

America's Ultimate Dead-End Job

New York. If you can make it there you'll make it anywhere. Except politics

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By [BRAD PARKS](#)

Two years before the end of the 19th century, in a faraway land, a mostly forgotten former New York City mayor named John T. Hoffman was stricken by a fatal heart attack.

His remains arrived in New York a month later. In a coffin covered almost entirely in flowers—cut roses at the foot, lily sprays in the middle, wreaths of ivy and palms at the head—he was committed to the ground in a family plot at Dale Cemetery in Ossining, N.Y., surrounded by local dignitaries, family and friends.



Photo Illustration by Sean McCabe; Photos by Associated Press (4); Getty (2); AFP/Getty; Dr. Don's Buttons (Rudy sticker); Lori Ferber (Lindsay sticker); Jim Havel (Koch pin)

Nowhere to Go But Up?

Robert Wagner Jr.

Ran for: U.S. Senate, 1956

What happened: The son of a former U.S. senator, he sought his father's seat. Republican Jacob Javits rode Dwight Eisenhower's wide coattails to victory.

John Lindsay

Ran for: President, 1972

What happened: New Yorkers heckled the dashing three-term mayor on the primary campaign trail. He dropped out after also-ran showings in Florida and Wisconsin.

Ed Koch

Ran for: Governor of New York, 1982

What happened: The mayor couldn't transfer his popularity within the city to the rest of the state, and he lost the primary to Mario Cuomo.

Rudy Giuliani

Ran for: U.S. Senate, 2000

What happened: He withdrew from race after a prostate cancer diagnosis, separation from his wife and disclosures about an affair. Hillary Clinton won the seat.

Rudy Giuliani

Ran for: President, 2008

What happened: Seen as a front-runner at first, he paid for ignoring the early primaries. He withdrew after finishing third in Florida.

Along with him, they might as well have buried the political hopes of New York mayors ever since.

In the 141 years since Hoffman jumped from city hall to the governor's mansion, no man elected mayor of New York has moved onto higher elected office. And as the city's quadrennial election for chief executive kicks in, with all its sound and fury, it's worth remembering that Michael Bloomberg and William Thompson are essentially competing for a booby prize: Mayor of New York is the biggest dead-end job in U.S. politics.

Blame the peculiarities of the men who have held the office, or the idiosyncrasies of the city itself. Just don't blame lack of effort. Mayors of New York have aspired to become

governor, U.S. senator and president of the United States. All of them have failed, sometimes spectacularly so. Even Hoffman, newspapers later reported, only made it to Albany because he had Boss Tweed stuffing the ballot box for him.

And now here comes Mr. Bloomberg, with all his ambition and billions, seeking the mayor's office for a third time. He has bucked the city's term-limit laws and spent \$83 million (and counting) of his vast fortune papering trashcans in every corner of the five boroughs with campaign literature, leaving nothing to chance against his underfinanced opponent. Mr. Bloomberg says it's because the city is in crisis and needs his proven leadership. But perhaps, deep down, it's because he has finally reached the conclusion that historians and political scientists alike could have told him already: He has nowhere else to go.

If it sounds counterintuitive, it should. To say nothing of the instant name recognition that comes with the job—magazine covers, talk shows, prime seats at Yankee Stadium—being mayor of New York would seem like excellent preparation for higher office.

In addition to being the nation's most populous city, with 8.3 million residents, New York's government expends \$59 billion annually—more than all but 36 countries. Its 260,000 municipal workers would make it one of the 50 largest private employers in the world. Its police force, with 37,000 uniformed officers, is larger than the FBI. It educates 1.1 million children, more than the entire populations of eight U.S. states.

What's more, the job itself is anything but ceremonial. New York has what is known as a "strong mayor" system of government, and in recent years changes to the city charter have strengthened it further. The mayor can hire and fire 60 commissioners at his own whim. He sets a budget that can be approved, but not amended, by the city council. Mr. Bloomberg even put the Board of Education under his control. It is the closest thing to dictator as exists in representative democracy.

"Being mayor of New York is actually the best job in politics—even better than being president of the United States," says Mitchell Moss, professor of urban policy and planning at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. "The mayor wakes up every day and decides which pitch he's going to hit, and can hit a home run every time. Being president is more about catching bombs than throwing them.

"The only job equal to being mayor of New York," he says, "is being pope."

And yet, judging from history, the pope seems to have a roughly equal chance of being elected president as Hizzoner the Mayor does. Because while Greeneville, Tenn., Mayor Andrew Johnson, Buffalo Mayor Grover Cleveland and Northampton, Mass., Mayor Calvin Coolidge have all gone onto the nation's highest office, the Mayor of New York City never has.

Other cities—Baltimore, Cleveland and Philadelphia, to name a few—have sent some recent mayors on to elected office at the state and federal level. Even in Chicago, where

mayors have a propensity to stay in office until they die, it's been a mere 96 years since a former chief executive went onto the governor's mansion.

But all Gotham has to show for the 20th Century is Ardolph Loges Kline, who wasn't even mayor. He was acting mayor for a few months in 1913 and was later elected to Congress. Other mayors, like George B. McClellan and Fiorello LaGuardia, served in Congress before becoming mayor, but could take their careers no further after a stint in city hall.

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Mr. Bloomberg was asked about this phenomenon by city hall reporters last year and dismissed it as a "statistical fluke." Others have called it a curse. Yet those who study the city and its history point to some essential factors that go far beyond math or the occult.

Start with the problems facing a New York mayor who aspires to statewide office. For all its residents, the city's population is still only 43% of New York as a whole. And just ask Ed Koch about the infamous upstate-downstate schism.

After one term as mayor, Mr. Koch was so popular that the Democrats *and* the Republicans put him on their tickets for reelection in 1981. Yet his run for governor in 1982 was a disaster. In a Playboy magazine interview, he made fun of upstate New Yorkers as gingham-pants-wearing, pickup-truck-driving hicks. It went downhill from there. Koch lost the Republican primary to another city resident who at least had the good sense not to flaunt it, Mario Cuomo.

"Cuomo ran a better campaign and part of the reason is he established he wasn't only identified with New York City," says Doug Muzzio, professor of political science at Baruch College. "We like to think it's always, 'I love New York.' But north of the Bronx and east of Queens, the attitude is more often, 'I loathe New York.'"

Demographically, New York isn't like most places in America. It is a city of enormous diversity, whether ethnic, racial or financial. Convincing the borough of Manhattan you will represent its interests takes far different rhetoric than convincing Manhattan, Kan., of the same thing.

"New York saddles its mayors with a certain ideological fix even if the mayor doesn't necessarily subscribe to that ideology," says Thomas Kessner, urban history professor at Columbia. "Mayors of New York are seen as embracing diversity, immigration, gun control. Those are real hurdles to overcome in a national election."

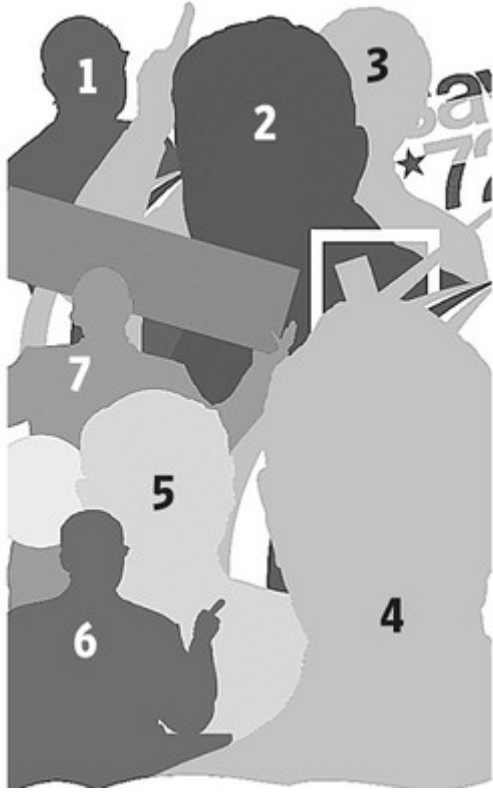


Photo Illustration by Sean McCabe

(clockwise from upper left): 1. Robert F. Wagner, Jr.; 2. Fiorello La Guardia; 3. John V. Lindsay; 4. Michael Bloomberg; 5. Edward Koch; 6. William C. Thompson, Jr.; 7. Rudolph W. Giuliani.

Beyond that, it's nearly impossible to serve the citizens of New York without accumulating the kind of enemies who tend to follow you around. When Mr. Giuliani ran for president in 2008, he wasn't only a flawed candidate (his personal foibles were well documented) with a flawed strategy (that whole ignore-the-early-primaries thing), he also was hounded on the campaign trail by families of fallen New York City firefighters who insisted "America's Mayor" was anything but a hero for his actions surrounding 9/11.

A generation earlier, when John V. Lindsay was stumping around Florida in his bid for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination, a New York gadfly named Robert Blaikie hired an airplane to tow a banner over the South Florida coast saying, "Lindsay means *tsouris*," the Yiddish word for "trouble." It was a warning to Florida's population of Jewish snowbirds. Lindsay finished a disastrous fifth in Florida, derailing his presidential hopes.

"By the time you finish a couple terms in New York, your negatives are just too high," says George Arzt, a former spokesman for Mr. Koch and a veteran political consultant. "There's just too much baggage, too many things you did wrong, too many things you're blamed for."

Those factors have led to a long succession of failure from men who started with great promise but whose careers couldn't survive a stay in Gracie Mansion. Before Mr. Giuliani or Mr. Koch, there was A. Oakey Hall, a protégé of Boss Tweed who in 1873 won the mayor's office with the backing of Tammany Hall, the Democratic machine that ruled New York on and off for a century. "At the height of his popularity it was confidently predicted by friends and foes that he would yet be Governor of the State of New York and President of the United States," his New York Times obituary reported. But after the Orange Day riots between Irish Catholic and Irish Protestant factions—and subsequent revelations about Tweed's enormous corruption—Hall was finished. Not even Tweed's insistence that Hall wear a bright-green suit on St. Patrick's Day could save his career.

Other Tammany Hall candidates also were seized by scandal, whether it was the strikingly handsome Thomas F. Gilroy (1893-1894), who was felled by the Lexow Commission police-corruption investigation; or Robert A. Van Wyck (1898-1901), the first mayor of a consolidated New York, who in the days before refrigeration was found to have helped the American Ice Company gain an ice monopoly in exchange for piles of company stock.

Jimmy Walker (1926-1932), a dashing lothario mayor of the Roaring '20s, was snared by the Seabury Commission; his bribe money was found stuffed in a "little tin box" later made famous by the musical "Fiorello!"

William O'Dwyer, the last of the Tammany Hall mayors, resigned in 1950 to become ambassador to Mexico—and to escape questions about his ties to organized crime, which were never fully answered.

Other mayors suffered different kinds of misfortune. For William Havemeyer (1873-1874), it was a train malfunction while he was returning from a weekend trip to Long Island. Forced to walk from Great Neck to Flushing, he caught a chill and died. William Jay Gaynor (1910-1913) survived an assassination attempt from a disgruntled city employee but succumbed to a heart attack while on an ocean cruise three years later.

John P. Mitchell (1913-1917), nicknamed the "Boy Mayor" when he was elected at age 35, left office after two terms to enlist in the Army Air Services. He died on a training run in 1918.

Bad timing hurt others. William R. Grace, mayor for two nonconsecutive terms in the 1880s, was the Bloomberg of his day, a successful businessman—he founded W.R. Grace Company—and a devoted philanthropist. But he was also Catholic, at a time when the nation simply didn't elect Catholics to higher office.

Then there was Fiorello LaGuardia, who seriously considered a run for President in 1940 and might well have won with support from his close friend, Franklin D. Roosevelt. But when Roosevelt decided to run a third time, LaGuardia stepped aside. By the end of a bruising third term, he had neither the political capital nor the energy for more.

Robert F. Wagner Jr. (1954-1965) had dreams of claiming his father's U.S. Senate seat. But running against Jacob Javits in 1956, Wagner had the misfortune of running into President Dwight D. Eisenhower's wide coattails that helped the Republican, Javits, to an easy victory. By the time Wagner was done with his difficult third term as mayor a decade later, he was seen as not only tired but unelectable.

If there is an end in sight to the drought, it may well rest with Mr. Giuliani. He has yet to declare any intention of running for U.S. Senate in 2010, but polls have already installed him as a favorite against Kirsten Gillibrand to fill the final two years of Hillary Clinton's unexpired term.

As for Mr. Bloomberg? He wouldn't appear to have any place to move his crown. Mr. Bloomberg has expressed no interest in being governor, a position with little real authority that would require him to spend most of his time in Albany, which is not easily confused with Manhattan. And legislative positions don't seem to suit his executive demeanor, either.

That leaves only the presidency, a door that may already be closed. He would be 70 by the time of the 2012 elections, so his political biological clock is ticking loudly. As an independent candidate, Mr. Bloomberg's own advisers have concluded he would need both major parties to nominate extremists, unlikely in an era of centrist candidates. Plus, he has to survive all the bumps of his presumed third term, with a potentially disastrous budget shortcoming looming. That means his current campaign for mayor just might be the last he ever runs. Unless, of course, he decides to run for a fourth term.

—Brad Parks's first novel, *"Faces of the Gone,"* comes out in December.