

Fiorello LaGuardia Reading the Comics (July 8, 1945)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia



Musical duo Double Dee and Steinski

Politicians and political news has been a part of the radio spectrum since KDKA informed its listeners of Warren Harding's Presidential victory in 1920. Later, FDR's famous "Fireside Chats" (a series of 30 semi-regular radio addresses delivered between 1933 and 1944) further enmeshed American politics with broadcasting. Since then, radio has been an integral part of our electoral and governing process. From campaign ads (containing everything from savvy jingles to "go negative" allegations) to simulcasts of speeches, debates and conventions to latter day weekly Presidential broadcasts (largely the purview of the media-savvy Ronald Reagan), there is no area today in which the airwaves and the electorate do not intersect.

But perhaps one of the most interesting and, historically, certainly most memorable uses of the medium arrived in 1945 when then New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia took to the Big Apple airwaves to—not give a speech or even an interview—but to read the newspaper comics to the children of his fair city.

This was far from LaGuardia's first time behind the microphone. Taking a page from FDR's playbook, LaGuardia had been regularly taking to the air to address the NYC citizenry. He began his weekly, Sunday broadcast, "Talk to the People," in January of 1942. Conveniently, it was broadcast over the city's WNYC radio station, a frequency fully owned and operated by the City of New York. The Mayor's weekly broadcasts would endure until he left office in December 1945.

Along with being good PR, the Mayor's show was also part of the war effort, a vehicle to boost morale and even to give advice. During his weekly program, the Mayor was libel to take on anything from the latest war news to info about the city's latest rations to food prices, conservation, employment of children and pressure cookers. (The final one earned a mention because the Mayor considered them a good way to conserve fuel while preparing dinner.)

But, when the Mayor decided to read the weekly funnies to the city's young people over the airwaves in July of 1945, it wasn't just benevolence that spurred him on. It was a political statement. The City of New York was at that moment in the midst of a newspaper delivery strike. Though papers were being printed (and could be purchased at the printing plant), the deliverer's union was not distributing them. With no internet or TV back then, only radio and, especially, the cheaply-available printed press were the media lifelines of people eager for news from Washington and about the war. The sudden, indefinite suspension of newspapers dealt a blow to the people of New York. For comparison, imagine if, tomorrow, all of the internet suddenly shut down.

Though LaGuardia, NY's Republican three-term mayor (he served 1934-1945), was largely pro-union in his policies, the delivery strike did not sit well with him. At its height, the Mayor called the walk out by the 1,700 workers a "stubborn, silly, idiotic defiance of the government." Hence, in order that the kids wouldn't be deprived of their weekly "funnies" due to "a squabble among grown ups," Mayor LaGuardia decided to make a live reading of them a part of his broadcast.

But, there was more at play here than just the adventures of some comic characters. Though LaGuardia veiled his actions by stating his actions were only for the kids, his reasons for reading were far more complex than that. In taking to the spectrum to update the "kiddies" on their favorite comic characters, the Mayor was bypassing traditional delivery systems and circumventing the role of the strikers, nullifying their role and, with it, the issues behind their labor strike.

Meanwhile, while speaking to the kids, and covertly speaking to (or telling off), organized labor, LaGuardia was also enhancing his own reputation. Via the familial radio he was recasting himself in the fatherly role of a Mr. Fix-It. The website "The Leisurely Historian" takes LaGuardia's motives and influence even farther by stating:

By reading the comics, he was actually not just providing entertainment for the children of his constituents. La Guardia was finding a way to insert himself into the everyday street-corner conversations of millions of New Yorkers. I would argue that *this*, just as much as appealing to the children, was key to why this was such a defining moment for the memory of La Guardia's career. He had understood the social function of comics to its adult readers, and had joined in that discussion. It's the mark of a true populist--to actually understand what's important to people, even the stuff they wouldn't normally admit to.

It wasn't just the comics that LaGuardia shared that day. From his office in City Hall, the Mayor, in an exceedingly casual and colloquial style, also discussed the war, the current, local "meat situation," the need for milk bottle recycling and the price of cantaloupes. Of course, he also discussed the ongoing delivery strike, adding in a little admonishment, a verbal wagging of the finger, along the way. "Boys, I don't think you're acting right," he stated during the broadcast.

Of course, though, it's the comic strips that everyone remembers. In the first of the Mayor's broadcast during the strike, occurring on July 8th, LaGuardia read "Dick Tracy" (this particular panel included an appearance by Breathless Mahoney). His reading was an animated one. LaGuardia threw himself into it and delivered a full performance, adopting a variety of voices and inflections. At one time, to fully explain the action, he pounded aggressively on his desk. Legend has it that the rapping nearly blew out the ears of his sound engineer. And the alleged moral to the strip that day was a pointed one, one that LaGuardia took a bit of relish in repeating: "Say children, what does it all mean? It means that dirty money never brings any luck! No, dirty money always brings sorrow and sadness and misery and disgrace."

LaGuardia's performance of the comics on radio only occurred three times. (A later broadcast had the Honorable Mayor reading "Little Orphan Annie," who, in her strip at that time, was on trial for murder!) But LaGuardia's gesture endeared him to his city and forever impacted his image and political legacy. To be sure, with his taking the comics to the airwaves, LaGuardia showcased himself as a savvy politician, one concerned about his constituents, one clearly "of the people," but also somehow "above it all" in terms of looking out for them and on their behalf.

Though both before and after these special radio performances, LaGuardia would do much for his city (and his country; he had previously served in the US Congress), it is these comics recitations that have become, for better or worse, his "defining moment." Certainly this is the case within the culture today. Besides the airport that bears his name, LaGuardia is perhaps most remembered for his relaying of "Dick Tracy," et.al. over the airwaves to New York, New York, in the summer of 1945. His comics-on-radio escapade has gone on to be celebrated in the 1959 Broadway musical "Fiorello!" and even sampled by the hip hop artists. LaGuardia's radio

actuality of “What does it all mean?” was first utilized in song in 1983 in “Lesson 1—The Payoff Mix” by hip hop duo Double Dee and Steinski. Six years later, De La Soul sampled that sample for their 1989 song “The Magic Number” from their album “3 Feet High and Rising.”

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