

FIGURELLO H. LA GUARDIA (1882-1947)



Fiorello H. La Guardia

FIGURELLO LA GUARDIA was born in Greenwich Village in New York City to an Italian father and an Italian-Jewish mother. His father, Achille La Guardia, was a lapsed Catholic from Cerignola, and his mother, Irene Coen, was a Jewish woman from Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His maternal grandmother, Fiorina Luzzatto Coen, was a Luzzatto, a member of the prestigious Italian-Jewish family of scholars, kabbalists, and poets and had among her ancestors the famous rabbi, Samuel David Luzzatto. It was in Trieste that Achille La Guardia met and married Irene. Fiorello La Guardia was raised an Episcopalian and practiced that religion all his life. His middle name “Enrico” was anglicized to “Henry” when he was a child.

He moved to Arizona with his family, where his father had a bandmaster position while in the US Army at Fort Whipple.

La Guardia attended public schools and high school in Prescott, Arizona. After his father was discharged from his bandmaster position in 1898, Fiorello lived in Trieste.

In 1901, he joined the State Department and served in US consulates in Budapest, Trieste, and Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia). He served in these positions until 1906. Having been turned down for promotion, he left the consular corps and returned to the US to continue his education at New York University. From 1907 to 1910, he worked as an interpreter for the US Bureau of Immigration at the Ellis Island immigration station. He graduated from New York University School of Law in 1910, was admitted to the bar the same year, and began a law practice in New York City.

He was married twice. His first wife was Thea Almerigotti, whom he married on March 8, 1919. In June, 1920 they had a daughter, Fioretta Thea, who died on May 9, 1921, of spinal meningitis. His wife died of tuberculosis on November 29, 1921, at the age of 26. Eight years later, in 1929, he married Marie Fisher, and they adopted two children, Eric Henry (born in 1930) and Jean Marie (1928–62).

La Guardia became Deputy Attorney General of New York in January, 1915. In 1916, he was elected to the US House of Representatives, where he had a reputation as a fiery and devoted reformer. As a Congressman, he represented an ethnically diverse slum district in East Harlem and, although barred from important committee posts because of his political independence, he was a tireless and vocal champion of progressive causes. La Guardia took office on March 4, 1917, but soon was commissioned in the US Army Air Service. While in the

US Army, he rose to the rank of major and commanded a unit of Ca.44 bombers on the Italian-Austrian front during World War I. Upon returning from the war, La Guardia resigned his seat in Congress on December 31, 1919.

In 1919, La Guardia was chosen to run as the Republican candidate for the office of President of the New York City Board of Aldermen. His Democratic opponent was Robert L. Moran, an alderman from the Bronx who had succeeded to the Board presidency in 1918 when Alfred E. Smith, who had been elected Board President in 1917, became Governor. Michael “Dynamite Mike” Kelly, commander of New York’s Third “Shamrock” Battalion, also joined the race. Tammany Hall looked with alarm at Kelly’s entrance into the campaign and tried to persuade him to withdraw his candidacy and throw his support behind Moran. When he refused, Tammany went to the New York Supreme Court and successfully sued to keep Kelly’s name off the ballot. When Election Day arrived, over 3,500 of Kelly’s supporters wrote Kelly’s name on the ballot, and this number of write-ins was sufficient to defeat Moran, who lost to La Guardia by 1,363 votes.



Caproni Ca.44 - Postwar redesignation of Ca.5 heavy bomber



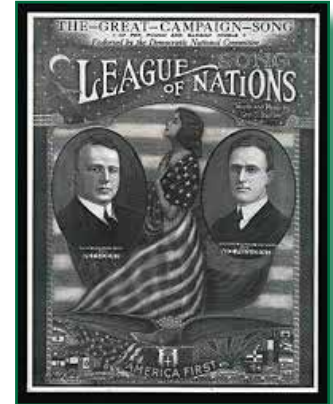
Ellis Island, NY, 1905

As the son of Italian immigrants and also as an interpreter on Ellis Island between 1907 and 1910, La Guardia had experienced how immigration policies affected the families that came to the United States. He wanted a change for the immigrants, especially with the immigrant medical examinations that took place on Ellis Island. His passion for justice for immigrants and his ability to speak both Yiddish and Italian helped him in his fight for justice for immigrant factory workers.

La Guardia, running as a Republican, won a seat in Congress from the Italian stronghold of East Harlem in 1922 and served in the US House of Representatives until March 3, 1933. A leading liberal reformer, he sponsored labor legislation and railed against immigration quotas. His major piece of legislation was the Norris-La Guardia Act, co-sponsored with Nebraska senator George Norris in 1932. It circumvented Supreme Court limitations on the activities of labor unions, especially as those limitations were imposed between the enactment of the Clayton Antitrust Act in 1914 and the end of the 1920s. Based on the theory that the lower courts are creations not of the Constitution but of Congress, and that Congress therefore has broad powers in defining and restricting their jurisdiction, the act forbids the issuance of injunctions to sustain anti-union contracts of employment, to prevent ceasing or refusing to perform any work or remain in

any relation of employment, or to restrain activities generally constituting component parts of strikes, boycotts, and picketing. It also said courts could no longer enforce “yellow-dog” contracts, which are labor contracts prohibiting a worker from joining a union.

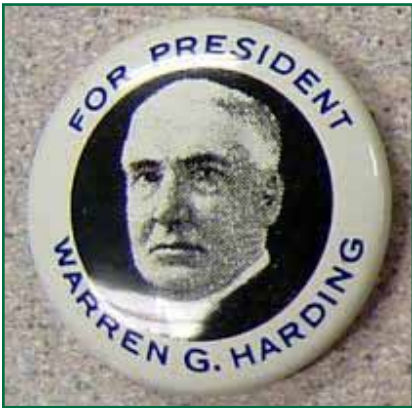
La Guardia was never an isolationist. He supported using American influence abroad on behalf of democracy or for national independence or against autocracy. Thus he supported the Irish independence movement and the anti-czarist Russian Revolution of 1917, but he did not approve of Vladimir Lenin. Unlike most progressive colleagues, such as George Norris, La Guardia consistently backed internationalism, speaking in favor of the League of Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, as well as peace and disarmament conferences. In domestic policies he tended toward socialism and wanted to nationalize and regulate; however, he was never close to the Socialist Party, nor was he a Marxist (he never read Karl Marx).



As a congressman, La Guardia was a tireless and vocal champion of progressive causes, from allowing more immigration, to removing US troops from Nicaragua, to speaking up for the rights and livelihoods of striking miners, impoverished farmers, oppressed minorities, and struggling families. A goad to the era’s plutocrats and their enablers in government, he fought for progressive income taxes, greater government oversight of Wall Street, and national employment insurance for workers idled by the Great Depression.

He was also one of the first Republicans to voice his opinion about the Prohibition Act, urging that the dry cause “would prove disastrous in the long run.” This position was taboo for both parties since they both avoided taking a stand on prohibition issues at the time.





As a Republican, he had to support Warren G. Harding in 1920, and he had to be silent in the 1928 campaign although he favored Al Smith, the Democratic candidate. In 1929, he lost the election for mayor of New York City to incumbent Democrat Jimmy Walker by a landslide, and this was followed in 1932 with his defeat for re-election to Congress by James J. Lanzetta, the Democratic candidate. 1932 was not a good year for Republican candidates like La Guardia, and his 20th Congressional District was shifting from a Jewish and Italian-American population to a Puerto Rican population. However, some scholars have argued that powerful Tammany Hall boss Jimmy Hines was able to successfully get enough votes forged to unseat him in that election.

Prior to the 1933 election, Jimmy Walker and his Irish-run Tammany Hall were forced out of office by scandal and La Guardia was determined to replace him. First, however, he had to win the nomination of both the Republican Party and also the “Fusion” group of independents. He was not the first choice of either party, for they distrusted Italians. On the other hand, La Guardia had enormous determination, high visibility, the support of reformer Samuel Seabury and the ability to ruin prospects of any rival by a divisive primary contest. He secured the nominations and expected an easy win against the hapless incumbent mayor John P. O’Brien. At the last minute, however, Joseph V. McKee entered the race as the nominee of the new “Recovery Party.” McKee was a formidable opponent because he was sponsored by Bronx Democratic boss Edward J. Flynn and apparently was favored by President Franklin Roosevelt. La Guardia made corruption his main campaign issue. The campaign was a dirty affair, and saw mud slung three ways, with La Guardia denounced as a far-left “Red,” O’Brien as a pawn of the bosses, and McKee as an anti-Semite. La Guardia won the election. His victory was based on a complex coalition of regular Republicans (mostly middle class Germans in the boroughs outside Manhattan), a minority of reform-minded Democrats, some Socialists, a large proportion of middle-class Jews, and the great majority of Italians. The Italians had been loyal to Tammany over the years, but their switch to La Guardia in this election proved decisive.



La Guardia and Roosevelt

La Guardia came to office as mayor in January 1934 with five main goals:

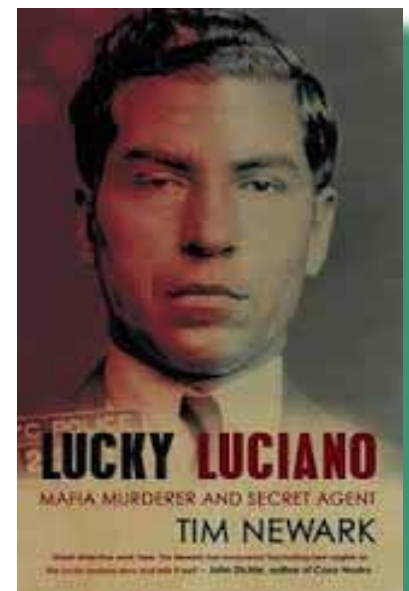
- Restore the financial health of New York City and break free from the bankers' control;
- Expand the federally funded work-relief program for the unemployed in the city;
- End corruption in government and racketeering in key sectors of the economy of the city;
- Replace patronage with a merit-based civil service; and
- Modernize the infrastructure of the city, especially transportation and parks.

He achieved most of the first four goals in his first hundred days, helped by the fact that FDR gave him 20% of the entire national CWA (Civil Works Administration) budget for work relief. (The city benefitted from its being favored by the New Deal for the funding of public works projects.) He then collaborated closely with Robert Moses, combined with support from the governor, Democrat Herbert Lehman, to upgrade the decaying infrastructure.

La Guardia governed in an uneasy alliance with New York's Jews and liberal WASPs, together with Italian and German ethnic groups. He was not an orthodox Republican. He also ran as the nominee of the American Labor Party, a union-dominated anti-Tammany left-wing group that supported Franklin D. Roosevelt for president beginning in 1936. La Guardia supported Roosevelt, chairing the Committee of Independent Voters for Roosevelt and Wallace with Senator George Norris during the 1940 presidential election.

La Guardia was the city's first Italian-American mayor, but was not a typical Italian New Yorker. He was a Republican Episcopalian who had grown up in Arizona, and had a Triestine Jewish mother and a Catholic-turned-atheist father. He reportedly spoke several languages, including Hebrew, Croatian, German, Italian, and Yiddish. He was also a very active Freemason.

He loathed the gangsters who brought a negative stereotype and shame to the Italian community. His first action as mayor was to order the chief of police to arrest mob boss Lucky Luciano on whatever charges could be found. La Guardia then went after the gangsters with a vengeance, stating in a radio address to the people of New York in his high-pitched, squeaky voice, "Let's drive the bums out of town." In 1934 he went on a search-and-destroy mission, which he carried out with gusto, looking for mob boss Frank Costello's slot machines, rounding up thousands of the "one armed bandits," swinging a sledgehammer and dumping them off a barge into the water for





Fiorello LaGuardia on TIME cover, Aug. 2, 1937.

the newspapers and media. In 1935 he appeared at the Bronx Terminal Market to institute a city-wide ban on the sale, display, and possession of artichokes, whose prices were being inflated by the mobs. When prices went down, the ban was lifted. In 1936, he had special prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey, a future Republican presidential candidate, single out Lucky Luciano for prosecution. Dewey led a successful investigation into Luciano’s lucrative prostitution operation, eventually sending Luciano to jail with a 30–50 year sentence. (The case was made into the 1937 movie *Marked Woman*, starring Bette Davis).

His admirers credited him for, among other things, restoring the economic lifeblood of New York City during and after the Great Depression. He is given credit for many massive public works programs administered by Robert Moses, his powerful Parks Commissioner, and which employed thousands of voters. His

relentless lobbying for federal funds allowed New York to develop its economic infrastructure.

To obtain large-scale federal money he became a close partner of Roosevelt and New Deal agencies such as CWA, PWA and WPA, which poured \$1.1 billion into the city from 1934–39. In turn, he gave FDR a showcase for New Deal achievements, and he helped defeat FDR’s political enemies in Tammany Hall (the Democratic Party machine in Manhattan). He and Moses built highways, bridges and tunnels, transforming the physical landscape of New York City. The West Side Highway, East River Drive, Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, Triborough Bridge, and two airports (Floyd Bennett Field, and, later, La Guardia Airport) were built during his mayoralty. Responding to popular disdain for the sometimes corrupt City Council, he successfully proposed a reformed 1938 City Charter that created a powerful new New York City Board of Estimate, similar to a corporate board of directors.

The year 1939 was a busy one for him. He opened the 1939 New York World’s Fair at Flushing



New York World’s Fair, Flushing Meadows, 1939.

Meadows-Corona Park, in Queens; opened New York Municipal Airport No. 2 in Queens (later renamed Fiorello H. La Guardia Field), and had the city buy out the Interborough Rapid Transit Company, thus completing the public takeover of the subway system. He was an outspoken and early critic of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. In a public address in 1934, La Guardia warned that “part of Hitler’s program is the complete annihilation of the Jews in Germany.”

In 1941 during the run-up to American involvement in World War II, President Roosevelt appointed La Guardia first director of the new Office of Civilian Defense (OCD). (Roosevelt was an admirer of La Guardia; after meeting Winston Churchill for the first time he described Churchill as “an English Mayor La Guardia”). The OCD was the national agency responsible for preparing for blackouts, training air raid wardens, and setting up sirens and shelters in case of German air raids. The government knew that such air raids were highly improbable, but the goal was to psychologically mobilize many thousands of middle class volunteers to make them feel part of the war effort. La Guardia remained Mayor of New York during this time, shuttling back and forth with three days in Washington and four in the City in an effort to do justice to two Herculean jobs. On top of this, he still performed other gestures, such as arranging police protection with his personal assurances for local artists Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, when they were threatened by Nazi supporters for their new patriotic comic book superhero, Captain America. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, his role was turned over to a full-time director of OCD, James M. Landis.



With US entry into World War II, New York City’s unemployment ended and the city was the gateway for military supplies and soldiers sent to Europe, with the Brooklyn Navy Yard providing many of the warships and the garment trade providing uniforms. The city’s great financiers, however, were less important in decision-making than policy-makers in Washington, and very high wartime taxes were not offset by heavy war spending. New York was not a center of heavy industry and did not see a wartime boom as defense plants were built elsewhere. FDR refused to make La Guardia a general and was unable to provide fresh money for the city. By 1944 the city was short on funds to pay for La Guardia’s new programs. La Guardia’s popularity had slipped away during the war years, and he ran so poorly in straw polls in 1945 that he did not run for a fourth term.

He was known for his regular radio talks he gave while in office. Most popular of these was during a newspaper strike in July, 1945, when he used his radio time to read the comics to New Yorkers. After leaving office, he continued on radio with two different shows, one of which was quickly canceled due to his proclivity for bold statements.

In March 1946, he came out of retirement and was made the director general for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). He stayed in this position until December, 1946. Suffering from pancreatic cancer, he died on September 20, 1947 at the age of 64 in his home at 5020 Goodridge Avenue, in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, and is interred at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

LEGACY

Fiorello La Guardia left behind a legacy that included not only physical improvements in New York City, but a cleaner city government. Known for his love of music, he was famous for spontaneously conducting professional and student orchestras and was instrumental in the creation of the High School of Music & Art in 1936, now renamed the Fiorello H. La Guardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. He is the namesake of New York's La Guardia Airport, La Guardia High School, La Guardia Community College, and other parks and buildings around New York City.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from Biography.com, Wikipedia, and online Encyclopedia Britannica.
