

This Day in History... September 20, 1947

Death of Fiorello La Guardia

On September 20, 1947, former New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia died.

Fiorello (Italian for "little flower"), was born December 11, 1882, in Greenwich Village, New York. His family then moved to Arizona when his father got a job as a bandmaster at Fort Whipple in the US Army. When his father was discharged in 1898, the family moved to Trieste.

After graduating from a private school, La Guardia joined the State Department and served in the US consulates in Budapest, Trieste, and Fiume. La Guardia then chose to continue his education so he returned to America to study at New York University. At the same time, he worked for the US Bureau of Immigration at Ellis Island as a translator from 1907 to 1910. La Guardia translated Italian, German, Yiddish, and Croatian and was considered one of the agency's top interpreters.



This stamp was mostly used on airmail to Europe and parts of North Africa.

In 1910, La Guardia graduated from New York University Law School, was admitted to the bar, and began practicing law in New York City. In the following years, he was made deputy attorney general of New York and then elected to the US House of Representatives. In that role, La Guardia became known as a vocal supporter of progressive causes. However, he was commissioned into the US Army Air Service later that year. Serving in World War I, La Guardia rose to the rank of major and commanded a bomber unit on the Italian-Austrian front.

La Guardia won reelection in 1918, but resigned his seat the following year after winning election for president of the New York City Board of Aldermen by just 1,363 votes out of nearly 950 thousand. In this role, he spent much of his time fighting for the rights of immigrant factory workers. In 1921, La Guardia ran for mayor, but lost the Republican primary. So the next year, he decided to return to Congress. La Guardia ran for and won a seat in the House, which he held until 1933. La Guardia pushed against immigration quotas and helped create the Norris-La Guardia Act, which evaded Supreme Court limitations on labor unions. He also pushed for progressive income taxes, increased government participation in Wall Street, and national employment insurance. La Guardia ran for Mayor again in 1929, but lost by a landslide.



From the Prominent Americans Series

Then at the end on 1932, the Tammany Hall-backed mayor of New York City was forced to resign and La Guardia lost reelection to congress. Therefore, La Guardia decided to run for mayor a third time in 1933. He ran with the backing of the Republican Party, as well as the City Fusion Party which had been created by a group of republicans and anti-Tammany Democrats to challenge Tammany's dominance. La Guardia won with 40.38% of the vote. Entering office, La Guardia had five main goals – to improve the city's finances, increase work relief programs, stop government corruption, encourage appointments based on civil service rather than patronage, and update infrastructure – particularly transportation and parks.

President Franklin Roosevelt supported his causes and gave him 20% of the national Civil Works Administration budget to aid in work relief. Roosevelt and his New Deal supporters gave the city extensive funding for public works projects.

La Guardia also targeted gangsters, as he believed they created a negative stereotype of the Italian community. Upon taking office, he ordered the chief of police to arrest Lucky Luciano on any charges he could find. He targeted other mob bosses, ended mob-run inflation on artichokes, and shut down burlesque theaters.

Mayor La Guardia was also celebrated for improving New York's economy through his public works programs that employed thousands. Working closely with President Roosevelt, La Guardia transformed New York into a display of the success of his New Deal policies. This led to the building of highways, bridges, tunnels, and airports (one of which was later named in La Guardia's honor).

In the months prior to America's entrance into World War II, Roosevelt made La Guardia director of the Office of Civilian Defense, which prepared the public for blackouts, air raids, and sirens. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, La Guardia was replaced in that position. His popularity waned during the war years and he chose not to run again in 1945. La Guardia continued to work though, serving as director general of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in 1946. However, he died the following year, on September 20, 1947. In a 1993 poll, La Guardia was voted the best former mayor in America.



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Stamp picturing the logos of several of FDR's New Deal organizations.



La Guardia opened the 1939 New York World's Fair.

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