

William O'Dwyer: An Irish Mayor For All New Yorkers

BY MARIE SARRO

In a city as ethnically diverse as New York, it is essential that a politician be sensitive to the needs of many different groups. At the same time, it is impossible for an individual to ignore his or her own ethnic background and simply blend into the melting pot for the sake of impartiality. How then, can a mayor of New York City be equitable to all people while remaining supportive of his own ethnic group? This was precisely the task which faced William O'Dwyer, the last Irish-born Mayor of New York City who governed from 1946–1950. During his four and a half years in office he exhibited strong support for Irish and Irish-American causes, yet always remained focused on creating improvements that would benefit all New Yorkers.

O'Dwyer's interest in public service began when he was a boy living in Bohola, County Mayo, Ireland. In 1897, when O'Dwyer was just seven years old, he witnessed families around him fighting powerful and cruel landlords for the right to remain on their land. O'Dwyer later recalled this terrible scene:

Evictions were the most heartless things in the world—when they were evicted, and thrown out and their houses burned, even in the middle of winter, the neighbors were told, "Now if you harbor them or feed them or give them house-room, we'll throw you out and burn your house."¹

He began to learn firsthand about the seemingly impossible struggles of the lower classes against all too powerful governments. Some years later his father, who was a teacher, fought against the practice of nepotism by the Catholic Church in order to protect the jobs of educators through unionization.² From the day his father went to Dublin to lobby for his cause, O'Dwyer took note of the difficulties that working-class people were forced to endure. From these events he developed "a feeling for the oppressed against the oppressor" that he would carry with him for the rest of his life.³



BECOMING MAYOR OF NEW YORK

O'Dwyer's experiences with conflict and self-determination in Ireland helped him greatly once he arrived in New York at the age of twenty in 1910. Upon his arrival, he rented a room in a Bronx apartment building and took a job delivering groceries.⁴ Over the next few years, O'Dwyer took whatever jobs were available. He joined the plasterers union and helped to build the Woolworth Building, and also worked as a longshoreman and as a bartender at the Hotel Vanderbilt.⁵ In 1917 he followed in the footsteps of many Irish immigrants before him and became a member of the New York City Police Department. For the next seven years he walked a beat by the Brooklyn waterfront while studying for his law degree at Fordham University.⁶ After another seven years of practicing law, O'Dwyer was appointed Magistrate in 1932.⁷ In 1939 he was elected District Attorney of Kings County, and it was there that he entered the public eye. His prosecution of criminals in the gang Murder, Inc. resulted in seven men, including the notorious Louis Lepke, being sent to the electric chair.⁸ After witnessing Manhattan's Republican District Attorney, Thomas E. Dewey receive his party's nomination for governor in 1938, Tammany Hall, the hub of New York's Democratic party leadership (run almost exclusively by the Irish since 1870) decided to capitalize on

Illustration:

Co. Mayo native and New York City Mayor William O'Dwyer (center) with, from left to right, Joseph E. McLoughlin (Galway), Tommy Ayres (Clare), Consul General of Ireland Garth Healy, and James J. Comerford (Kilkenny), City Hall, June 1949. Courtesy of Marion R. Casey, from the collection of Rita McLoughlin FitzPatrick.

Marie Sarro earned her bachelor's degree in History from New York University in May, 2002. She is currently teaching Global Studies at Murry Bergtraum High School in Manhattan while pursuing her master's degree in History at Hunter College. Her research on William O'Dwyer was inspired by Professor Marion R. Casey.

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the crime-fighting reputation of one of their own. In 1941 they gave O'Dwyer the nomination for mayor.⁹ It was the tenth time in succession, dating back to 1909, that the Democrats nominated a candidate of Irish decent for mayor.¹⁰ However, O'Dwyer ran unsuccessfully against the popular incumbent Republican, Fiorello LaGuardia, and then took a leave of absence from his duties as District Attorney to serve in World War II. There he made the rank of Brigadier General and was appointed by President Roosevelt to head the United States section of the Allied Control Commission for Italy.¹¹ He returned to America in 1945, just in time to receive the Democratic party's nomination for mayor once again.

In an effort to balance the Democratic ticket ethnically, Tammany Hall's leaders announced that a Manhattan Jew named Irwin Davidson would run for City Council President, and a Bronx Italian, Lawrence Gerosa, for comptroller.¹² O'Dwyer knew that as an Irishman and a Democrat, he would receive the backing of the city's Irish voters, and that he was likely to receive the majority of the Italian votes as he had in 1941. In fact, it was only the Jewish voters who did not give the majority of their votes to O'Dwyer in the previous election.¹³ These Jewish voters were loyal to the American Labor party (the ALP), and O'Dwyer wanted their support in the upcoming election. Tammany, on the other hand, advised O'Dwyer to keep his distance from the ALP because of its Communist affiliation. However, in an unprecedented show of independence for an Irish Democrat with political aspirations, O'Dwyer defied Tammany Hall. He contacted ALP leader Vito Marcantonio who pledged the ALP nomination to O'Dwyer on the condition that he take an Italian, Vincent Impelliteri, as his running mate for City Council president. O'Dwyer agreed and then bumped his candidate for comptroller, Gerosa, for the Jewish Lazarus Joseph in order to restore the ethnic balance.¹⁴ The public now perceived him as a man who was independent of the Tammany bosses, while the ALP support gave him the image of a liberal and friend of the working class.¹⁵ He was victorious in the race, receiving the largest plurality that the City had ever seen, with 285,738 more votes than the combined total of both Jonah Goldstein, the Republican-Liberal-Fusion candidate and the No

Deal party's Newbold Morris, who was back by Mayor LaGuardia.¹⁶

LENDING SUPPORT TO IRISH NEW YORKERS

O'Dwyer took office in January, 1946, immediately after the end of the Second World War. At this time, the City was faced with a new and particularly challenging set of problems ranging from the transition from a war time economy to a surge in population growth attributed to the return of thousands of soldiers, and their subsequent creation of families. A great increase in population presents many challenges to a municipality with an increased need for housing, schools, hospitals, and more funding for public welfare programs. After the 1945 election, while Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia was finishing his last term, Bill O'Dwyer paid him a visit at City Hall. LaGuardia had the mayor-elect sit in his chair and said to him, "Now, you have inherited a perpetual headache."¹⁷ Indeed, many pain-staking tasks lay ahead for O'Dwyer as he attempted to balance his roles as an Irishman and the City's political leader.

Shortly after taking office, O'Dwyer set to work in lending his support to Irish Americans, many of whom helped to get him elected. *The Gaelic American* was one paper that frequently wrote about O'Dwyer, his actions, and his contributions to Irish Americans and those back in Ireland. A close examination of the newspaper demonstrates that O'Dwyer gave a very strong show of support to the Irish Americans and their social, political, and civic activities. In the 1920s, O'Dwyer had served as vice president and later president of the United Irish Counties Association (the U.I.C.A.). The organization was founded in 1904 to coordinate social and athletic events among the individual county associations within New York City.¹⁸ As mayor, O'Dwyer continued to show unwavering support to the group. In March, 1947, he was asked to install the association's new president, James J. Comerford, at a dinner which also honored the memory of the martyred Padraic Pearse, killed by the British in 1916. He had this to say to those present:

Pearse wouldn't settle for a partition of Ireland. There was too much spirit in his body; there was too much of a giant in the men of his time.... Partition was forced upon the people of Ireland at the point of

*a gun, but it is not too late for an agreement to be reached in the position of Ireland as supposed to be guaranteed by the Atlantic Charter.*¹⁹

In fact, it was quite common for O'Dwyer to visit the circles of many other Irish organizations. When he started on the campaign trail in 1945, he met with the Ancient Order of Hibernians (the A.O.H.), and vowed that as mayor he would ask for the return of the six Northern Ireland counties to Ireland.²⁰ (The issue of Irish unity seems more like one to be discussed in a presidential campaign than in a mayoral election race, but O'Dwyer was intent from the beginning on using his position to further the interests of Irish Americans.) In April, 1947, he shortened a vacation in California so that he could return to New York and attend a show of Irish music and dance hosted by the Carmelite priests who were associated with movements for Irish independence.²¹ In May of the same year, O'Dwyer received a standing ovation at the American Irish Historical Society dinner when he arose to present poet Padraic Colum with the Society's Gold Medal for outstanding achievement. Just moments before, the chairman of the Dinner Committee, Terence J. McManus had said of the mayor, "Mayor O'Dwyer inherited a difficult situation when he became the City's Chief Magistrate. The way he has handled his position challenges the admiration of citizens throughout America."²² In fact, it was events such as these, those meant to show support for the movement for Irish nationalism (uniting the thirty-six Irish counties, including the six that became Northern Ireland after Britain's Partition of the island in 1921), that earned O'Dwyer a reputation as a man who was not afraid to stand up for what he believed in.

The Gaelic American repeatedly praised O'Dwyer for his blatant support of Irish and Irish American causes. A September, 1948 article announced that O'Dwyer would be the principal speaker at an anti-partition rally, commenting: "The Mayor is one of the very few elected public officials in the United States who have fearlessly and consistently backed the Anti-Partition program."²³ At that anti-partition rally, O'Dwyer told a packed house at Carnegie Hall:

I look forward with a great deal of pleasure to one evening now and then

*when I can be relieved of the trouble of all the races that make up our city and spend a half hour with my own flesh and blood to talk about Ireland. It is a privilege for me to come here to talk about the injustice that keeps Six Counties of the little island that is the cradle of our race under the subjection of our traditional enemy.*²⁴

The Gaelic American reported that he then urged other leaders to disregard their fears of political consequences and follow his lead: "He urged his audience to utilize every lawful means to bring about the complete freedom of Ireland and declared that it was the duty of all officials with Irish blood in their veins to speak out for her cause in high places where it would be most effective."²⁵ And as any effective leader would, William O'Dwyer led by example.

At an Anti-Partition Rally in 1947 which was sponsored by the U.I.C.A. and the A.O.H., O'Dwyer referred to the partition as one of the "ranked examples of injustice in the world today and a disgrace to civilization."²⁶ He ended his speech with a call for the New York Irish to continue their fight for the restoration of the six counties to Ireland. Later that year at the Irish Race Convention, O'Dwyer reminded his listeners that taking the oath of citizenship to the United States did not necessitate relinquishing cooperation and sympathy with the aspirations of the people of Ireland. In response to O'Dwyer's emotional speech in which he also proclaimed that, "autonomy is the right of the children of heaven,"²⁷ the Northern Ireland Minister of Home Affairs responded by saying that the speech was, "false propaganda of certain advocates of Irish unity... Mayor O'Dwyer is not aware that the union of north and south would debase standards of living of every man and woman in Northern Ireland."²⁸ Despite this criticism, O'Dwyer continued to display his support for Ireland, her leaders, and the struggle for a thirty-two county Ireland.

DIGNITARIES RECEIVED AND NOT RECEIVED

In his capacity as Mayor of the City of New York, O'Dwyer was able to act as a diplomat, hosting many Irish dignitaries at City Hall. *The Gaelic American* was quick to report the travels of these

individuals. One of the major events in the Irish community to take place during the O'Dwyer administration was the arrival of two Irish football teams in New York for the All-Ireland football final. The major competition had never before been held in the United States. O'Dwyer described the event as a "red letter day for the Irish in America." He went on to add:

*The Irish in New York are only one unit in the complex make-up of our great city: but they have made a notable cultural contribution to the life of America, and the contest on September 14th will be added evidence of the virility, tenacity, and sentiment of the Irish race.*²⁹

During this time the mayor was invited to Mexico to celebrate Mexican Independence Week beginning September 12. However, the game held such significance that O'Dwyer informed Mexican officials that he would not be able to arrive in Mexico City until September 15, just in time for the official observance.³⁰

One of the most celebrated guests to be received by the mayor was the former Irish prime minister, Eamon DeValera, who merited a ticker-tape parade.³¹ In September of the same year, the new Irish prime minister, John A. Costello, also paid a visit to Gracie Mansion.³² Daniel P. Morrissey, Ireland's minister for industry and commerce, arrived at City Hall in January, 1949. Mayor O'Dwyer congratulated the minister on advances made despite the country having been for centuries "despoiled by a foreign invader."³³ In March, the Irish minister of external affairs, Sean McBride, the son of an Irish martyr killed in the struggle for independence, came to the city. On this occasion, O'Dwyer proclaimed:

*The Republic of Ireland was recognized by the nations of the world on Easter Monday this year: but we know that the recognition of a Twenty-Six County Republic does not fulfill the aspirations of the Irish people. We know that there will not be complete freedom in Ireland until the British Army of occupation is withdrawn and until the six historic North-Eastern Counties are restored to the rest of the land.*³⁴

However, it was perhaps a guest not received

by Mayor O'Dwyer who received the most attention. In April, 1950, the Northern Ireland Secretary Sir Basil Brooke visited the U.S. and was refused at City Hall. The liberal magazine *The Nation* commented, "As though he were Mayor not of New York but of his native Bohola in County Mayo, Mr. O'Dwyer truculently announced that the Prime Minister of Ulster [sic] would be received at City Hall only over his dead body."³⁵

The articles in *The Gaelic American* provide an insight into the ways in which Irish Americans responded to William O'Dwyer's actions. The fact that the paper was so diligent in reporting his activities displays just how significant his support was to the Irish American community and the degree of pride taken in his actions by his own people.

Upon reviewing these documents, it is apparent that Irish Americans saw O'Dwyer, and he also saw himself, as an individual in a prime position to champion the causes of their people. His Irish constituents were not only approving, but also thankful and appreciative of his efforts, as evidenced by their drive to have him reelected in 1949.³⁶ The American Irish Citizens Committee for the Reelection of William O'Dwyer stated that newspapers who once supported O'Dwyer were vilifying him in the hopes that a representative of the privileged class (Newbold Morris) would replace him. A letter to committee members asked:

WHY THIS SUDDEN CHANGE?

Is it because—

He saves all of the people and not a choice few?

He has raised civil service wages to a decent living standard?

His rent control bill has prevented gouging of tenants?

*He has built Public Housing for 193,000 people?*³⁷

The letter urged voters to consider O'Dwyer's record when voting, and not to be misled by these publications.³⁸

Despite the gestures of support he lent to the Irish-American community, O'Dwyer could neither politically nor personally accede to the requests of all Irishmen. He chose his own battles, and more than once rejected requests from the homeland. People in and around O'Dwyer's

birthplace of County Mayo often sent letters requesting the mayor's personal assistance. While these letters demonstrate that people in Ireland genuinely believed that they had a friend in the Irish mayor an ocean away, they were not alone. It was reported in 1947 that the mayor was receiving between seven thousand and fifteen thousand letters each month.³⁹ People wrote to the mayor from all over the world requesting money, jobs, and even romantic dates. It would have been impossible for O'Dwyer to honor all requests, especially those that involved the writing of a personal check. Most of the letters received a form letter response explaining that:

*The Mayor daily receives numerous requests for donations...and much as he may be in sympathy with a cause in which appeal is made to him, since he could not possibly accede to all requests, he feels that in fairness to all who write him he must follow a uniform policy to which exception is not made.*⁴⁰

Such responses were also sent in regard to requests for O'Dwyer's support from the Irish Centre Club⁴¹, which was described as a social, educational, and cultural gathering place for New York's Gaels, and to the Green Cross, an Ireland-based foundation which gave financial assistance to the families of Irishmen imprisoned in British jails.⁴² As a result of the mayor's official policy, he rejected almost all requests for financial support and assistance, and his support for the Irish and Irish-Americans was limited to public appearances and speeches.

LOYAL TO HIS POSITION

There were indeed times when O'Dwyer's speaking appearances were not at all pleasing to Irish-Americans, largely resulting from his desire to remain loyal to his position as mayor of the City of New York and the representative of a vast and varied conglomerate of people. At no point was this more difficult for O'Dwyer than in 1946 when Winston Churchill planned a visit to New York City. Upon hearing the news that O'Dwyer would speak at a reception honoring England's Winston Churchill as a leader and diplomat, the Irish-American community flooded City Hall with their letters of outrage. *Clan na Gael* and IRA Veterans

of New York sent a telegram on March 12, 1946, which read, "We protest against public reception and presentation to Winston Churchill who was responsible for letting loose the Black and Tans on Ireland (Anglo-Irish War 1920-21), and causing the deaths of thousands of Irish Men and Women." O'Dwyer disregarded these statements and many others similar to them and spoke at a City Hall reception honoring the former British Prime Minister. O'Dwyer's aides advised him to recall Winston Churchill's family roots in New York City; for example, his grandfather Leonard W. Jerome was instrumental in establishing the "Riot Relief Fund" to benefit the families of the New York City police officers that were killed in the 1863 draft riots.⁴³ O'Dwyer discussed aspects of the family's contributions and mentioned that the fund had survived as the New York Police and Fire Widow's Fund. His remarks also included the following words in praise of Churchill:

*As Mayor of New York, I have the signal honor of extending an official welcome to our most distinguished visitor. In welcoming him, I desire to recall to you, though I am sure you too remember—the time not long ago when he captured the hearts and admiration of the world. In the early dark days of the war when the nations of Europe trembled before the onslaught of Hitler's Armies and a terrible fear engulfed the people of the world his clarion voice rallied them to a stubborn resistance. His ringing phrases instilled new hope in the hearts of freedom-lovers and his zeal begot in them new courage. His tenacity was an inspiration.*⁴⁴

While O'Dwyer was well aware of the disapproval he would face within the Irish-American community in the wake of this controversial speech, he still chose to accept and honor the dignitary not as an Irishman, but in his official capacity as the mayor of New York City.⁴⁵ Some fifteen years later, O'Dwyer would comment on the event, saying, "I recognized the world-wide position of Churchill, and my position as mayor of the City. I had no love for Churchill because of his action in the Irish picture, but I also felt it was my duty as mayor of the City to receive him."⁴⁶

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O'DWYER AND RELIGIOUS ISSUES

While O'Dwyer was never heavily criticized by the local newspapers for supporting Irish causes, he often took heat for what many perceived as favoritism towards the Catholic Church. One such instance was in 1949 when O'Dwyer joined Cardinal Spellman, head of the New York Archdiocese in calling for State Department action to free Cardinal Mindszenty, another Catholic clergymen imprisoned in Hungary allegedly for his dealings with corrupt landlords. As the *New York Times* reported, "Mayor O'Dwyer called on Secretary of State Acheson to do all he could to prevent the 'lynching' of the Hungarian Primate."⁴⁷ Regardless of Mindszenty's guilt in the matter, many resented O'Dwyer's alliance and involvement with the Church in matters such as these. One radical newspaper went as far as to ask O'Dwyer, "Is it your theory that any trial of a Catholic Cardinal should be denounced because a Catholic Cardinal can do no wrong?"⁴⁸

Mayor O'Dwyer often found himself in the center of extremely difficult political decisions pertaining to religious matters. However, under no circumstances did O'Dwyer lend unconditional support to Cardinal Spellman or to the Catholic Church. Wherever possible, he attempted to distance himself from situations that could portray him as either favoring the Church, or betraying it. In August, 1949, just a few months after the Mindszenty affair, the spotlight was on O'Dwyer once again. Both the senatorial and mayoral elections were approaching in November, and a controversy was brewing within the Democratic Party. Cardinal Spellman was publicly promoting the notion that parochial schools should receive federal funding, an idea which did not sit well at all with Eleanor Roosevelt, a major player in Democratic Party leadership. With the election just a few months away, all eyes turned to O'Dwyer to see where he stood on the issue. O'Dwyer understood that siding with the Cardinal would weaken his image as an impartial and tolerant politician in the eyes of non-Catholic Democrats, and that on the contrary, siding with Roosevelt would alienate millions of the city's Catholic voters with interest in parochial schools. Without full Democratic support, Republican victories in the upcoming elections seemed likely. After taking a vacation to clear his head, O'Dwyer decided ultimately to remain

neutral on the situation and attempt to bring about a resolution that would once again bring unity to the Party. Several days later the Cardinal issued an amended statement that called not for the general support of religious schools with public funds, but rather the use of public funds for specific auxiliary expenses not having to do with religion such as transportation, health aids, and non-religious textbooks. When asked for commentary on the new proposal, Mrs. Roosevelt replied, "I...think it a...fair statement."⁴⁹

The Mayor made several other attempts to ensure that he landed somewhere in the middle of the religious spectrum. Letters from Catholic clergy requesting O'Dwyer's support were treated in the same manner as was all other mail. One note came from a Catholic priest working in a remote Panamanian mission with the desire to build a schoolhouse for the poverty-stricken native people. In addition, O'Dwyer also received a letter from a midwestern Catholic school requesting funds to purchase a school bus,⁵⁰ and a request for aid from the National Conference of Catholic Charities.⁵¹ All such requests were answered with letters of regret.

In addition to remaining impartial, O'Dwyer took very specific measures to create a fair representation of other faiths within his administration. At the dedication ceremony of the headquarters of the United Nations in 1947, which involved Mayor O'Dwyer and several world dignitaries, Cardinal Spellman was the only clergyman available to give remarks. The Mayor received a letter from the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York which read:

*I should respectfully like to draw to your attention the fact that the United Nations is a world organization in which all are concerned and that to look upon the Roman Catholic Church as the only branch of religion worthy of representation on such an occasion is unworthy of a great city whose administration presumably believes in the democratic process.*⁵²

The Protestant Council of the City of New York also sent a letter requesting that the Mayor agree to the "representation of at least the three major faiths at any official functions where any members of the clergy are invited to participate."⁵³ O'Dwyer responded to both letters indi-

cating that clergy from all three faiths were invited to the ceremony but that only Cardinal Spellman accepted.⁵⁴ He was in turn assured that if in the future he contacted the Protestant Council directly, they would gladly provide him with a clergyman from their “side of the fence.”⁵⁵

Early in his administration, O’Dwyer received a letter from Congregation Tifereth Torah of Bensonhurst which demonstrated the confidence that New York’s Jewish community had in the Mayor. It read in part, “Permit me to take this occasion to express to you our heartfelt wishes and divine blessings in your new office as mayor of the City of New York. We are sure that your administration will improve the welfare of all classes and groups, and bring about lasting achievements that will be a pride for our city.”⁵⁶ The letter further requested that O’Dwyer send a letter of encouragement to be published in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the congregation’s newsletter. O’Dwyer’s aides advised him that the temple was not one of the larger or most important in the City, and that he should stick to the official policy and deny the request. However, the Mayor decided to send a message of congratulations.⁵⁷

Mayor O’Dwyer also did what he could to advance the position of Jewish people in New York City and around the world. He gave a radio address discussing the plight of Jews in the wake of the Holocaust. And as a member of the War Refugee Board he created measures to ease Jewish entry into America and pushed for the United States to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Israel.⁵⁸ Members of the City’s Jewish community praised him for his work to gain recognition and acceptance their religion. The Jewish National Fund had O’Dwyer’s name inscribed in the Sefer HaMedinah, the new volume of the Golden Book of the fund for being “helpful in bringing about the decision of the United Nations of November 29, 1947, for the creation of a Jewish State.”⁵⁹

O’DWYER AND RACIAL ISSUES

Mayor O’Dwyer also received recognition for taking steps towards bettering the social and economic situation of the City’s black population. Discussing the poverty that most blacks suffered at the time, O’Dwyer stated:

It’s a mistake to call it a Negro prob-

*lem. It’s a White problem. We made it. They didn’t. A partial solution lies in schools. When adults are bigoted, it’s hard to change them. But children can be taught democracy while they are young. It’ll take three generations of educating school children to wipe out racial and religious prejudice, but we’re not going to wait that long. We’ll do what we can in the meantime.*⁶⁰

When advisors suggested that the rising crime rate in Harlem be countered by adding more police officers to the area, O’Dwyer suggested the provision of better housing and economic opportunities for the residents.⁶¹ O’Dwyer arranged for the Lewisohn Stadium, part of City College, to be donated for an evening to a protest and demonstration on behalf of Isaac Woodard, a black man who had his eyes gouged out by police in the South.⁶² The entire event was organized and run by black residents of Harlem, and it was the first time the City had donated the use of a venue for such an event.

The Mayor also made unprecedented attempts to promote racial equality in the city. Later in life, O’Dwyer stated that he believed the city was carrying on an official policy of racial discrimination.⁶³ During his administration he set out to make changes in the everyday lives of blacks. He acknowledged that while the housing shortage was difficult on everyone, it was particularly troublesome for blacks, who were prohibited from residing in certain housing projects. In response, O’Dwyer prepared a local law which prohibited discrimination in public housing. In an effort to promote greater equality, Mayor O’Dwyer appointed Ray Jones, a black politician from Harlem, as Deputy Housing Commissioner. Jones took O’Dwyer on car rides through the slums of Harlem, opening his eyes to the plight of black New Yorkers. Subsequently, O’Dwyer was able to solicit funds from private sector donors for cartage that helped resident volunteers literally clean up their communities.⁶⁴

Through his position as a public figure, William O’Dwyer lent his support and influence to the Irish Americans as well as many of the City’s disadvantaged minorities, such as black and Jewish residents. However, aside from his gifts of speech

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and diplomacy, O'Dwyer's work ethic and role as a politician led to an administration of great change for the city. The records of his accomplishments as mayor illustrate just how much he accomplished in the names of all New York City residents.

Within just a few weeks of taking office, Mayor O'Dwyer was faced with a labor crisis when the Transit Workers Union (the T.W.U.), threatened to strike if they did not receive a large wage increase.⁶⁵ These workers, mainly Irish émigrés, had long been underpaid, and O'Dwyer knew that if a strike of subway workers were allowed, the city would be severely crippled. O'Dwyer was able to avoid such a disaster by contacting an old friend, Philip Murray, the national president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (the C.I.O.), the umbrella group to which the T.W.U. belonged. Murray was successful in calming the seas between O'Dwyer and T.W.U. leader Mike Quill. A strike was averted, and O'Dwyer had passed his first test. Later, O'Dwyer would negotiate an increase in the subway fare in order to give these workers a wage increase that would be competitive with the rising cost of living. Since the inception of the subway system, the fare had been five cents, and O'Dwyer favored a raise to ten cents, opposed by virtually all New Yorkers. His only other option was to make up the difference by taking from other departments. After leaving office O'Dwyer ultimately explained his rationale for his decision, "The decision I made was to raise the fare to ten cents. It had nothing to do with the politics of it, it was just a question of being fair and just to the service of all city departments."⁶⁶ This decision was understandably ill received by New Yorkers, who had been avoiding a fare increase for over fifteen years. And this would not be the last of Mayor O'Dwyer's struggles with workers and their unions, on the one hand, and his public image on the other.

After discovering the difficulty it took to deal with such labor crises, the mayor responded by creating the Division of Labor Relations, a committee charged with monitoring potential labor disputes and avoiding strikes that would be detrimental to the City. The group's stated purpose was to, "avert, or at the very least to settle quickly, strikes and work stoppages in industries essential to the health, safety, and welfare of the people of the City of New York."⁶⁷ They made lists of all indus-

tries vital to the public interest, and within each industry listed unions under contract, and the expiration dates of such contracts. They would then send communications to both union representatives as well as the companies and businesses that hired them thirty days before the expiration of the contracts in order to urge negotiations. The city would also offer mediation and arbitration services to those that requested it. In July, 1949, arbitration was accepted by labor and management in an eight day strike of three-thousand employees of the New York City Omnibus Corporation.⁶⁸ The mayor also used tripartite citizens panels comprised of outstanding representatives of labor, industry, and the public to mediate disputes of great importance to the city, and avoid costly and disruptive work stoppages.

IMPROVEMENTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Aside from keeping the subways operating, William O'Dwyer's terms as mayor saw other significant improvements in the realm of transportation. Mayor LaGuardia, at the end of his term, had prepared contracts that would create a second airport (the first being LaGuardia Field) in New York City. By the time O'Dwyer ascended to office, it was apparent that the city could not afford the cost of construction of the new Idlewild Airport (now J.F.K. International), especially since major repairs were already needed at LaGuardia. O'Dwyer's decision to break contracts with airlines already signed regarding the airfields at Idlewild was met with great criticism in the airline industry. However, others praised him for recognizing that honoring these contracts would have "used up all the city's available funds for construction, at the expense of schools and social services which the citizenry needs more than a grand new airport."⁶⁹ The Port Authority offered a deal to the City in which they would take the titles to both airports and assume responsibility for their maintenance and repair. O'Dwyer rejected the proposal, not wanting the City to lose control of its airports or any of its commercial waterfronts indefinitely. However, he eventually negotiated a deal in which the airports would be leased to the Port Authority for fifty years. The agreement stipulated that, "Improvement, development, operation, and maintenance of Idlewild Airport, LaGuardia Airport, and Floyd Bennet Field by

the Port Authority and at its expense will be in the public interest.”⁷⁰ Now the city would have a first-class airport without any capital expenditure.

A major accomplishment of the O’Dwyer administration was the increase of the number of housing units made available to residents. With the war’s end, veterans were returning home to New York in droves only to find that there were no accommodations available to them. O’Dwyer himself testified before a federal legislative committee on behalf of a new national government housing measure.⁷¹ The Taft-Ellender-Wagner Act would have provided funds for low-rent housing for veterans, but Congress did not pass the Act in 1946 nor when it was reintroduced in 1949. This was apparently due to Congress’ regarding President Truman as a lame duck, and therefore seeing no need to cooperate with his initiatives. Nevertheless, O’Dwyer was committed to making sure veterans had a place to go in New York City. He continued this fight and spoke at the 1947 United States Conference of Mayors urging politicians throughout the nation to pressure Congress to allocate federal funds to municipalities exclusively for housing veterans.⁷² Locally, he began the first local rent control program to prevent the laws of supply and demand from placing tenants at the mercy of their landlords. He also continued building efforts with city funds, despite the belief that the government should have been doing something to alleviate the crisis caused by the housing shortage. By 1949, the city had forty-two new public housing projects underway, with federal aid attached to only one, at a cost of \$410 million to the City.⁷³ Later that year, with the election of Harry S. Truman as President of the United States, a long awaited Housing Act was passed. However, the city had already completed 47,600 apartments on its own despite the tremendous economic burden the construction placed on the city. After his career as mayor had ended, O’Dwyer himself considered his record in the development of housing to be one of his greatest achievements.

Perhaps one of Mayor O’Dwyer’s most important improvements was his work to better the city’s school system. In 1950, the New York City Board of Education was described in the following terms:

In magnitude of operations, in extent of physical plant and in demand on taxpayers’

*dollars, the city’s free public school system far overshadows all other non-revenue-producing municipal agencies. Indeed it is so vast that the governments of many states and foreign nations fall far behind it in budgetary expenditures, personnel employed and volume of activity. It is undoubtedly the largest city school system in the world.*⁷⁴

When O’Dwyer took office in 1946, the school system was suffering particularly badly from wartime cutbacks. Not a single school had been constructed in the city since 1943. One of his first orders of business was to have \$151,121,000 allocated for construction of seventy-five new schools and the modernization of still others. At the end of the four years, twenty-two school projects accommodating 23,101 pupils had been completed and opened for use, while twenty-eight projects seating 30,722 pupils were under construction, and twenty-five projects providing seats for 21,170 pupils were being made ready to be placed under contract.⁷⁵ O’Dwyer’s administration also inaugurated the High School of the Air, a program which broadcast instruction over the radio to over 400 homebound high school children who were supplied with receiving sets through the generosity of individuals and community agencies.⁷⁶ Programs were also instituted to help Spanish-speaking children make adjustments to their school life including the assignment of additional teachers for remedial instruction in reading, and the establishment of workshops and study courses to help teachers who have large numbers of such students.⁷⁷

Lastly, O’Dwyer made several significant steps towards improving the health of New Yorkers. Most notably, his administration was instrumental in thwarting a smallpox outbreak that caused the deaths of several people. The mayor was photographed getting his inoculation, as were many Broadway performers, in an effort to get the word out to citizens. Great measures were also taken to obtain ample supplies of the necessary serum. In the end, a great catastrophe was averted.⁷⁸ Also in response to the general complaint that hospitals were overcrowded and understaffed, O’Dwyer’s administration initiated the Out-Patient Program as well as the Home Care Program, which cut the hospital population

substantially.⁷⁹ O'Dwyer was also forced to deal with the understaffing of many city hospitals. As a result of substandard salaries, long working hours, and heavy caseloads, many workers resigned leaving the hospitals with less than fifty percent of the needed staff. In 1946, O'Dwyer announced a five-day, forty-hour workweek to supersede the then existing six-day, forty-eight-hour week.⁸⁰ He also initiated a \$600 or twenty-five percent salary increase for nurses, bringing the annual pay to \$2400. By the end of the term, he had spent \$38 million on new facilities and improvements in health care.⁸¹

William O'Dwyer's administration brought many New Yorkers the jobs, homes, health care, and quality of life that they desperately needed in the years after World War II. He was an independent and strong politician, dedicated to improving the City that he called home. Aside from his education and skills, O'Dwyer also had the personality that is necessary for effective leadership. Moreover, he had the life experience and charisma needed to relate to almost any one of his constituents. One friend recalled that he had a rare ability to draw the attention of everyone as he entered the room, and connect with a personal comment or remark, regardless of his closeness to the individual.⁸² When asked later in life what he felt constituted a great leader, O'Dwyer responded:

*First, he must inspire people, and secondly, he must be willing to discern somehow what the people want, so that he can give them what they want—define it for them more clearly than they themselves know...and thirdly, he should have the power whether by word of mouth, and it generally is, or by writing, the power to be the type of a personality that can impress people. That, to me, is more or less the essence of leadership.*⁸³

O'Dwyer himself appeared to have all three of his suggested qualities.

Notes

1 William O'Dwyer, interview by John Kelly, 1960–62, transcript, Oral History Research Office, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York, 220.

- 2 Ibid., 295–6.
- 3 Ibid., 296.
- 4 "The Big Bonanza," *Time*, 7 June 1948, 25.
- 5 "Rise to Mayoralty Began 6 Years Ago," *The New York Times*, 7 November 1945, 2.
- 6 S.J. Woolf, "Mayor O'Dwyer Talks About His Job," *The New York Times Magazine*, 3 February 1946, 44.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Chris McNickle, *To Be Mayor Of New York: Ethnic Politics In The City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 55.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Woolf, 44.
- 12 Chris McNickle, *To Be Mayor Of New York*, 55.
- 13 Ibid., 56.
- 14 Ibid., 57.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 James A. Hagerty, "Record Plurality," *The New York Times*, 7 November 1945, 1.
- 17 William O'Dwyer, *Beyond The Golden Door*, ed. Paul O'Dwyer (Jamaica, New York: St. John's University, 1987), 228.
- 18 John T. Ridge, "Irish County Societies," *The New York Irish*, Ed. Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 291.
- 19 "Comerford Installed As President United Irish Counties By O'Dwyer-Stands For Republic For All Ireland," *The Gaelic American*, 22 March 1947.
- 20 "O'Dwyer Out for Irish Freedom Tells Brooklyn AOH He Will Ask For Restoration of Six Counties," *The Gaelic American*, 20 October 1945.
- 21 "Carmelite Priests Arrange Fine Show for Entertainment," *The Gaelic American*, 26 April 1947.
- 22 "American Irish Historical Society Awards Gold Medal to Padraic Colum Mayor O'Dwyer Makes Presentation," *The Gaelic American*, 10 May 1947.
- 23 "Mayor O'Dwyer to Speak at Rally of Irish Counties," *The Gaelic American*, 25 September 1948.

- 24 "Rep. Lynch And Other Orators at Carnegie Hall Meeting Assail British Injustice," *The Gaelic American*, 9 October 1948.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 "O'Dwyer Calls 'Border a Disgrace' at Huge Rally," *The Gaelic American*, 14 June 1947.
- 27 "O'Dwyer's Speech at Convention Irks Belfast-Bigot," *The Gaelic American*, 29 November 1947.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 "'Sunday, Sept. 14, Red Letter Day For Irish In America'," Mayor O'Dwyer Tells Committee for All-Ireland Final," *The Gaelic American*, 9 August 1947.
- 30 "Mayor O'Dwyer Postpones Trip to Mexico," *The Gaelic American*, 23 August 1947. Oddly enough, upon his resignation during his second term as mayor, President Truman appointed O'Dwyer Ambassador to Mexico.
- 31 "De Valera Gets Thunderous Welcome On Arrival In New York-Expresses Hope for a United Ireland Soon," *The Gaelic American*, 13 March 1948.
- 32 "Partition is a Running Sore Says Taoiseach on Arrival—Determined it Must Be Cured," *The Gaelic American*, 4 September 1948.
- 33 "Mayor O'Dwyer Greets Morrissey at N.Y. City Hall," *The Gaelic American*, 22 January 1949.
- 34 "O'Dwyer Welcomes Son of Martyred Father at City Hall," *The Gaelic American*, 7 May 1949.
- 35 "The Shape of Things: The Emotionalism of Mayor O'Dwyer." *The Nation*, 6 May 1950, 413.
- 36 "Lifetime of Public Service," *The Gaelic American*, 22 October 1949.
- 37 Martin Killeen, New York, New York, to [members, New York, New York], TLS. American Irish Citizens Committee for the Reelection of William O'Dwyer, Folder 3, Correspondence, The Archives of Irish America, Bobst Library, New York University.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 "The Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, 17 May 1947, 23:26.
- 40 James Harten, New York, New York, to [Mr. Thomas O'Sullivan, Westmeath, Ireland] TLS, 31 January 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Contributions, reels 15–16, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 41 P.J. Gillespie, New York, New York, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] TLS, 31 January 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Contributions, reels 15–16, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 42 James Hamill, New York, New York, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] TLS, March 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Contributions, reels 15–16, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 43 Logan, memorandum to William O'Dwyer, 4 March 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Parades-Winston Churchill, reel 61, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 44 William O'Dwyer. "Remarks of Mayor O'Dwyer at Reception in Honor of Winston Churchill." Council Chamber, City Hall, New York. 15 March 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Parades-Winston Churchill, reel 61, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 45 It is possible that O'Dwyer's status as a veteran of World War II factored heavily in his decision to receive Churchill, a major player in the Allied victory.
- 46 O'Dwyer, William, Interview by John Kelly, 1960–62, transcript, Oral History Research Office, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York, 540.
- 47 "Mindszenty Is Found Guilty," *The New York Times*, 8 Feb. 1949, 1.
- 48 "An Open Letter to Mayor O'Dwyer," *The Daily Worker*, 9 Feb. 1949.
- 49 Ibid. Despite his seemingly close affiliations with the Catholic Church, O'Dwyer would later state that he personally had a strong antagonism towards the Church as a result of the "Church domination" he experienced in high school and later while studying for the priesthood in Salamanca. It is to this oppression that he attributed his trademark desire to remain independent in his thoughts and actions. (O'Dwyer, William, Interview by John Kelly, 1960–62, transcript, Oral History Research Office, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York, 293.)
- 50 St. Patrick Academy, Raton, New Mexico, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] ALS, 21 January 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 51 Daniel M. Sunday, Washington, D.C., to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] TLS, 24 January 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.

- 52 Malcolm E. Peabody, New York, New York, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] ALS, 15 April 1947, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 53 E.F. Adams, New York, New York, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] ALS, 25 April 1947, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 54 William O'Dwyer, New York, New York, to [Rt. Rev. Malcolm E. Peabody, New York, New York] TL, 21 May 1947, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 55 Malcolm E. Peabody, New York, New York, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] ALS, 17 June 1947, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 56 Rabbi Aaron B. Dachowitz, Brooklyn, New York, to [William O'Dwyer, New York, New York] TLS, 2 January 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Contributions, reels 15–16 Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 57 William O'Dwyer, New York, New York to [Rabbi Aaron B. Dachowitz, New York, New York] TL, 5 February 1946, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Contributions, reels 15–16 Municipal Archives, NYC. This may be a result of the Temple's Brooklyn location and O'Dwyer's personal connections to the area as a former resident and District Attorney.
- 58 Chris McNickle, *To Be Mayor Of New York*, 61.
- 59 Morris Rothenberg., New York, New York, to [William O'Dwyer., New York, New York] TLS, 7 January 1948, microfilm. O'Dwyer Papers Collection, Correspondence, Municipal Archives, NYC.
- 60 Amos Landman, "The First Year is the Toughest," *New Republic*, 13 Jan. 1947, 15–17.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 "Racial Milestones," *New Amsterdam News*, 24 Aug. 1946.
- 63 William O'Dwyer, Interview by John Kelly, 1960–62, transcript, Oral History Research Office, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York, 317.
- 64 William O'Dwyer, *Beyond The Golden Door*, 319.
- 65 Salvatore J. LaGumina, *New York at Mid-Century: The Impellitteri Years* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 81.
- 66 William O'Dwyer, Interview by John Kelly, 1960–62, transcript, Oral History Research Office, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York, 284.
- 67 Mayor O'Dwyer's Report on the Activities of New York City Agencies, 1946–1949. Aug 1950. Division of Labor Relations: 3., Municipal Reference Library of the City of New York. M45 65 ra.
- 68 Ibid., 6.
- 69 Landman, 15.
- 70 N.Y.C. Mayor – Agreement with Port Authority Re Air Terminals 1947, Municipal Reference Library of the City of New York. R M45 55 at.
- 71 Salvatore J. LaGumina, *New York at Mid-Century*, 82.
- 72 William O'Dwyer, "The Housing Crisis-A Challenge to the Mayors," *American City*, 62 February 1947, 103.
- 73 William O'Dwyer, *Beyond The Golden Door*, 259.
- 74 Mayor O'Dwyer's Report on the Activities of New York City Agencies, 1946–1949. Aug 1950. Board of Education: 1., Municipal Reference Library of the City of New York. M 45 65 ra.
- 75 Ibid., 7.
- 76 Ibid., 24.
- 77 Ibid., 29.
- 78 William O'Dwyer, *Beyond The Golden Door*, 326.
- 79 Ibid., 327.
- 80 Mayor O'Dwyer's Report on the Activities of New York City Agencies, 1946–1949. Aug 1950. Department of Hospitals: 4., Municipal Reference Library of the City of New York. M 45 65 ra.
- 81 William O'Dwyer, *Beyond The Golden Door*, 329.
- 82 Dorothy Hayden Cudahy, "New York Stories," The Archives of Irish America online at www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/aia/exhibits01.htm#nystories.
- 83 William O'Dwyer, Interview by John Kelly, 1960–62, transcript, Oral History Research Office, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York, 266.

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