who trolled a Black man who had way more class dignity, education and intelligence, constantly incited racist tropes to distract from the fact that this Black person was actually doing a solid job."

Powell and I remember Dinkins promise of racial healing and embrace of the city's "gorgeous mosaic. But the city he inherited from the Great Divider was in a deep recession, reeling from, high crime rates, soaring AIDS infection rates, a raging crack epidemic, rampant homelessness, and racial/ethnic division. His fall from liberal grace followed the 1991 "Crown Heights Riot," during which Yankel Rosenbaum a rabbinical student was killed during violent protests after a Hasidic driver hit and killed Gavin Cato, an African American boy. Just as the murder of Yusuf Hawkins in Italian American Bensonhurst in 1989 was a cudgel to beat on Rudy, the "Pogrom" used by Giuliani, who later also joined thousands of off-duty police rioting against the sitting mayor at city in 1992. On the positive(?) side of bigotry, Powell notes in his review that Dinkin's "Supporters also said that although his opponents led racist attacks against him that contributed to his defeat for a second term, he also inspired a new generation of Black activists."

Like many other chroniclers, including myself, Powell felt that evaluating "Mr. Dinkins's legacy is a tricky task." Noting that his successes in rebuilding in low-income neighborhoods, assistance to the homeless, and better funding for libraries. He also rebuilt more low-income housing in his single term than Rudy Giuliani did in two. Other positive notes about Dinkin's mayoralty was the unusual transparency of his administration, and its willingness to acknowledge failures. It was historically diverse devoted to serving the underserved. He also led the fight against poverty, and provided support for health clinics, mental illness and homeless services. He also allocated anti-crime money for after-school programs ("Safe Streets, Safe City: Cops and Kids), and created the current version of the Civilian Complaint Review Board. At all times he was a calm voice of reason in a too often tense city, while offering a City of Hope for both oppressed minorities and, not incidentally progressive, white voters; not bad for his dad William, a barber, and his mom, Sarah, a domestic worker's son.

However, as all others who wrote on his final page of life, Powell went into great detail about his failures mentioning not only the Crown Heights Riot but failing "...to face down a Black nationalist boycott of a Korean vegetable stand, a confrontation encoded with racist language." He concluded his assessment with some sobering words from an interview he had with Dinkins in the summer of 1993, while being challenged for Mayor again by Giuliani. "I have been mayor in a hurricane" he told him "I'd really like to be here when the roof is rebuilt," he said. "There's so much we could do." Four months later he lost to Rudy in another close, racially and ethnically divisive race and "stepped into history."

Robert D. McFadden provided the saddest ending to our Tale of Two Cities by referring Dinkins 2013 Memoir in which he acknowledged missteps, but ascribing the narrowness of his 1989 victory and 1993 to the fact that he was Black. "I think it was just racism, pure and simple," he said in "A



Mayor's Life: Governing New York's Gorgeous Mosaic," written with Peter Knobler.

The ending of Dinkins' ignominious Tale was perhaps the beginning of national one.
From the Video Transcript of The Last Word: David N. Dinkins (see [>>](#) [2])

Giuliani had the backing of the mostly white police force and white neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island. "We knew it was going to be close. But we didn't expect to lose. And early Election Day, there were people in Brooklyn, white off-duty police officers who were intimidating some people in line with questions like, 'Have you ever been arrested? Do you have a driver's license?' and things like that. "We have heard reports that voters in Washington Heights are being challenged and asked by poll watchers for Mr. Giuliani's campaign to produce their passports prior to voting." "My people were very upset. Now it's election night. And we're conceding." "My brothers and my sisters. The people have spoken." "Some in my group wanted me to demand a recount and this, that and the other. And wiser heads among us, we said no, in this country we don't have coups and revolutions. We have elections." "You see, my friends. Elections come and go. Candidates come and go. Mayors come and go, but the life of a city must endure. Never forget that this city is about dignity. It's about decency. It's about the hope and determination of working people struggling to make a better life for their children and their children's children. My friends, the gorgeous mosaic is alive."

Post Script: All writers whom I researched for this article agreed on both his decency, and the value of his Tennis Deal, that even former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg said more than a decade ago, was "the only good athletic sports stadium deal, not just in New York but in the country." To get the deal done he granted a 99-year lease on city parkland to the United States Tennis Association for a stadium and public tennis complex in Flushing Meadows, Queens. There in 1993, Mayor David N. Dinkins presented my daughter Kathryn Suzanne Krase with the Brian Watkins Leadership Award at the Mayor's Cup All-Scholastic Championships, where for the fourth consecutive year she and her partner, Olona Hirsch Kahn, won the Girls doubles championship.

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