1

Bridging Different Worlds

The United States in the years from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the century was a country going through enormous changes. Industrialization spurred monopolization and concentration of wealth while providing Americans with cheaper and more plentiful products. Declining prices for farm products led farmers to form protest organizations to attempt to redress their grievances. In this age of materialism and greed, corporate influence in politics grew substantially. Union activity, some of it violent, intensified. The immigrants overwhelmed cities, particularly after 1882, when the source of immigrations shifted from northern and western to southern and Eastern Europe, and the numbers increased. By the end of the nineteenth century, New York had grown substantially in area as well with the annexation of the city of Brooklyn, the expansion of New York into Manhattan's northern sections, and the addition of the locales of Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx. The city population stood at approximately 3.5 million, the nation's largest city.

New York City became the center of immigrant arrival with Ellis Island opening in New York harbor in 1892 as the main United States entry point. From 1892 to 1924, over 14 million immigrants disembarked at the Island, and although many went elsewhere in the country, New York's foreign-born population rose to 14% of its inhabitants. In addition New York experienced a substantial migration of Southern Blacks fleeing destitution and violence. Most new arrivals, whether domestic or foreign, came poverty-stricken, and desperately needing a job and housing. Adding to the ethnic mix already present, the newcomers

Fiorello La Guardia: Ethnicity, Reform, and Urban Development, Second Edition.
Ronald H. Bayor.

helped create a diversity unique in the world and exacerbated a number of urban problems particularly in relation to poverty and housing. Certain neighborhoods evolved into ethnic enclaves and ghettoes, areas where a foreign language would be the main speech on the streets, stores catered to ethnic tastes, foreign-language newspapers were widely read, and politicians wooed groups with ethnically based campaigns.

These ethnic groups also competed and conflicted with each other, trying to secure limited resources, challenging cultural values, and at times tearing the city apart in race riots and ethnic conflicts. New York's housing, jobs, and political positions all became part of the competition that emerged especially between the Irish, Jews, Germans, Italians, and Blacks. Furthermore, what happened in their ancestral homes often impacted New York's politics. The eventual rise of Russian Communism, Italian Fascism, and German Nazism had strong implications for New York's immigrant populations.

As New York emerged into the twentieth century, problems abounded and opportunities appeared. The new population's poverty resulted in the growth of slum housing, sweatshop conditions in factories, and crime. Jobs became available with the building of the New York subways, opening in 1904, and with the growth of the garment industry. But these jobs did not pay much, workmen's compensation and unemployment insurance were not yet available, employers abused child labor, and they fought any union attempts to better the workers' lives.

Many Americans became concerned about this poverty in the midst of plenty, corrupt city governments, exploitation of workers, child labor, and the threat the new industrial wealth posed to democratic institutions. As the nation tried to come to terms with industrialization and urbanization, responses varied. Some, such as financier J.P. Morgan, fit well into this period and reaped enormous profit from it. Other, like Yale professor William Graham Sumner, became spokesmen for Social Darwinism, which justified the great wealth of the corporate entrepreneurs. Still others railed against the essence of the Gilded Age and offered criticisms and suggestions that would create a more equitable system and smooth away the harsh edges of nineteenth-century capitalism.

Fiorello Enrico (later Henry) La Guardia, born on December 11, 1882, in New York City in the midst of this turmoil, was to provide a unique response to the economic and social upheavals of his time. La Guardia bridged the era between the early years of protest against the industrial system and the later outburst of reform in the 1930s, and he took part in all the major issues and events of this period: immigration and ethnicity, Progressivism, the fight against the corrupt urban political machines, World War I, the 1920s conservative and nativist reaction, the 1930s economic collapse, Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal reforms, World War II and its immediate aftermath. He emerged as a spokesman for good government, unions, immigrants, Blacks, the urban poor, miners, and farmers. Fiorello connected the philosophies and activism of an earlier generation of reformers – among them, housing crusader Jacob Riis, Theodore Roosevelt, and Senators George Norris, Robert La Follette, and William Borah – to the later reformers of the New Deal generation. He interacted both with the older reform generation and with his own cohort in New York. The latter group provided various alternatives for coming to terms with the industrial age. James J. (Jimmy) Walker, born in 1881 and later New York mayor, accepted and profited from the urban corruption of his times. Franklin D. Roosevelt, born in 1882, brought reform with a new and surprising influence that uplifted the nation as well as New York City. Future governor and presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith, born in 1873, Robert F. Wagner, born in 1877 and future US Senator, and Salvatore Cotillo, born in 1886 and later justice on the New York State Supreme Court, represented the Tammany political machine's approach to needed reform. (Tammany was New York County's Democratic party organization).

The bridging of a generational gap among the reformers is only part of La Guardia's story. He also connected the values of the Old and New Worlds, immigrants and the native-born, and western and eastern America. As such, La Guardia linked a New York City immigrant reform tradition represented by the socialist-oriented garment unions with the reform of middle America's farmer-labor groups. Moreover, as biographer Arthur Mann relates, La Guardia was "a marginal man who lived on the

edge of many cultures." In addition to English, he could speak Yiddish, French, Italian, Hungarian, German, and Croatian. "Half Jewish and half Italian, born in [New York's] Greenwich Village yet raised in Arizona, married first to a Catholic and then to a Lutheran but himself … an Episcopalian, Fiorello La Guardia was a Mr. Brotherhood week all by himself." Like New York, he was a product of diverse elements, all of which explain his personality, commitment, and accomplishments.

Family Background

When Fiorello was born in 1882 in an ethnically diverse section of New York's Greenwich Village, large-scale Italian and eastern European Jewish migration was just beginning and would reach its peak in the early years of the twentieth century. His parents, Achille Luigi Carlo La Guardia and Irene Coen, had arrived in New York in 1880. Achille's music brought the La Guardias to the United States. His skill as a cornetist and arranger had led him in 1878 to tour the United States with Adelina Patti, a well-known Italian opera star. Achille, captivated by the New World, resolved during the tour to come back to live in America. After returning to Europe, he met and married Irene in 1880 in Trieste, Austria-Hungary, her birthplace, and then immigrated to the United States. Gemma, a daughter, was born in 1881, followed by Fiorello (Little Flower) in 1882, and Richard in 1887. Had the La Guardias stayed in New York City, Fiorello would have grown up in a milieu of Irish political control through the Tammany machine and of competition among often contentious and striving ethnic groups over housing, jobs, political positions, and criminal operations. This environment nurtured Jimmy Walker, Al Smith, and Robert Wagner, who moved easily up the political ladder, but reluctantly offered only a few political positions to Italians. If America faced serious issues during a period of industrial growth and heavy immigration, New York City, where every problem seemed magnified, experienced wrenching times. Crime, poverty, ethnic conflict, corruption, labor violence, worker exploitation, disease, and inadequate housing were part of New York life. All these problems grew worse during the 1890s Depression.

To the Frontier

Fiorello would work to relieve these problems as New York's mayor and as a dominant force in the city's political world. However, in 1885, Achille, experiencing difficulty in finding steady work as a musician in New York, joined the army as chief musician in the Eleventh Infantry Regiment and moved his family west. Achille took his bold step of leaving a relatively comfortable New York ethnic world to venture to the unknown western frontier in search of opportunity. Fiorello thereby grew up with a unique childhood experience and a different perspective than he would have learned in New York's overcrowded tenements. The La Guardias moved a number of times – from Fort Sully in North Dakota to Madison Barracks, Sackets Harbor, New York to Fort Huachuca, Arizona Territory; and finally, in 1892, to Whipple Barracks near Prescott, Arizona Territory. By this time, Achille had become a bandmaster. The small western frontier town of Prescott, rather than New York's multiethnic neighborhoods, became Fiorello's childhood home.

The West of the 1880s and 1890s still had elements of frontier life, although they were fast disappearing. Nonetheless, soldiers, cowboys, miners, Indians, gamblers, and outlaws inhabited Fiorello's world. The Indian Wars were in their last years but Arizona Territory contained a number of tribes – Apaches, Hopi, Pima, and Navajos. Sparsely settled but a land in which American civilization and culture expanded rapidly, Arizona Territory and the West represented the area, according to historian Frederick Jackson Turner, writing in 1893, that shaped American life. The new western territories helped form the American characteristics of individualism, nationalism, and democracy. But the West also contained railroad-labor conflicts, and corrupt government Indian agents. All of these aspects of Western life influenced the young Fiorello.

In his autobiography, Fiorello pointed to some particular events in Arizona that, he asserted, shaped his personality, thinking, and subsequent life. For example, La Guardia observed how the Indian agents, all politically appointed, cheated the Indians, "This was," La Guardia stated, "my first contact with 'politicians.' " Fiorello noted that his hatred for professional politicians and political machines began when still a child. Along with the

agents in Fiorello's demonology were professional gamblers, or "tinhorns," an epithet he would frequently hurl at New York's corrupt public officials and gangsters. These early observations coalesced for the impressionable youngster when he later began reading the Sunday edition of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, which the family received in Prescott. This newspaper's incessant attacks on New York's Tammany machine and its revelations of corruption in that city during the 1890s, particularly in the police department, gave more focus to Fiorello's anger at political dishonesty. "A resentment against Tammany was created in me at that time," he later said, "which I admit is to this day almost an obsession." Coupled with a general resentment of authority figures, evident early in his life, La Guardia's later challenge to the established politicians was almost predictable.

Reform Beginnings

The Progressive movement's beginning stages in the 1890s served as the historical and national context for La Guardia's early animosity toward corruption and Tammany. Responding to the myriad social, political, and economic problems Americans faced at that time, various reformers emerged to offer solutions. For example, in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century, reform mayors sought and won election in a number of cities and challenged the political corruption and greedy utility and transportation company officials who through franchise deals and high prices robbed the public. In some cases, such as in Toledo, Ohio with Samuel ("Golden Rule") Jones, elected in 1897, or a few years later in Cleveland with Tom Johnson (1901), dynamic and honest mayors dealt with corruption, made government more efficient, and provided a better existence for their cities' inhabitants.

Progressivism in the early twentieth century built on all of the following: the protests of the Populists (the rural-based reform movement of the 1890s), the good government supporters, the believers in the social gospel (a clerical-based advocacy for social reform), the muckraking journalists (writers who exposed avarice and corruption in American life), and the efforts to provide a better environment for the poor and a more

orderly, conflict-free one for business. From these elements, Progressivism emerged with a thrust toward more democracy, an increase in government power and efficiency in order to solve the many economic and social problems of the country which had been exacerbated by the 1890s Depression, and a moral imperative to deal with the abuses of industrial society.

This period's dominating reform movement attracted many individuals from various backgrounds. Businessmen, clergy, journalists, immigrants, and even Tammany machine politicians such as Al Smith and Robert Wagner became part of this effort. La Guardia also was drawn to Progressivism as his actions showed later. In the early stages of his political career, Fiorello's Progressive philosophy was still forming, but even then his interests and concerns were the same as many of the progressives. In 1937, La Guardia, then mayor of New York City, commented on how much he had been influenced by reading Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives* in 1903. This widely read and influential book, first published in 1890, revealed the terrible living conditions found in New York's slums. With his strong resentment of dishonesty and special privilege, and his moral outrage when "they" (the powerful, corrupt, greedy elements of society) cheated the poor, Fiorello at heart became a progressive long before his thinking about reform fully matured.

In addition to the plight of the Indians, La Guardia was affected by the poor treatment of workers in the late nineteenth century, a time of intense labor–management friction. During this period, workers tried to organize to secure higher wages and shorter hours, but often encountered an implacable management that could call on a sympathetic government for the means to break strikes. Workers' lives were blighted by child labor, long hours with low pay, and little compensation for injuries on the job. The railroad industry consistently ranked among the nation's most abusive. As with many newly settled western areas, Prescott saw extensive railroad construction as the western lines expanded into its territory. La Guardia, a sensitive and thoughtful boy attuned to the suffering of others, watched as the rail officials mistreated their workers building the lines near Prescott. He saw very quickly that the bosses treated the workers, often immigrants, like machines rather than people. "If a laborer was injured he lost his job," noted La Guardia. "Even as a young

boy, this struck me as all wrong, and I thought about it a great deal." According to this future spokesman for worker's rights, the Prescott experience developed his awareness of the need to protect workers. "It was this early glimpse of the condition of working people, of their exploitation and their utter lack of protection under the law, which prompted me to take an interest on their side in society."

In 1894, the Pullman strike shut down the nation's railroads and culminated in a violent outburst. Railroad workers in Eugene Debs' American Railway Union fought for their rights as workers and clashed first with the Pullman Company, and then with a coalition of railroad company executives called the General Managers' Association. Finally, when efforts to get the men back to work under a court injunction failed, the army entered the fray against the workers. La Guardia, who was 12, saw soldiers being used to protect railroad property and to keep laborers form congregating and airing their grievances. He later recalled that he thought at the time that the workers were being treated unjustly and that labor problems could be dealt with in a way that was fair to both workers and management.

Early on, then, La Guardia showed a budding Progressivism, a concern with workers and strikes, and a western sense of individuality and open spaces. He was therefore in perfect tune with the emerging western, and often Republican, progressives such as Robert La Follette and George Norris, whom La Guardia would support later on. As New Deal advisor and La Guardia aide Rexford Tugwell said:

> It must never be forgotten that La Guardia was actually a Westerner, and typically western in his intentions and reactions … His was a breed familiar to American politics. Among his contemporaries – some actually older, some younger than he, but active at the same time – were [Senator Burton K.] Wheeler [Montana], [Senator] Norris [Nebraska], the two La Folletes [the sons of Robert La Follette: Philip and Robert Jr. of Wisconsin], [Governor] Floyd Olson [Minnesota] and numerous associates in the in the House, such as Tom Amlie [Wisconsin]; and these were the people with which he felt a close kinship, with whom he liked to be, and whose motives he understood and approved.

Fiorello viewed himself as a westerner even during his years in New York where he could easily be spotted wearing his western-style hat.

An Outsider

However, one factor made him remain very much an outsider and gave him a different perspective from the western progressives. Fiorello's father was an Italian immigrant and his mother, although born in Trieste, Austria-Hungary, came out of an Italian-Jewish background. Fiorello's identification with the hordes of southern and eastern Europeans streaming into the country in the 1890s connected him forever with these groups just as if he had been reared in New York's crowded immigrant districts. Achille wanted his children to identify with what he viewed as "American." They attended a Protestant Sunday school in Prescott, were raised as Episcopalians, and spoke English at home. However, to his peers in Prescott, La Guardia was an Italian (his material Jewish ancestry not yet being publicly known or emphasized).

One incident reveals how Fiorello's identification affected him. When he was 10, an organ-grinder with a monkey came to Prescott. The children gathered around to watch, and they soon began to taunt La Guardia. They called out, "A dago with a monkey! Hey Fiorello, you're a dago too. Where's your monkey?" La Guardia was mortified, and more so when his father, speaking Italian, asked the organ-grinder to their house for dinner. Fiorello was teased cruelly by the other children because of this incident. The long-term impact was evident after La Guardia had become mayor. He forbade organ-grinders to use New York's streets, an action difficult to explain without knowledge of his embarrassment in Prescott. Nonetheless, the more significant factor is that regardless of his father's efforts, Fiorello was clearly aware that he was a "marginal man," on the outside of American culture. At one point he called himself Frank in order to sound more American, but then reverted to his original name. And years later, when his thoughts turned to seeking the presidency, he often said that his name limited his chances to move up in politics. His sense of "marginality" remained a part of his makeup.

La Guardia, defensive about his ancestry, became a fervent supporter of the immigrant populations and a fighter for the respect due them. As he noted in his autobiography:

> It always annoys me greatly whenever I hear thoughtless people, often raised the easy way, who have never known any of the hardships these immigrant families endured every day, hurl insults at American citizens who have in many cases contributed more to the welfare of this nation than those who look down upon them or turn their noses up to them.

Rage and Resentment

La Guardia combined his sensitivity about his ethnicity and his concern for the have-nots with belligerency that some have attributed to his small stature. As an adult, Fiorello stood at a little over 5 feet tall with a slight build. His sister claimed that Fiorello tried to stand out in other ways – by being aggressive and talkative – and was very self-conscious about his height. In one youthful incident, Fiorello was fighting a taller boy and his fists could not get near the boy's face. Rather than give up, La Guardia found a chair, jumped on top of it, and started fighting again. He never gave up. Later on, when he was mayor and an aide made a remark about a job seeker being too short, La Guardia flew into a rage and shouted, "What's the matter with a little guy? What's the matter with a little guy? What's the matter with a little guy?" And this from a man who always kept a bust of Napoleon on his desk. His belligerence was directed at all those around him, even those he loved and respected. Fiorello at times would curse at his father, and when one of his teachers graded some incorrect math answers as right, Fiorello showed her the mistakes and said, "Look here, teacher, you better learn arithmetic if you are going to teach us." Achille had difficulty controlling his son. Like his father, Fiorello was independent-minded, mischievous, rash, and stubborn.

Rage and resentment and (also like his father) a toughness combined with sensitivity and concern made up Fiorello's character. He loved music, and had a gentle side, but also was as

tough as any street-corner politician. When a child, he learned to play the banjo and cornet from his overly critical father, who screamed at him when he made a mistake. Fiorello would respond by saying, "Keep on screaming Papa, in this way I'll learn." Yet he was also later to be touchy about criticism, mistrustful of others, and resentful toward authority. Like his father, he was a very demanding overseer, unlikely to praise his subordinates, although he was likely to worry about their welfare. The future mayor borrowed his leadership style from his father. The imperious maestro led his band as Fiorello would later lead the city – with a strong hand.

Fiorello loved the leadership role, even as a young boy, and enjoyed being the center of attention. With his short stature and high voice, however, La Guardia did not seem to be someone who would be able to take on the often vicious Tammany and bring New Yorkers into a period of reform.

The Impact of War

La Guardia graduated from grammar school in January 1898. He began his ninth grade but never finished because of the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April 1898. The war changed Fiorello's life and added yet another resentment against "them," "the interests" (the powerful, corrupt elements of society), a resentment which he would carry with him the rest of his life. Fiorello's father, along with the Eleventh Infantry, was transferred to Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis, in April 1898, then to Mobile, Alabama, and eventually to Cuba. The family stayed at Jefferson Barracks. Fiorello at first tried to enlist, but his age and size kept him out of the army. Determined to follow his father to Mobile and then to Cuba, Fiorello secured a job at age 15 as a war correspondent with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. When the Eleventh Infantry moved on to Tampa, Florida, en route to Cuba, Fiorello went too, but there the war ended for him and his father. Achille became sick, as did many other soldiers during the war, from rotten meat sold to the army. The federal government would eventually take action against the abusive meat-packing companies when Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency, but for now many suffered from an industry that cared little that

consumers were fed tainted meat. Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel, *The Jungle*, was to expose the problems of the industry in 1906.

Achille never fully recovered. He was sent back to Jefferson Barracks, and soon after was honorably discharged from the army because of his medical problems. Fiorello went on to St. Louis with his father, and after a brief stay in New York in 1898, the family sailed back to Europe, giving up on the New World experience. Hoping to make a new start in Trieste, Achille entered into business. Although he ultimately did well with a hotel he leased, he did not live long enough to enjoy his success. In 1904, at 55, Achille died from heart problems. Fiorello was convinced the rotten meat of army days has destroyed his father's health and was also angry that his mother was denied a pension based on her claim that Achille's death was service-related. As a congressman, Fiorello, in one of his first acts of his political career, proposed a bill that required the death penalty for those who sold inferior or tainted supplies to the army in wartime and a long jail term in peacetime. Fiorello had been affected personally by the abuse and greed of the industrial age – no longer just an observer of corrupt Indian agents and unfair railroad companies, Fiorello was now a victim. His father died after an aborted career and his family was plunged into poverty. This incident became the final boyhood lesson and explains at least in part his attraction to reform later on.

The Consular Years

In need of money, Fiorello secured a job in 1900 as a clerk at the American consulate in Budapest. In 1903 he moved on to Fiume, a Hungarian port, to serve as acting and then permanent consular agent. In these positions, La Guardia showed his intelligence, ability to learn quickly, and independence. He mastered several languages – German, Croatian, French, Hungarian, Italian, and Yiddish – and therefore could understand the language of many of the immigrants going to America. La Guardia also saw the immigrants' suffering and became their champion. Ambitious, status-hungry, enjoying the power of the consular agent's position, and touched by the plight of the migrating

Balkan population, La Guardia turned this relatively low-level job into a stepping-stone and educational experience. He also became a gadfly to his superiors.

Two incidents reflect La Guardia's concerns and independence. He became aware as consular agent in Fiume that the procedure for medical inspections of immigrants was faulty. Prospective immigrants would sail to America, and upon arriving at Ellis Island in New York harbor face a complete medical exam that might discover a condition that made them ineligible for entry. Families then had to face an arduous return journey to Europe with their funds exhausted or, worse, had to decide to enter America without one or more family members who had to return to the Old World. Financial ruin or family separation – neither indicated a good choice for people already going through difficult times. La Guardia suggested a solution that should have been obvious to any immigration official. Rather than a very superficial attempt at judging an immigrant's health before sailing, which had been the practice of consuls, he began providing potential immigrants with full medical examinations before they left Fiume. He refused to allow ships to sail unless the exam took place and thereby delayed the departure times and angered steamship line officials. Nonetheless, under La Guardia's procedure, fewer immigrants were refused entry when they arrived in America from Fiume than from other ports. Many years later this procedure became standard policy for all immigrants leaving for the United States.

On another occasion, Fiorello received a request for the immediate embarkation of immigrants so that Maria Josefa, archduchess of Austria, could watch the immigrants board. This meant keeping the immigrants below deck for three days until the scheduled sailing time. La Guardia, only 22 at the time, refused to accede to the archduchess's wishes because of his concern for the immigrants. After complaints from the royal family, La Guardia was transferred to Trieste. Standing up to these officials became a prelude to his standing up to powerful politicians in the US and battling for people's rights. A fiercely independent individual, La Guardia did not back down to authority, especially when he felt his cause just, and involved society's downtrodden. In addition, he enjoyed the attention his antics brought.

Because he had so antagonized influential people in the Austro-Hungarian government, and caused problems for the US State Department, La Guardia did not get promoted. Still ambitious, however, he wanted to make a name for himself in America. Fiorello therefore resigned in 1906 from the consular service and returned to New York, leaving his mother, sister, and brother behind in Budapest.

"The Test Is If You Hesitate"

Fiorello arrived in a city undergoing vast changes as it absorbed the great waves of humanity flowing in from abroad. From the Lower East Side of Manhattan (where thousands of newly arrived Eastern European Jews and Southern Italians settled) to Harlem and on to the boroughs of the Bronx and Brooklyn (which caught the overflow of this migration as well as earlier immigrants moving to better housing), New York seemed at times to be bursting at the seams. The city appeared to be the entire world in microcosm. The sounds and scents of Warsaw, Palermo, Dublin, Bucharest, Berlin, Kiev, and Canton filled the streets, and such labels as Little Italy, Kleindeutschland, the Jewish ghetto, and Chinatown identified the city's neighborhoods. In the immigrant quarters, pushcart vendors selling fruits and vegetables, small shops with their wares spilling out onto the sidewalk, crowded tenements with cluttered fire escapes, and open fire hydrants cooling off the neighborhood children during the summer revealed New York's crowded and bustling street scenes. The city was noisy, gritty, poor, and filled with newcomers, but it also had quiet, secluded, wealthy residential areas where old-stock Americans lived in magnificent homes.

Fiorello worked at a variety of jobs in New York before settling into a position in November 1907 as an interpreter at Ellis Island. He also served briefly in 1910 as an interpreter at night court. La Guardia again became aware of human suffering, for during these peak years of migration to America, Ellis Island swelled with frightened and confused immigrants from many lands. In just 1907, over one million immigrants arrived on the Island.

The immigrants' lives opened up to La Guardia as he interpreted the rules for them, heard their heart-breaking stories, saw where they went to live in the city, and helped them deal with various bureaucratic problems. He not only saw their plight at close range but also Tammany's abuse and corruption, the graft in the Police department and among city officials that he had only read about before. When the young La Guardia worked at night court, an immigration inspector issued the following warning: "You can get experience in this job, or you can make a great deal of money. I don't think you'll take the money. But remember, the test is if you hesitate. Unless you say 'No!' right off, the first time an offer comes your way, you're gone." Fiorello never hesitated.

The Power of Tammany

Tammany, in its heyday during these years, followed the dictates of its 1890s boss, Richard Croker, who stated that "he was in politics for what he could get out of it." The rising tide of immigrants and the burgeoning power of the political machine worked hand in hand. Tammany provided jobs, social welfare, and, at times, political recognition in return for votes. Corruption, payoffs, and patronage sufficed as the machine's lifeblood. Although often claiming to be the immigrants' protector, Tammany clearly worked against them in numerous ways, such as by taking bribes to neglect housing regulations. While reform mayoral candidates occasionally won by running on fusion (joint or merged) tickets (e.g., Seth Low in 1901 and John Purroy Mitchel in 1913) and investigations such as that of Lexow Committee in the 1890s revealed Tammany corruption, the machine always rebounded back into power. These machine politicians even extended their control, dominating all of the borough Democratic organizations by 1909. By using the police and criminals and at times making deals with Republicans to stay in power, Tammany remained a formidable force in New York City politics for many years.

Tammany became even stronger under boss Charles F. Murphy's reign (1902–1924). Murphy had the foresight to develop

capable young politicians such as Al Smith, Robert Wagner, and Salvatore Cotillo within Tammany and occasionally to support progressive measures. Smith, for example, a product of New York's Irish slums, rose quickly in Tammany ranks. He started as just a political hack, but grew and changed while a state assemblyman, particularly after delving into the causes of the terrible Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in 1911, which claimed the lives of numerous young immigrant women working under unsafe conditions in this factory. As vice-chairman of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, which functioned from 1911 to 1914, Smith came to understand the abusive labor conditions that existed in industrial America and that played a key role in the many Triangle factory deaths. During and after his commission work Smith became a strong advocate of reform and helped to convince the Tammany bosses that some legislation had to be passed to help the working class. Wagner followed the same course. Growing up poor (his father worked as a janitor), the son of German immigrants, Wagner saw the Tammany machine as the key to success. He rose fast in Democratic politics and was elected to the state assembly and senate (and later to the US Senate). While his reform impulse blossomed earlier than Smith's, the Triangle fire and his work as chairman of the investigating commission moved him into a major supporter of social welfare legislation. Cotillo, raised in East Harlem's Little Italy, entered politics as an opponent of Tammany. Following entreaties form the machine, Cotillo joined its ranks in 1912. He believed that only through Tammany could he help his people. Moving up in Tammany ranks, although more slowly and with more opposition than Smith and Wagner, Cotillo emerged as an important advocate of social reform. Murphy, according to Smith, believed in some social legislation as well, but other evidence indicated that he also saw the backing of reform issues as a way of winning votes and appeasing the reformers in the party. He agreed to change as long as it did not hurt the machine. As historian David Burner comments, "If Murphy gave his blessing to some reforms, he stood in the way of many more." And he expected his subordinates to follow his lead, and that indicated the limitations of a boss-run government. If not outright corrupt, the machine bosses had limited vision. Murphy, although eliminating some corrupt practices, still thought of Tammany's

survival above all else. After he died in 1924, corruption and graft became rampant again.

A People's Attorney

After his return in 1906, La Guardia's New York world consisted of Tammany, immigrants, reform-fusion mayors, corruption, and Progressivism. Always ambitious, and forever interested in improving himself, Fiorello entered into New York University's evening law school in 1907 after securing his high school diploma and passing the qualifying examinations. La Guardia worked during the day at Ellis Island and rushed to school at night (except in the last year of law school, when he worked at night court and went to school in the day). These were busy years in which La Guardia demonstrated what was to be a lifetime capacity for hard work and long hours. Fiorello graduated from law school (with mediocre grades) in 1910, passed the bar, quit his job at Ellis Island, and began a career as a lawyer. He rented space in an established law firm's office and began to specialize in immigration issues, such as deportation cases. His concern for the immigrant poor and his willingness to provide legal advice free of charge or at low rates earned him a reputation as a "people's attorney" in the Lower East Side area where he worked. In 1912 Fiorello and Raimondo Canudo (a lawyer and editor of a newspaper for Sicilians) set up their own law office and focused their practice on immigration problems.

As was true of his Ellis Island years, his law practice became an educational experience for La Guardia. His western boyhood and middle-class background had distanced him from the world of Italian peasant immigrants. He now shared their world as well as that of their Jewish neighbors on the Lower East Side. His ability to speak Italian and Yiddish enabled La Guardia to do the legal work for the immigrant population, which he continued to do when he became a partner in the firm of Weil, La Guardia, and Espen in 1914. At that time he gained first-hand knowledge of New York's court system and its unfair and corrupt practices, arbitrary decisions, and politically influenced judgments, all of which inspired his move into politics to correct this system

and served him well later as a reformer of the courts. He also saw the need to improve government so as to provide equitable treatment for the average citizen. During this time as well he met Marie Fischer, later to be his second wife, who worked as his secretary.

Fiorello's law work drew him into union activities during a period when unions fought for recognition and workers endured long hours, low pay, and mistreatment in sweatshops. A garment workers' strike in 1912 found La Guardia gladly offering his services to the union after his friend August Bellanca, one of the strike leaders, asked for his help. Given his earlier reaction in Prescott to the Pullman strike, and his knowledge of the problems of poverty-stricken immigrants, it is not surprising that La Guardia championed the union cause. The Prescott and New York experiences forged his later views that workers had a right to strike, that government should protect that right, and that there should be a process for avoiding strikes. The union asked La Guardia to help bring together Jewish and Italian workers in the common cause, Fiorello was effective with the ethnic groups and also active at the union hall, on the picket line, and in the courts.

The strike became a turning point for the future mayor. He developed ties with union officials; made his first speech; met various socialist leaders, such as Meyer London (later a congressman), and labor lawyer Jacob Panken, whom he would sometimes support and sometimes conflict with in years to come; established himself as a labor lawyer; and became an active participant in New York's growing union movement in the garment trades. He also met Thea Almerigotti, an Italian immigrant from Trieste, who worked as a dress designer and became his first wife. The workers so appreciated Fiorello's talents and efforts that he became part of a three-member committee assigned to work out a final agreement with management. From this point on La Guardia's connections with the unions stayed strong. For example, he continued into the 1920s as a volunteer lawyer for District Council 1's Italian section. The council consisted of affiliates of the United Garment Workers. La Guardia also made his initial contact with the beginning Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union of America, which emerged as a result of the strike. This labor conflict was the first of many

in which La Guardia would offer his talents to settle the disputes peacefully.

Not Politics as Usual

As an ambitious lawyer and union activist who was in touch with and concerned about the immigrant slum population and disgusted by corruption in the courts and politics, Fiorello was well placed for a try at running for political office. But this was not going to be politics as usual for Fiorello. Although he wanted power and respect, he also adhered to a scrupulously honest and independent existence. Above all, he wanted to change the corrupt system and work to improve the lives of his immigrant neighbors. As he stated, "I had been storing up knowledge, and I was eager to bring about better conditions, particularly a more equitable economic situation and less favoritism to special interests in the administration of the law." An incipient progressive, a people's attorney motivated by ethnic and reform factors, La Guardia began a political career that would bring him fame as a dynamic reformer and as a vocal spokesman for the new immigrants and the poor.

Study Questions

1 What experiences in La Guardia's youth shaped his personality and political ideas?

2 In what sense was La Guardia a "marginal man"?

3 What role did Tammany play in New York City politics?

4 Describe what it must have been like to be the only Italian American or the only minority growing up in a world where other people did not understand your background?

5 How did his Ellis Island and New York court system experience shape La Guardia's thinking?

6 Why couldn't La Guardia accept "politics as usual"?

Time Line

1880: Fiorello's parents, Achille and Irene, arrive in New York
1882: Fiorello La Guardia born in New York City
1885: Achille joins army and family moves to the West
1894: Pullman strike
1898: Spanish-American War
1898: Family returns to Europe
1904: Achille dies
1906: Fiorello returns to New York City
1907: Fiorello starts work as an interpreter at Ellis Island
1910: Fiorello begins his law career
1911: Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire
1912: Garment workers' strike
1919: Marries Thea Almerigotti