The Historian in Practical Politics

Though professionally a student of government and of law, I was originally interested in history and I have always continued to read a good deal of it, probably more of it than of anything else. I admit that during fifteen years or so of active politics I was in danger of becoming totally illiterate, because the political career doesn’t afford very much time for reading. There are some terrible gaps in my background because of that. But if the absence of reading was due to politics, it gave me much practical experience in the way history, particularly political history, is made.

I have run four times in the City of New York and once in the Borough of Brooklyn. That is a total of five political campaigns, and when you realize that New York is a pretty tremendous community—it has an electorate of two million—one gets a pretty considerable initiation in the political process just by the experience alone. And then I had the unusual opportunity of a certainly close relationship with one of the political masters of our generation—LaGuardia.

LaGuardia and I were not always on the closest and friendliest of terms. For a long stretch at a time, we would be engaged in more or less of a “cold war.” Then at times we would be almost intimate, although I don’t think anyone was ever very intimate with the man. Finally, it was open warfare after practically fifteen years of association. And he, of course, had some very unusual contacts with another political master of our era, perhaps the greatest practitioner of the art in our times—Franklin D. Roosevelt. It would be very interesting for a historian or a political scientist—I am not sure whose duty it would be—to undertake the task of writing the political history of their relationship. But knowing the President slightly, although I had had some contact with him over a twenty-year period, and LaGuardia more intimately, I am afraid that very, very little of what passed between them found its way onto paper. I can almost assure you that practically none did. And both of them are now, of course, dead. I don’t know whether there are any people who are
still living who could put together even bits of pieces of that story to make it worthy.

For example, I know from LaGuardia that at one point either in late 1939, or early 1940, Roosevelt had practically accepted the notion that he would not run for a third term, that Jack Garner would be the man, and that F. H. LaGuardia was to be the candidate for vice-president. It was at that time that LaGuardia talked to a few of us intimately about what a great liberal Jack Garner was. He was quite bent on convincing us at that period. I don’t think it was actually until May or June, when conditions in Europe had deteriorated, that the President’s mind changed and he undertook to run for a third time.

The historian of this era is up against the fact that two things at least—the telephone and the airplane—militate against the preservation of written records. The telephone is a very handy instrument—quick, direct contact. It eliminates intermediaries. It was always possible for LaGuardia to pick up the telephone and have Roosevelt at hand, or for Roosevelt thus to talk to LaGuardia. As for the airplane, it was very easy for the Mayor to take off at eight-fifteen in the morning, be in Washington at nine-thirty, and back again in New York, if need be, by one o’clock. And in my dealings with a lot of people and important political folk of the contemporary picture, I find that that is the way the most significant things in the political realm, in the practice of the art of politics, at least, are done.

On one occasion, I needed to have some conversation with a great man, and the conversation took place in this curious manner: I had luncheon with his secretary in a room in the hotel. I had no knowledge—that is, I could not testify—that the great man was in the other room. During the course of the luncheon, the secretary rose two or three times and said, “Just a minute, Joe, I’ll be right back.” He disappeared and was gone for four or five or ten minutes. When he came back, we resumed our conversation. I was therefore in a position to swear—if I should have been called upon to do so—that I had never seen the great man at that particular time. As a matter of fact, I don’t even know that he was present in the next room; I have a guess that he was. I came away with the distinct impression that I had carried on a conversation with him.

I know that when LaGuardia wanted to talk to Tom Dewey, for
example, the communication was almost never put in writing. If things were put in writing, it was done through a specially designed creative record which would be immediately or presently made public. But the important arrangements in the highest political realm were always on an oral basis, usually between the parties directly, without the intervention of intermediaries; and almost always, I am certain, no memoranda were kept. Those conversations will die with the participants. The historian has to get them before rigor mortis sets in, or a tremendous amount of significant information will be lost to posterity.

I don’t know whether that is the duty of the historian or the duty of the political scientist, but it does seem to me that somebody should be undertaking the task of getting as much as can be got, for example, from those who were intimate with Roosevelt. Harry Hopkins is already dead, and nobody was closer for a long period of time than Harry Hopkins. A good many of the most important political figures that I have known were lonely figures. They did not have intimate secretaries who were with them for protracted periods, with whom they shared their innermost thoughts. In the case of F. H. LaGuardia, there was no one. His secretaries generally lasted a couple of years, and were not secretaries in any important sense. They handled the public and the routine daily appointments, and things of that sort. They were not involved in his political doings. They didn’t know much at all about his real political activities beyond perhaps, “Friday I am going down to Washington; Tuesday I am going up to Albany,” or Saratoga, or some other place. That is one aspect of the picture.

At the highest level of political strategy and relationship, therefore, things are done and no record is kept. There were unquestionably conversations between Roosevelt and LaGuardia with respect to the latter’s going into the Army and becoming head of the Military Government in Italy. I do not think that there is any doubt that that had been promised to him. Circumstances developed which caused the President finally to think differently (although I am sure he had made commitments), for the War Department, as I understood, objected, and LaGuardia, although he was measured for his uniform, never got to wear it. There is a curious sidelight to this appointment. In order for him to leave New York City without
changing the political composition of things there, it was necessary
to get special legislation. Sometime during the winter of 1941—late
December I guess it would have been—there were some conversa-
tions with Mr. Dewey about that legislation, after which it was
handled with unusual adroitness.

There was a bill in the legislature to permit sheriffs to go into
military service without forfeiting their posts, a bill introduced in
January, by a man named Oscar Tagg from Ogdensburg or some-
where or other in the north country—Watertown, I guess it was. The
bill was a sleeper. By March, various organizations that pride them-
selves on their alertness had examined the bill and found it innocu-
ous. Suddenly the bill was reported out and amended. The amend-
ment provided that, in company with many other officials, if the
mayor of a city of over a million left his position, his duty was to
devolve upon the deputy mayor. That bill was amended in one hour
and passed within the next hour, sent over to the other House, signed
by the Governor—all before anybody knew there was to be such a
bill. And that happened many months after a conversation had
taken place sometime between Christmas and New Year’s in 1941.
Now I don’t know—no one has told that story and I don’t suppose
it will be told—just what occurred at that meeting and in whose
house the conversation took place.

On occasion, I acted as intermediary between the Mayor and the
Governor because there were times when they couldn’t speak civilly
to one another. And so, when they had to communicate—and they
did since one was the Governor of our state and the other was the
Mayor of our city, and there were times when they had to do public
business—it usually fell to my lot to work it out between them. I
would journey to the District Attorney’s office or later to Albany,
and hold a conversation, come back and report the conversation,
make another trip, and so on, but I never wrote letters on any of the
matters under consideration.

My own literary effects after a period of fifteen years in politics
wouldn’t amount to a bag of beans—declining an invitation to
speak before the Flatbush Chamber of Commerce, accepting an
invitation for the Polish War Vets, answering letters from people
requesting a job, writing letters saying, “Sorry, we don’t have any
just at the moment.” Now, what is the historian to do?
On the other hand, it seems to me that the historian who deals with contemporary affairs is up against a tremendous, almost unassimilable welter of material that is relevant and pertinent to public affairs. The public story, I think, is relevant. There is, for example, the collection of The New York Times for one year. It is a formidable affair. The Times' index alone is a couple of big volumes for the year. And that isn't all. You certainly wouldn't learn all about the political history of New York if you were to base your information on The New York Times alone. You certainly ought to have the files of the Daily News, at least, and PM, and the Journal American. Furthermore, everyone knows that encyclopedic as the Times and Tribune are, there is a lot which doesn’t get into their columns—reports and economic data—because, despite the fact that some of the top secret material is never put into any written record, there is a tremendous amount of information that is being preserved.

Now to get back to what seems more pertinent to our own considerations, and to Mr. Herring's paper. In looking at politics, I have no formulated theories, but I do see in it at least two broad aspects. You have first, the masses of people with certain political habits of loyalty deeply ingrained, as, for example, those people who belong, in our expressive phrase, to the Democratic Party and the Republican Party and sundry other parties. You have that broad background against which the game of politics is played, and anyone who has practiced the art becomes, in time at least, a good deal of a determinist regarding politics.

In my five campaigns we knew before we began whether we were going to win or lose, and nothing that was done in the course of the campaign made any particular difference in the outcome. Anyone who is reasonably alert to what is going on today (with the Gallup Poll and other instruments) doesn’t have to have the old-fashioned ear that could sense all of the news. The old-timer, by just going around and talking to half a dozen people, could come in and tell how such and such an election was going to go; he hardly knew just what he did, he wasn’t scientific in what he did, but he got results through what he did. I have had some of my own boys do this in cases where we didn’t have the mechanism of the Gallup technique available to us. I have some boys right now on whom I can call and say, "What is going to be the reaction on so and so?" "Well, I will tell
you in two or three days,” will be the answer. These boys are sufficiently trained that, by getting in touch with a very few people in their districts, they can come back and report the probable results. And they are right! They are not necessarily one hundred per cent or ninety-nine per cent right, but for all practical purposes, their estimate is effective. The technique is important and useful in the art of practical politics; but you develop a certain fatalism or determinism about it. I consider now that most of the things I have done in political campaigns just didn’t count. Most of the money that we spent was wasted; most of the energy that we spent was equally wasted.

Now, why did we do it? Well, we did it because it is important to keep the structure of the political organization with you. I didn’t campaign because I thought I was changing votes, going around talking. Although I was a Democrat, I always ran on the Republican ticket. When I went around to Republican clubs, I didn’t think I was making any votes for myself. They wouldn’t have been there if they weren’t going to vote for me, but, since I was their candidate and they were the fellows who were to go out and ring doorbells in the election, I owed it to them to go and be seen. It was the least I could do; they felt just a little more like putting in the drudgery of mounting stairs and ringing doorbells.

You are not making votes going around night after night. Of course, you do a lot of it. In the first campaign, I made 320 speeches in ten weeks. That is a lot of speeches—too many, because your candidate gets to the point where he is literally slap-happy. He can’t think any longer. All he knows is that his feet feel as though they were part of the concrete pavement. About six o’clock in the evening he wonders how in the world he can force himself to make eight speeches that night in different parts of town. I have traveled as much as eighty miles right in New York City in a single evening making speeches. But you do it, not because you are changing votes, but to keep up a certain amount of morale in your party. Most elections are determined when the nomination is made, and the candidates and their speeches, the editorials and the newspapers, and all the other things are just devoid of inference.

When, however, you get to that hairline situation which will develop, where a Gallup Poll, after a nomination, shows that it is
“50-50” or “49-51,” then your campaign counts and what you say counts; but even more than these things count, there is that basic factor that everyone in practical politics takes for granted, recognizes—that our elections are not determined basically by campaigns, but by things said and done, economic circumstances, and all kinds of other things that have happened long before the nominations are made. I don’t think that our political historians have put enough emphasis either on the forces that shape up that opinion, or on the very fact that that fundamental situation exists.

There is always the unusual case. Pardon my being anecdotal. It occurred during our 1941 campaign. I always operated under a theory that we have called “my campaign set-up.” This was the Patagonian theory taken from the old wheeze: “What do they do in Patagonia when the wind blows over the pampas? Why, they let it blow!” I had the reputation of being an imperturbable candidate, for having that theory, I thought we were either going to win or lose, and all the campaign details were not going to make any difference in the world. But it was 1941, and registration had taken place with the Republicans on the first Tuesday in October. On the Tuesday following, LaGuardia assembled the key people in the campaign—there were about a dozen of us—as his guests, and said, “Now boys, we are in. The election is in the bag. The important thing from now on is not to make any mistakes. Just take it easy. Don’t get excited and feel you have to say something. We can coast in. Play it very slowly and carefully. We are in. The only way we can lose is through some mistake of our own.”

Well, I think that was on a Tuesday morning; that night we were routed differently around town so as not to be held up by one another. If we had four meetings in Brooklyn, I would go around right end and LaGuardia would go around left end. Along about eight o’clock, I had come from the James Monroe High School and was up at Eastern Parkway and Utica at P.S. 167, I think it was. Just as I turned the corner—the school was right on the corner—the Mayor’s car turned the corner. He was a few steps ahead of me, and as he got out of the car, a young reporter rushed up and said that the Court of Appeals had just decided that Joe O’Leary didn’t have to run for election. It involved a state comptrollership or some similar position. That to us should have been a good break, because we had
been quite worried when the State Comptroller had quit and it appeared that there would have to be an election. When the Court ruled otherwise, we should have been gratified; but somehow or other LaGuardia did not understand what was said and was boiling with rage. He went in and publicly labelled the Chief Justice of our Court of Appeals, Lehman, and his brother, Governor Lehman, "goniffs." We lost a quarter of a million votes on account of that. Fortunately we had them to spare.

One thing like that can change luck, but basically, you have the general certainty that people are influenced not only by party loyalty but by things that go deep into the past—economic circumstances, family political history, relatives, church affiliation, and so forth. No one it seems to me, has done enough work—and I am not sure if this is the job of the political scientist or the job of the political historian—in analyzing the influence of the Catholic Church and other religious groups on elections, of the business of racial voting in political line-ups, of all the other factors which are the warp and woof in politics before you get to the higher level where "A" makes a little deal with "B" about nominations or about this, that, and the other thing.

Then you have the second aspect of the structure of politics—namely, the effectiveness of party organization with which I think our political scientists have done a fairly good job. I don’t think the historian has to be either a politician or a political scientist to understand it. There is plenty of good literature on the structure of our political relationships. As Flynn’s new book and Kent’s "The Great Game of Politics," among others, describe it, it is easy to know that structure. Yet, perhaps we haven’t effectively understood the importance of political structure. Perhaps the political scientist has overemphasized it, whereas the historian has taken it for granted, or actually ignored it.

It is a fact that the structure of politics and the structure and function of the political organization have an important role which is not always clearly comprehended. Let me illustrate: If you have, say in June or October, the Gallup Poll which shows that your two parties are evenly divided, and if you have on the one hand a good, well-disciplined, well-heeled organization, and on the other, a poorly-

1 Edward J. Flynn, You're the Boss (New York, 1947).
organized, poorly-disciplined, poverty-stricken organization, the first would get out, maybe, eighty per cent of its fifty per cent, and the other would get out sixty per cent of its fifty per cent; the result would make Mr. Gallup look like a liar. That is one of the hazards of Mr. Gallup's trade, one which he can't really allow for, since unfortunately for him, there haven't been enough hairline instances. Yet there have been instances where exactly that has happened, where the well-heeled organization has gotten out its vote and the poor one has not been able to—and victory goes to the fellow who can get out the vote. Studies of such situations are important in the understanding of the political process.

Now, just as a rank outsider, let me comment on things Mr. Herring has said. It has never occurred to me that it was the duty of a historian to be a political scientist, a politician, an economist, an anthropologist, a botanist and I don't know what all else. It seems to me that perhaps it is the duty of those separate disciplines to develop some history of the things that they are particularly interested in. The historian coming along takes up that material, integrates it, and interprets it. But I don't think it is possible for historians to undertake to be cultural anthropologists and social psychologists and everything else. That would be a job.

But I was more startled at the suggestion that the historian should take account of what kind of world he is living in; it would seem to me that the historians might draw up the kind of a world they would like to live in rather than the kind of world they are living in. Haven't you got there a danger? I don't want to put words into your mouths, but it seems to me that there is a danger in anyone, whether it is Mr. Herring or Mr. Hitler, saying to the historian, "We want you to produce the kind of history which will be useful in galvanizing our people in one direction or another, toward liberalism or toward national socialism."

Isn't there that danger in saying you must do the things that are relevant to this day and age? I don't doubt, I never would doubt, that a historian unconsciously might try hard to avoid reflecting the interests of his age in what he selects to put into history. If he does, however, will his publisher? The publisher will be interested in what his contemporaries want to read, but is that the historian's job? I have read the history, say, of the Critical Period, or of the
period of the adoption of the Federal Constitution. I would prefer to read it with as much fullness, as much objectivity as anyone coming back after a lapse of a century and a half can attain, recognizing the loss of material and so on. Now, I see that Carl Van Doren has published a book in which he tries to show the relevance of the adoption of the Federal Constitution to this era, viewing it as a kind of curtain raiser for some contemporary development in international co-operation; I am not unwilling to read that, but I somehow know this is a layman speaking and not even as a politician. I would prefer to have such a book written in terms of its own times.

Am I wrong in thinking that the historian, whether urged by some feeling of national duty, or urged by somebody in some national bureau of psychic warfare, or urged by the national state which says, "Now, you point your history this way because it is terribly important at these times that our people see the great glory of their past, or that they see this or they see that in their past, because we want it to focus on their contemporary political thinking and action," might yield to this pressure and adopt this type of relevance? This I would regard as a very dangerous procedure.

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