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My Turn

John V. Lindsay

Speaking Up for New York



By writing this, I am breaking a rule I imposed upon myself almost two years ago. When I retired from public life and headed abroad for a year's sabbatical, I was determined that I would stay out of my successor's hair in New York's City Hall. I still feel that way, but now, after listening on a regular basis to the gratuitous comments that the President of the United States continues to drop around the country and even abroad about New York City, I finally resolved to say something—on that subject at least.

There are other matters on which I will keep my silence. From the time we ran against each other for mayor in 1965, Abraham Beame and I have had many differences—in style, in approach to issues to be confronted (including the buck), in our relationship to the banks, and in the choice of people for Cabinet posts and staff. In my opinion, New York did not have to lose investor confidence. But all of that recedes under the current blunderbuss attack of the President.

Mr. Ford talks sweepingly of New York's mismanagement, as if he had a history of competence in the field of management. More on that in a moment. But in passing, I recall with some irony that Standard and Poor's, the demigod of the business world in measuring municipal fiscal prudence, raised the credit rating of New York City during my last month in office (December 1973), based on its own careful, independent examination of the fiscal management of New York. Moody's, Standard and Poor's competitor for caution, had done the same exactly twelve months earlier.

APPALLING INSENSIBILITY

And I noted a recent Congressional committee's report pointing out that for comparable services New York's cost of doing business is roughly the same as that of most large American cities. But that is not what is really important to me now, any more than is the knowledge that weaknesses, mistakes and mismanagement in frontline city government have long been there and still are.

What is important is the appalling insensibility of the leader of our country to such a major part of American life as the American city. One would hope that

such myopia is only confined to this one critical aspect of America and its history. Mr. Ford has never faced a large and diverse constituency. A safe and homogenous Congressional district is hardly the school of hard knocks.

Twenty-five years in the marbled cocoon of the House of Representatives can be a far more isolating experience than that of the average person trying to "make it" in almost any neighborhood in America today. And being on the Committee on Armed Services for most of that 25 years is worse than confinement in a cocoon—it's being sealed in a tank, unless one is to adopt the unsafe and uncomfortable course and ask hard questions of the Pentagon and its management, its uses, and abuses. Enormous cost overruns of taxpayer-funded contracts, millions in waste, to say nothing of Vietnam and other exorbitant junta alignments and adventures, were none of Mr. Ford's critical concern for waste, mismanagement or policy; from him, we got only unquestioning and uncritical support.

MEDIOCRE CABINET

Neither has Mr. Ford run anything in his life—has he ever met a payroll? Such credentials may be all right, even in the Federal government, which doesn't actually run *that* much and still has inherited a half-decent Federal bureaucracy. But this holds true only if the Chief Executive surrounds himself with men and women who know the meaning of public productivity and have a sense of programs and their relationship to people. But the President fails the test of leadership on that score, too. I would judge his Cabinet to be among the most mediocre in American history; one or two seem to stand slightly taller than the rest, but they, too, lack a real understanding of what people everywhere are all about.

New York City has been the nation's incubator for more than a century. Through its efforts, almost alone, a new middle class has time and again been raised and introduced into the mainstream of America as wave upon wave of new immigration, always America's new poor, hit the Statue of Liberty city. New York became, necessarily, a city-state

unlike anything in the world, and in the process bore burdens the rest of America was not yet ready to shoulder. Worse, the cost of much of those burdens—such as the unworkable Federal welfare program—was then thrust upon the city by Federal and state laws. New York's burdens grew far beyond those of other cities. New York was the place to which the millions of different people came, sanctioned under Federal law, looking for a better life.

RANK PARTISANSHIP

New York is *still* the Big Apple, because it still represents change and creativity. It's a bit battered at the moment, almost worn out, but it has made its generous contribution to the country in more ways than Americans realize, including many who "made it" throughout our land and who had been helped up the rung and set on their way by the old city. Do we always despise those we ought to love the most?

I had hoped the President would have somehow gained some understanding of this, particularly as I had spent seven years in Congress and knew and liked Congressman Gerald Ford. So it is sad to see rank partisanship on the part of President Ford, when it is neither necessary nor called for, and routine politics at work as if the world and the country had never changed, or learned hard lessons. In today's world, and in today's groping America, it is such a waste! And so old and hackneyed! Perhaps a pragmatic political argument can be made for a strategy of running against New York and the inner cities of America, but I find it debasing; it reflects an insensitivity to the urban problem that can only be based on bad information finding a ready home in a house void of any personal or gained knowledge. This I find the most frightening and disheartening of all. I'm sure this country can do better.

Lindsay, mayor of New York from 1966 through 1973, is now practicing law in the city.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Jim -

Since this is Cabinet --
Would you want to add anything
else to our usual note. ?



Trudy