

mitchellmoss.com

articles

book chapters

op-ed pieces

reports

in the news...

Minor-League Office, Big-League Chance

New York Newsday - June 10, 1993

By Mitchell Moss

Most Americans, though not most New Yorkers, believe that success in any field qualifies one for elective office. Just look at the number of athletes, actors and entrepreneurs who have gone into public office in other communities. After careers in major league baseball, pitchers "Vinegar Bend" Mizell and Jim Bunning, for example, went to the House of Representatives. NFL quarterback Jack Kemp was elected to Congress from Buffalo, and Pete Dawkins, one of West Point's best quarterbacks, tried unsuccessfully to emulate former Knicks star Bill Bradley, U.S. Senator from New Jersey.

In California, the entertainment industry has spawned political careers: Voters sent song-and-dance man George Murphy to the U.S. Senate and Ronald Reagan to the White House (after two terms as governor), as well as Sonny Bono and Clint Eastwood to mayoral positions.

In New York City, politicians don't start at the top: They hone their skills through on-the-job training. And at each rung of the political ladder, voters decide whether a politician deserves to move up. This year, all eyes are focused on the mayoral race, but the race for public advocate is just as important in selecting the future leadership of the city.

The public advocate - the new name for what was once known as the president of the City Council - is one of three citywide elected positions. The job

has few executive or legislative duties, but it has attracted talented and ambitious candidates who recognize a good stepping-stone to higher office. Jackie Mason's short-lived candidacy was a joke, since New Yorkers can distinguish between politics and standup comedy, even if it took Mason a while. It is far more difficult to please a hostile community board or an aggressive press corps than to kibbitz with a nightclub audience.

In fact, the public advocate job is a fabulous platform; the lack of official duties allows the office-holder to shape the job and define its role within the city. Although editorial boards and civic groups regard it as a trivial job that wastes taxpayer money, the position actually provides a valuable stage for politicians to audition for future office without making the public pay a huge price for what may prove to be our bad decision or their poor judgment.

New Yorkers know that it takes more than glamour, a prominent family name or a good throwing arm to be a successful politician. Unlike other voters, New Yorkers reject prominent individuals who think that success in business qualifies one for higher office; just look at the failed candidacies of Lew Lehrman, John Dyson, Pierre Rinfret and Ronald Lauder

We want seasoned politicians who have spent their time in the minors, refining their skills and learning how to shape public policy: Mario Cuomo spent time in purgatory learning about upstate when he served as lieutenant governor; David Dinkins was an assemblyman, city clerk and borough president before winning the mayoralty, and Ed Koch spent his political adolescence in the City Council and Congress.

Rather than ignore the race for public advocate, we should recognize that the holder of that office may well be a candidate for an even more important job. Should Dinkins win reelection, the public advocate will be well positioned to succeed him; should Rudolph Giuliani win, the public advocate - if a Democrat - will be not just a sous chef, but a leading voice of the opposition. Or perhaps the public advocate will be so ineffective that voters will realize he or she isn't qualified to move to the top of the political class.

In any event, the public advocate can do little damage while citizens watch how well he or she performs in the harsh arena of New York politics. In an era when our congressional delegation is shrinking and the borough presidents have

lost much of their power, we should measure the public advocate by what the officeholder does with the job, not by what's in the city charter.

Copyright © Newsday, Inc.