Fiorello La Guardia

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Fiorello Henry LaGuardia (pronounced /fiə rɛloʊ lə 'gwɑrdiə/; born Fiorello Enrico La Guardia;
December 11, 1882 – September 20, 1947; he himself wrote his name as a single word with no space between the first "a" and the capitalized "G" which follows) was Mayor of New York for three terms from 1934 to 1945 as a liberal Republican. Previously he was elected to Congress in 1916 and 1918, and again from 1922 through 1930. Irascible, energetic and charismatic, he craved publicity and is acclaimed as one of the three or four greatest mayors in American history. Only five feet tall, he was called "the Little Flower" (*Fiorello* is Italian for "little flower").

LaGuardia, a nominal Republican who appealed across party lines, was very popular in New York during the 1930s. As a New Dealer, he supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat, and in turn Roosevelt heavily funded the city and cut off patronage from LaGuardia's foes. La Guardia revitalized New York City and restored public faith in City Hall. He unified the transit system; directed the building of low-cost public housing, public playgrounds, and parks; constructed airports; reorganized the police force; defeated the powerful Tammany Hall political machine; and reestablished merit employment in place of patronage jobs.^[1]

LaGuardia was a domineering leader who verged on authoritarianism but whose reform politics were carefully tailored to reflect and exploit the sensibilities of his kaleidoscopic constituency. He defeated a corrupt Democratic machine, presided during a depression and a world war, made the city the model for New Deal welfare and public works programs, and championed immigrants and ethnic minorities. He succeeded with the support of a sympathetic president. He secured his place in history as a tough-minded reform mayor who helped clean out corruption, bring in gifted experts, and fix upon the city a broad sense of responsibility for its own citizens. His administration engaged new groups that had been kept out of the political system, gave New York its modern infrastructure, and raised expectations of new levels of urban possibility. He synthesized the human sympathy of Tammany ward heelers with the honesty and efficiency of

Fiorello La Guardia



99th Mayor of New York City

In office

January 1, 1934 – December 31, 1945

Preceded by John P. O'Brien

Succeeded by William O'Dwyer

Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York's 20th district

In office

March 4, 1923 - March 3, 1933

Preceded by Isaac Siegel

Succeeded by James J. Lanzetta

Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York's 14th district

In office

March 4, 1917 - December 31, 1919

Preceded by Michael F. Farley

Succeeded by Nathan D. Perlman

Personal details

Born Fiorello Henry LaGuardia

December 11, 1882

Greenwich Village, Manhattan, New

York

Died September 20, 1947 (aged 64)

the good government reformers.

The intemperate mayor was rough on his staffers and left no doubt who was in charge. He lost his intuitive touch during the war years, when the federal money stopped flowing in, and never realized that he had created far more infrastructure than the city could afford. "LaGuardia represented a dangerous style of personal rule hitched to Bronx, New York

Political Republican
party

Religion Episcopalian

Signature

a transcendent purpose," according to Thomas Kessner, LaGuardia's biographer. "People would be afraid of allowing anybody to take that kind of power today." [1][2]

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Early life and career

LaGuardia was born in Greenwich Village in New York City to an Italian lapsed-Catholic father, Achille

La Guardia, from Cerignola, Italy, and a Triestine mother of Jewish origin, [3] Irene Coen Luzzato; he was raised an Episcopalian and practised that religion all his life. His middle name "Enrico" was changed to "Henry" (the English form of Enrico) when he was a child.

He moved to Arizona with his family, where his father had a bandmaster position in the U.S. Army. LaGuardia attended public schools and high school in Prescott, Arizona.^[4]

After his father was discharged from his bandmaster position in 1898, Fiorello lived in Trieste, Italy (then part of Austria-Hungary), his mother's hometown.^[5]

La Guardia joined the State Department and served in U.S. consulates in Budapest, Trieste, and Rijeka (1901–1906). Fiorello returned to the U.S. to continue his education at New York University. In 1907-10 he worked for New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children as an interpreter for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration at the Ellis Island immigrant station.

He graduated from New York University School of Law in 1910. and was admitted to the bar the same year and began a law practice in New York City.^[4]

Marriages and family

LaGuardia married twice. His first wife was Thea Almerigotti, whom he married on March 8, 1919. In 1920 they had a daughter, Fioretta Thea, who died May 8, 1921. His wife died of tuberculosis on November 29, 1921, at the age of 26.^[6] He married Marie Fisher in 1929; they adopted two children.

Early political career



Fiorello LaGuardia between two Italian officers in front of a Ca.44, circa 1918

Elected to Congress

LaGuardia became Deputy Attorney General of New York in 1914. In 1916, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he had a reputation as a fiery and devoted reformer. As a congressman, LaGuardia 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. [7] LaGuardia took office on March 4, 1917 but soon was commissioned in the United States Army Air Service rising to the rank of major in command of a unit of Ca.44 bombers on the Italian-Austrian front in World War I. LaGuardia resigned his seat in Congress on December 31, 1919.

President of the Board of Aldermen

In 1919, LaGuardia 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 that office in 1918 when Alfred E. Smith, who had been elected President in 1917, became Governor ^[8] Michael "Dynamite Mike" Kelly, commander of New York's Third "Shamrock" Battalion, also joined the race. Tammany Hall looked with alarm upon Kelly's entrance into the campaign and tried to persuade him to withdraw his candidacy and throw his support behind Mr. Moran. When he refused, Tammany went to the New York Supreme Court and successfully sued to keep Kelly's name off the ballot. ^[9] When Election Day arrived, over 3,500 of Kelly's supporters wrote his name on the ballot. ^[9] This number was sufficient to defeat Moran, who lost to LaGuardia by only 1,363 votes. ^[10]

Return to Congress



LaGuardia during his time in Congress, circa 1929.

LaGuardia, running as a Republican, won a seat in Congress from the Italian stronghold of East Harlem in 1922 and served in the House

until March 3, 1933.^[11] A leading liberal reformer, LaGuardia sponsored labor legislation and railed against immigration quotas. His major legislation was the Norris-LaGuardia Act, cosponsored 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 wide power in defining and restricting their jurisdiction, the act forbids 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 acts

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. [12][13]

Foreign policy

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 did not approve of Lenin. Unlike most progressive colleagues, such as 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; he was never close to the Socialist party and never bothered to read Karl Marx. [14]

Champion of the progressive movement

As a congressman, LaGuardia was a tireless and vocal champion of progressive causes, from allowing

KOENIG ORDERED VIGILANCE

Warned Republican Chairmen to Stay by the Ballot Boxes and Scrutinize Count.

CURRAN DEFEATS BOYLE

Five Republican Votes in Board of Estimate Assured—Clean-Cut Result in Supreme Court.

New York Times Front Page Nov. 5, 1919 more immigration and removing U.S. 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, LaGuardia fought for progressive income taxes, greater government oversight of Wall Street, and national employment insurance for workers idled by the Great Depression.^[15]

Defeats in 1929 and 1932

As a Republican La Guardia had to support Harding in 1920; he had to be silent in the 1928 campaign although he favored Al Smith, a Democrat. In 1929, he lost the election for mayor to incumbent Democrat Jimmy Walker by a landslide. [16] In 1932, he was defeated for re-election to the House by James J. Lanzetta, the Democratic candidate. 1932 was not a good year for Republican candidates like LaGuardia, and the 20th Congressional district was shifting from a Jewish and Italian-American population to a Puerto Rican population.

Mayor of New York

1933 election

Walker and his Irish-run Tammany Hall were forced out of office by scandal and LaGuardia was determined to replace him. First 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, 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 hapless incumbent Mayor John P. O'Brien. At the last minute 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. LaGuardia made corruption his main issue. The campaign saw mud slung three ways, with LaGuardia denounced as a far-left "Red," O'Brien as a pawn of the bosses, and McKee as an anti-Semite. LaGuardia's win 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; their switch proved decisive. [17]

Agenda

LaGuardia came to office in January 1934 with five main goals^[18]:

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

He achieved most of the first four goals in his first hundred days, as FDR gave him 20% of the entire national CWA budget for work relief. LaGuardia then collaborated closely with Robert Moses, with support from the governor, Democrat Herbert Lehman, to upgrade the decaying infrastructure. The city was favored

by the New Deal in terms of funding for public works projects.

Ethnic politics

LaGuardia governed in an uneasy alliance with New York's Jews and liberal WASPs, together with Italian and German ethnics.^[19]

LaGuardia 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. LaGuardia supported Roosevelt, chairing the Independent Committee for Roosevelt and Wallace with Senator George Norris during the 1940 presidential election.

LaGuardia 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 ^[3] and a Catholic-turned-atheist Italian father. He reportedly spoke several languages, including Hebrew, Croatian, German, Italian, and Yiddish. LaGuardia was also a very active Freemason.



Fiorello LaGuardia statue at LaGuardia Place in Greenwich Village, NYC

Crime

LaGuardia loathed the gangsters who brought a negative stereotype and shame to the Italian community. [20] His first action as mayor was to order the chief of police to arrest mob boss Lucky Luciano on whatever charges could be found. LaGuardia 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, LaGuardia went on a search-and-destroy mission looking for mob boss Frank Costello's slot machines, which La Guardia executed with gusto, rounding up thousands of the "one armed bandits", swinging a sledgehammer and dumping them off a barge into the water for the newspapers and media. In 1935, La Guardia appeared at The Bronx Terminal Market to institute a city-wide ban on the sale, display, and possession of artichokes, whose prices were inflated by mobs. When prices went down, the ban was lifted.^[21] In 1936, LaGuardia 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.

LaGuardia proved successful in shutting down the burlesque theaters, whose naughty shows offended his puritanical sensibilities.^[22]

Public works

LaGuardia's admirers credit 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 his powerful Parks Commissioner Robert Moses and employed thousands of voters. The mayor's relentless lobbying for federal funds allowed New York to develop its economic infrastructure.

To obtain large-scale federal money the mayor became a close partner of Roosevelt and New Deal agencies such as CWA, PWA and WPA, which poured \$1.1 billion into the city 1934-39. In turn he gave FDR a showcase for New Deal achievement, 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 were built during his mayoralty.

He succeeded in creating major commercial airports (Floyd Bennett Field, and later LaGuardia Airport) within city limits.

1939

1939 was a busy year, as he opened the New York World's Fair at Flushing Meadow, Queens, opened New York Municipal Airport #2 in Queens (later renamed Fiorello H. LaGuardia Field), and had the city buy out the Interborough Rapid Transit Company, thus completing the public takeover of the subway system. When the newspapers went on strike he read the funny papers on the radio.

Reform

Responding to popular disdain for the sometimes corrupt City Council, LaGuardia 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.

Germany

He was an outspoken and early critic of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. In a public address in 1934, LaGuardia warned, "Part of Hitler's program is the complete annihilation of the Jews in Germany." In 1937, speaking before the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress, LaGuardia called for the creation of a special pavilion at the upcoming New York World's Fair "a chamber of horrors" for "that brown-shirted fanatic". [23]

LaGuardia's sister, Gemma LaGuardia Gluck, was arrested by the Germans in a roundup of Jews in Hungary in 1944. She was held under privileged conditions at Ravensbrück concentration camp and released after the war. ^[24]

Courts

According to *Try and Stop Me* by Bennett Cerf, LaGuardia often officiated in municipal court. He handled routine misdemeanor cases, including, as Cerf wrote, a woman who had stolen a loaf of bread for her starving family. LaGuardia insisted on levying the fine of ten dollars. Then he said "I'm fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a person has to steal bread in order to eat!" He passed a hat and gave the fines to the defendant, who left the court with \$47.50.^[25]

World War II

In 1941, during the run-up to American involvement in World War II, President Roosevelt appointed LaGuardia as the first director of the new Office of Civilian Defense (OCD). Roosevelt was an admirer of

LaGuardia, after meeting Winston Churchill for the first time he described him as an "English Mayor LaGuardia." [citation needed] The OCD was the national agency responsible for preparing for blackouts, air raid wardens, sirens, and shelters in case of German air raids. The government knew that such air raids were impossible but the goal was to psychologically mobilize many thousands of middle class volunteers to make them feel part of the war effort. LaGuardia remained Mayor of New York, shuttling back and forth with three days in Washington and four in the city in an effort to do justice to two herculean jobs. After Pearl Harbor in December 1941 his role was turned over to full-time director of OCD, James M. Landis. LaGuardia's popularity slipped away and he ran so poorly in straw polls in 1945 that he did not run for a fourth term. [26]

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 provided 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^[27]

FDR refused to make him a general and was unable to provide fresh money for the city. By 1944 LaGuardia was frantically juggling the books to pay the city's bills. His successors realized that New York City could not support his fabulous infrastructure and high wages and pensions for teachers, police and city workers without borrowing more and more until it faced bankruptcy, which came in 1975. [28]

Later life and death

LaGuardia was the director general for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in 1946.

A man of short stature, LaGuardia's height is sometimes given as 5 feet 0 inches (1.52 m). According to an article in the *New York Times*, however, his actual height was 5 feet 2 inches (1.57 m).^[29]

He became a member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia music fraternity.

He died of pancreatic cancer in his home at 5020 Goodridge Avenue, in the Riverdale section of the Bronx^[30] at the age of 64 and is interred at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.^[31]



The grave of Fiorello LaGuardia

Legacy

Historians have recognized La Guardia as the greatest mayor in New York City history, and perhaps the greatest in the United States.^[32]

Memorials

■ LaGuardia Airport, the smallest of New York's three major currently operating airports, bears his name; the airport was voted the "greatest airport in the world" by the worldwide aviation community in 1960. [citation needed] La Guardia ordered construction of the airport after his TWA flight arrived at Newark, which is in the neighboring state of New Jersey. His airline ticket had an arrival city that read "New York"; the landing in Newark instead outraged him and caused him to order the plane to fly to Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field. Not long after, the city voted to build a new airport in La Guardia's name.



The footstone of Fiorello LaGuardia

- The United States Postal Service honored him with a 14¢ postage stamp.
- LaGuardia Place, a street in Greenwich Village which runs from Houston Street to Washington Square, is named for La Guardia; there is also a statue of the mayor on that street.
- La Guardia loved music, and was famous for spontaneously conducting professional and student orchestras. He once said that the "most hopeful accomplishment" of his administration as mayor was the creation of the High School of Music & Art in 1936, now the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. [33]
- In addition to LaGuardia High School, a number of other institutions are also named for him, including LaGuardia Community College.
- He was the subject of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway musical *Fiorello!*.
- La Guardia Bridge in Prescott, Arizona on North Montezuma Avenue. [citation needed]
- In 1940, La Guardia received The Hundred Year Association of New York's Gold Medal Award "in recognition of outstanding contributions to the City of New York".
- *Rehov LaGuardia* (LaGuardia Street) is a major road and the name of a highway interchange on the Ayalon Highway in Tel Aviv, Israel.
- "Ulica Fiorella La Guardije" (Fiorello La Guardia Street) is the name of a street in Rijeka, Croatia. La Guardia served in the U.S. consulate in Rijeka during the period before World War I when the city was under Austro-Hungarian rule and was known under its Italian name Fiume.
- On Staten Island, Masonic lodge #1130 at 236 Main Street is named after him.
- He got passed the laws to ban pinball machines as gambling devices around 1939, and many photos exist of him destroying the games prohibition-style, with sledge hammers or in large fires. The laws stayed on the books until 1976.
- Because LaGardia was an outspoken Zionist there are several streets that are named after him in Israel, specifically the LaGardia Interchange in the Ayalon Highway in Tel-Aviv.

In popular culture

- LaGuardia was the subject of the hit 1959 musical "Fiorello!". He was portrayed by actor Tom Bosley. The show ran for two years and closed in 1961
- In *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth, he is depicted as one of the leaders of the opposition against president Charles Lindbergh.
- In *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell*, he is portrayed by Phil Arnold.
- In the timeline of Robert Heinlein's utopian novel "For Us, the Living" written in 1939 but only published posthumously in 2003 La Guardia is elected President in 1951 and serves two terms as a militant reforming president, effectively nationalizing the banking system and instituting a system of Social Credit.

See also

- LaGuardia and Wagner Archives
- LaGuardia Commission, a study on the effects of marijuana in U.S. society
- New York City mayoral elections for votes in 1929, 1933, 1937 and 1941.

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External links

• Obituary, New York Times, September 21, 1947 La Guardia Is Dead; City Pays Homage To 3-

Time Mayor (http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1211.html)

- La Guardia and Wagner Archives/Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection (http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/laguardiacol/)
 - oral interviews from the Fiorello La Guardia Oral History database (http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/defaultb.htm)
- Tiziano Thomas Dossena, "Fiorello La Guardia" in *Bridge Apulia USA*, No.3 (Italy, 1998) (http://www.dossena.org/tiziano/laguardia.html)
- 1919 passport photo, Fiorello LaGuardia (http://www.flickr.com/photos/puzzlemaster/5429338693/in/photostream)

	United States House of Representatives	
Preceded by Michael F. Farley	Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York's 14th congressional district March 4, 1917–December 31, 1919 (resigned)	Succeeded by Nathan D. Perlman
Preceded by Isaac Siegel	Member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York's 20th congressional district March 4, 1923–March 3, 1933	Succeeded by James J. Lanzetta
	Party political offices	
Preceded by Frank D. Waterman	Republican Nominee for Mayor of New York City 1929	Succeeded by Lewis H. Pounds
	Political offices	
Preceded by John P. O'Brien	Mayor of New York City 1934–1945	Succeeded by William O'Dwyer
	Government offices	
Preceded by None	Director of Civilian Defense 1941 – 1942	Succeeded by James Landis
	Non-profit organization positions	
Preceded by Herbert H. Lehman	Director-General of the UNRRA 1946	Succeeded by General Lowell Rooks

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