

Issues and Men

Fiorello H. La Guardia

WHAT manner of man is this La Guardia who has been nominated for mayor of New York? This is the question I encounter at every turn. Not unnaturally people all over the country are interested in the man whom the local reform forces have picked to head the fusion movement against Tammany in this critical year in our nation's history. What happens in the metropolis in the next two years will be enormously important and may even influence deeply the conduct of other municipalities. The city's financial situation is critical. If times do not improve, the keeping alive of foodless and workless citizens will become a problem transcending every other. Never did New York more greatly need a statesman and a man with tolerance, broad vision, and a kindly heart in the mayor's chair. A bigot, or a reactionary, or just a plain stupid man like the present Tammany mayor, John P. O'Brien, might do infinite harm.

Let it be said at once that Mr. La Guardia, or Major, or Congressman La Guardia if you prefer one of these titles, is not a conventional person. Those who think that the greatest city of America should be presided over by a highly educated and sophisticated person of the type of Seth Low or Nicholas Murray Butler will not be satisfied with the choice of Mr. La Guardia. He is short—quite short—rotund, and his personal appearance shows his Italian origin. If elected he will not shine, as did the last reform mayor of New York, John Purroy Mitchel, in the salon of General and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt. But Fiorello La Guardia will never for one moment be out of touch with or fail to understand the humble people of New York City and their needs, for he is himself as much a self-made man as is Al Smith. He too was born in New York, but he got part of his limited education in Prescott, Arizona. At the age of nineteen he was employed in the American consulates at Budapest and Trieste. When he was twenty-two he was appointed American consular agent at Fiume, where he served for two years. He then returned to New York and for three years served as interpreter at Ellis Island, where he certainly must have learned many lessons in the way a government should not treat those who enter its doors.

Meanwhile the young interpreter was studying law at New York University, beginning his law practice in 1910. Five years later he became deputy attorney-general of the State and was a member of the Sixty-Fifth Congress in 1917. He is one of the few members of the House of Representatives who, after having voted the country into the war, had the simple decency to go abroad and offer themselves as targets for the bullets to which they had condemned the flower of our youth. It is hard to think of La Guardia as a flying officer. He began as a first lieutenant and was promoted, not for political reasons but for efficiency, to be captain and then major commanding the American flying force which was attached to night and day bombing squadrons on the Italian front. He came back from the war without any illusions, knowing perfectly well that it was not

what it seemed and determined to do his best to make the post bellum world a liberal as well as a better one. Since his return to Congress his whole career has been a fighting one. He has been ridiculed, jeered at, lied about. He has been called a little Italian crook and a cheap politician. Big business has hated him as it has hated few men in Congress. But year in and year out he gamely fought his fight, and before his defeat for reelection, after fourteen years of service, won recognition as about the most efficient Congressman in protesting against Hooverism and the sale of government to the big-business interests.

Naturally he made mistakes. Often he seemed to go off half-cocked and then sometimes time would catch up with him and demonstrate the correctness of the positions he had taken. It is frankly to be confessed that he did not do very well when he ran for mayor in 1929 on the fusion ticket. The vote that he got in 1929 was almost the lowest ever polled by an anti-Tammany fusion candidate. But as we said then, so we say now: subject to certain political limitations, he has been a genuine progressive, has usually had the courage of his convictions, has been sound on questions of war and peace, and has repeatedly shown a readiness to sacrifice his career for his beliefs. He once even ran for Congress on the Socialist ticket when the Republicans refused to renominate him because of his independence—and he won.

Personally, it has seemed to me that the best leader for the fusion forces would have been Norman Thomas—I do not believe that La Guardia will quarrel with me for saying so. But I am heartily for the Major's election because I believe that he will bring to the mayoralty what it most needs—a warm heart inspired by the opportunity to serve the common people. I hope he realizes that the city of New York is not going to be redeemed by merely giving it another good reform administration; there must be radical changes in the charter and the form of the city governmental structure, and above all we must have proportional representation, which is now being urged by many who have hitherto failed to see how necessary that change has become. I feel sure he will be a far better candidate this year; for one thing the situation is vastly more favorable.

Finally, let me tell my readers that there would have been no fusion ticket at all if it had not been for a singularly fine, able, fearless, and devoted citizen of New York, Charles C. Burlingham. If any man deserves the title of the First Citizen of this municipality, it is Mr. Burlingham. If there is any good liberal cause which has not had his aid and support, I should like to know what it is. Only his age and his modesty, I believe, prevented his being compelled to be a candidate himself. Isn't it wicked that when there are Americans of this admirable type we get so damnably few of them into our public life?

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