



City of Ambition: FDR, LaGuardia, and the Making of Modern New York

Mason B. Williams

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“Fascinating. . . Williams tells the story of La Guardia and Roosevelt with insight and elegance.”—Edward Glaeser, *New York Times Book Review*

City of Ambition is a brilliant history of the New Deal and its role in the making of modern New York City. The story of a remarkable collaboration between Franklin Roosevelt and Fiorello La Guardia, this is a case study in creative political leadership in the midst of a devastating depression. Roosevelt and La Guardia were an odd couple: patrician president and immigrant mayor, fireside chat and tabloid cartoon, pragmatic Democrat and reform Republican. But together, as leaders of America’s two largest governments in the depths of the Great Depression, they fashioned a route to recovery for the nation and the master plan for a great city.

Roosevelt and his “Brain Trust”—shrewd, energetic advisors such as Harold Ickes and Harry Hopkins—sought to fight the Depression by channeling federal resources through America’s cities and counties. La Guardia had replaced Tammany Hall cronies with policy experts, such as the imperious Robert Moses, who were committed to a strong public sector. The two leaders worked closely together. La Guardia had a direct line of communication with FDR and his staff, often visiting Washington carrying piles of blueprints. Roosevelt relied on the mayor as his link to the nation’s cities and their needs. The combination was potent. La Guardia’s Gotham became a laboratory for New Deal reform. Roosevelt’s New Deal transformed city initiatives into major programs such as the Works Progress Administration, which changed the physical face of the United States. Together they built parks, bridges, and schools; put the unemployed to work; and strengthened the Progressive vision of government as serving the public purpose.

Today everyone knows the FDR Drive as a main route to La Guardia Airport. The intersection of steel and concrete speaks to a pair of dynamic leaders whose collaboration lifted a city and a nation. Here is their story.

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