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Giuliani's Successes Go Beyond Policing

Never have we who write about New York politics more richly deserved to be called "the chattering classes" than amid our cascade of farewells and good-riddances to Rudy Giuliani. So many pre-mortems, so little time. Too little, anyway, to note that the Mayor universally castigated for racial insensitivity has not only saved more lives in black and Hispanic communities than any of his post-1960's predecessors but also facilitated more nonwhite small-business and home ownership—achievements too prosaic for the chattering we enjoy.



Trying earlier this year to give long-suffering *New York Times* readers some inkling of how Mr. Giuliani has transformed the city against their newspaper's dim racial moralizing and prejudices about what helps the poor, Sunday *Magazine* writer James Traub at least drew back the curtain by asking, "Isn't preserving people's lives, well-being and property the most compassionate policy of all?"

This, of course, has been Mr. Giuliani's argument for eight years. Endlessly he has tried to impress upon journalists, activists and philanthropists what Mr. Traub's rhetorical question suggested: that blacks, Hispanics and white liberal survivors of rainbow politics can gain more ground from entrepreneurial approaches to neighborhood development (and from firmer assaults on crime, legal color-coding, public-sector protectionism and civic degradation) than they ever got from efforts to tackle "root causes" with social-welfare spending and racial preferences.

"People in this city don't need special things; they need more of certain general things—safety, education, jobs," I heard the new Mayor say early in 1994, as he rebuffed Al Sharpton's demand for a meeting about cops' storming of a mosque on a robbery call. "The officers who went in to that mosque didn't ask the color or gender of the people they were trying to protect. That's how most New Yorkers conduct themselves, and it's how I'll run this administration."

It sounded almost otherworldly against the tortuous racial etiquette of David Dinkins' "gorgeous mosaic" of distinct ethnic, racial, sexual and other groups, each with special claims on the municipal conscience and



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treasury. But as housing and safety improved even in poor neighborhoods under Mr. Giuliani, it became hard to recall, even believe, that Mr. Dinkins had set up the Office of Euro-American Affairs to legitimize multicultural pandering as a governing strategy.

After watching Mr. Giuliani's colorless successes for years with puzzlement and mounting frustration, rainbow racialists finally held a carnival of denial following the lethal police fusillade against Amadou Diallo. There were celebrity protests and *Times* editorials heralding a "movement against police brutality." But there was no such movement. Even while running up to three stories a day on the case for more than six months, *The Times* neglected to report that New York cops had killed nearly twice as many people in Mr. Dinkins' four years as in Mr. Giuliani's seven. (Only after I reported this in a *Boston Globe* column as the Diallo defendants were acquitted did *Times* columnist Clyde Haberman mention it.)

No one knew this better than hard-pressed blacks and Hispanics, as Mr. Traub discovered when he "tested out this theory" of Mr. Giuliani's about governing beyond race by querying passengers riding in "dollar vans" that ply the neighborhood of Flatbush, home to many Caribbean immigrants in Brooklyn. Most supported Mr. Giuliani's welfare-reform and workfare initiatives. Most praised his crackdowns on crime, saying they're glad that they can go out again at night and that, with homicides down 65 percent since he took office, thousands of people (most of them young blacks and Hispanics) who would have been murdered were alive. Many even defended the ubiquitous "stop-and-frisk" weapons searches, demanding mainly that officers be polite during the necessary sweeps.

Yet, indispensable though the crime drop has been, another reason Mr. Giuliani succeeded where the rainbow had failed lay under Mr. Traub's and the riders' own feet, or seats, in the local economy—the "off-Wall Street," small-business economy exemplified by the passenger vans. Sometimes, big truths emerge in the humble places.

Late in 1993, as Mr. Dinkins was finishing out his term after losing to Mr. Giuliani, Una Clarke, the City Councilwoman who represents the Caribbean neighborhood Mr. Traub described, called me at the *Daily News* seeking a column defending private passenger vans from a "midnight" Mayoral assault. As her district had changed from white to Caribbean in the 1970's, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority had let bus service decline, not least because immigrants can't vote. Immigrant entrepreneurs like Hector Ricketts, a former hospital administrator in Brooklyn, began fielding hundreds of 14-passenger vans that, even without public subsidies, had fares lower than buses because they had no sclerotic work rules or bureaucracies.

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New York's public sector leapt to respond as it knows best: Transit and city cops harassed van operators so mercilessly that one owner won a \$1 million judgment against the M.T.A. When Mayor-elect Giuliani protested that vans had "a proven capability of responding to special markets, as well as the potential for promoting economic opportunity in depressed neighborhoods," the public sector leapt again: City Council Transportation Committee chair Noah Dear and colleague Archie Spigner, who'd been an M.T.A. bus driver, scrambled to put on Mr. Dinkins' desk a bill to make it even easier to harass vans by making it harder to license,



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Under Mayor Giuliani, small businesses in minority neighborhoods took root and flourished. Isn't that compassion?

insure and route them.

Their rationale was that vans "steal" riders from buses. But if bus service hadn't deteriorated in the first place, the vans wouldn't have appeared. If they did now, the M.T.A., like the Post Office, would have to improve to compete, benefiting all riders. But that would mean cutting work rules and bureaucrats. No wonder the Transport Workers' Union honored Noah Dear at a \$250-a-plate dinner the day his anti-van bill was expected to pass. (No wonder he sponsored it.) Mr. Dinkins would sign it because in his political imagination unions are sacred, public services better than private, and the T.W.U.'s heavily African-American membership more deserving than Caribbean entrepreneurs and drivers.

Breaking a public-transit monopoly might save taxpayers \$300 million a year, but one couldn't seriously expect more African-Americans to compete as entrepreneurs, now could one? In 1990, Mr. Dinkins had ducked that challenge for months as African-American militants in the same Flatbush neighborhood staged a long, ugly, extortionist boycott of Korean

greengrocers. They didn't (or couldn't?) open their own stores; so much for their leader Sonny Carson's vow to "take back our neighborhood by any means necessary." The protesters didn't even represent the neighborhood, although a *Times* editorial implied that they did.

Black and Hispanic New Yorkers have been saddled too long with "leaders" who don't know that even the poorest, darkest-complexioned immigrant enclaves in any city make progress by establishing small-business beachheads amid the larger society's bigotry and incomprehension. They trade on ethnic ties at first, but outgrow them as they win more capital, connections, economic skills and political clout. So do struggles to organize new, exploited workers—as in New York's heavily Black Health and Hospital Workers' Union (and its heavily Jewish garment-workers' unions decades before that), or in today's heavily Hispanic "Justice for Janitors" campaign in Los Angeles.

When such efforts succeed, they transcend race more decisively than do racially protectionist public bureaucracies, street rhetoric and romantic reporting about them. But you wouldn't know that from journalists who learned their trade back when John Lindsay elevated race claims to a level that energized—but soon palsied—the political imaginations of mayors like David Dinkins, Detroit's Coleman Young, Cleveland's Carl Stokes, Chicago's Eugene Sawyer, Philadelphia's Wilson Goode and Washington's Marion Barry.

Most of them were replaced because their cities have changed in ways the chattering classes missed. Metaphorically, the rainbow mayors were carried into political oblivion in passenger vans operated by nonwhite immigrant entrepreneurs, whose understandings of race are more fluid and ecumenical. (Fortunately, New York's anti-van bill didn't reach the Mayor's desk until Mr. Giuliani was sitting there, and he vetoed it.) The newcomers are changing urban economies and political cultures in ways that confound welfare-state presumptions, and Mr. Giuliani has helped them do it to substantial effect not only in Flatbush but also in Harlem, East New York and the Spring Creek section of Queens. Since he has understood the importance of doing this from the beginning, it would be nice to hear that his would-be successors do too, and nice to see it acknowledged in the commentators' farewells.

Terry Golway will return to this space in several weeks.