



FIORIELLO!

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A Study Guide

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An Insurgent's origins

Immigration and unions in New York City

In 1907, 1.3 million immigrants entered America. Although 5,000 was the maximum numbers of people allowed to go through Ellis Island per day, sometimes as many as 15,000 were put ashore. Many immigration officials grew hardened and uncaring as they processed thousands of people a day. Immigrants became fearful they would be separated from the rest of their family or sent back to their home country. They needed someone who would offer care and concern for their well-being.

They found that someone in Fiorello H. LaGuardia. He took a job as an interpreter on Ellis Island during the day to pay his way through law school at night. He was no stranger to the government's inner workings on immigration policy; he had worked for the U.S. Consular Service in three cities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, organizing the emigration process.

Originally, LaGuardia was hired to handle Italian immigrants, but his experience and knowledge of several other languages allowed him to assist immigrants from many countries. He repeatedly threw himself into situations that allowed him to aid those going through the frightening interrogation process. LaGuardia would work to ease the immigrants' struggle. For example, he would do his best to prevent the break up of families in cases where one member had a disqualifying disease. When that failed he worked to change the policy and have immigrants examined overseas so that hopes were not raised and crushed unnecessarily. He had fervently fought for justice for emigrants in Europe, and he was not going to turn his back on them when they reached New York.

LaGuardia worked for the U.S. Immigration Service for three years and never became callous to the despair and disappointment he encountered daily. After receiving his law degree, he opened an office in New York City, aiming to represent all types of people, including immigrants.

Early in his law career, LaGuardia represented members of a shirtwaist-factory union in their fight against employers who forced them to work 60 hours a week for as little as \$5. Clothing manufacturers in New York City had a long history of severely exploiting their workers, and this was no exception. More often than not, the workers were newly arrived immigrants who would take whatever salary was offered to work 12-hour days in dirty, dangerous sweatshops.

In 1909, 20,000 dress and shirtwaist makers—all women—managed to organize and go on strike. Instantly, the Tammany Hall-controlled police force joined hired thugs in charging the picket lines and beating and arresting any who protested. The women persevered through the winter, but all they got was the promise of a 52-hour week—no increase in salary or better working conditions.

A year later, a devastating fire swept through the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, and because of overcrowding and other dire working conditions, about 150 workers, mostly women, burned to death or were killed when they threw themselves out windows to escape the flames.

Subsequently, in December 1912, LaGuardia led the fight for the workers against the clothing establishment. He was perfect for the job: His fluency in foreign languages allowed him to speak to the immigrant strikers, and his passion and defiance inspired the workers to stand together and not back down. He would spend his nights planning strategy with union leaders and his days in court defending picketers or on the street making speeches.

When it came time to negotiate a settlement a few months later, LaGuardia gave it his all. The result was a 53-hour work week and a slight raise in wages. This was not everything he or the strikers wanted but was still considered a victory.

The experience also was a success for LaGuardia personally. He entered the strike as an unknown and over its course won a reputation as a natural leader. The insurgent found himself exactly where he wanted to be: poised to enter politics.

"Major LaGuardia"

World War I

From the start of World War I in 1914, most Americans felt the war was solely a European conflict. But two weeks into 1917, British intelligence intercepted a telegram from German Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmerman to the Mexican government, proposing they join in an alliance against the United States in return for "the lost territories" of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Suddenly, the war "over there" seemed not so far away.

When President Woodrow Wilson called on Congress to convene in special sessions on April 2, Congressman LaGuardia was in the chamber listening to the president's impassioned call for war.

Though entry into the conflict was objected to by many progressives with whom he would later align himself, LaGuardia fully supported America's participation in the war. He was convinced that a higher morality called for the United States to fight for its principles and the liberation of millions of threatened Europeans. This gained LaGuardia few supporters in his congressional district; he also didn't help his popularity when he voted for a Draft Bill.

Though he knew his constituents disagreed, he was unable to vote against his conscience in any manner. He introduced a bill mandating the death penalty for "the fraudulent sale" of food or arms to the government in war time. He supported an unpopular foreign-loan bill that provided \$3 billion to the Allies. He insisted on government price controls to prevent war-time profiteering. He also worked to curb the potential for abuse of individual liberties and the curtailment of free speech in the name of "national defense."

At this point, congressmen in both parties saw LaGuardia as a dangerous radical. This impression deepened when, in July 1917, he enlisted in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps.

LaGuardia was sent to a training camp in southern Italy, where he was soon promoted to captain. He became known for his resourcefulness: When the barracks proved too cold, he managed to drum up dozens of oil heaters. When food rations were low and of poor quality, he contracted with a private caterer to feed the enlisted men a "big, well-balanced, typical American" meal. And before his men went on leave, he provided sex

education and the means of prevention. LaGuardia was not afraid to refer to himself as a congressman, and he used that title to get whatever his men needed.

But foremost, LaGuardia was there to fly combat missions. In describing his flying skills, he admitted he had trouble with landings and takeoffs, but that in between "I can fly the son-of-a-gun okay." He flew for three months until one morning in March 1918, when bad weather caused him to crash-land. He injured his hip and spine and was sent to the hospital for a couple of weeks.

Once back on his feet, he was unable to return to flying right away. Instead he became a diplomat for the U.S. and the Allies. He also organized a covert operation that succeeded in smuggling several thousand tons of steel out of German-controlled Spain and into the hands of the Italians. The job would have been a full-time operation for an intelligence agent, but LaGuardia managed to pull it off while still maintaining his diplomatic duties of public speeches and political meetings.

He returned to flying bombing missions in summer 1918. His targets were mainly enemy airfields and munitions depots, but as he later said, "Since the Austrians were well within Italian territory, we had to be careful not to bomb our own people."

LaGuardia became commander of all American combat pilots in Italy and was promoted to major in August of that year. As autumn arrived, the Allies were winning and major combat was winding down.

Back in New York, the election campaign for Congress had already started. Some people complained that LaGuardia had been gone too long, and they drew up an official petition for his removal. When he heard this he replied jestingly, "You might say that if any signers of the petition will take my seat in a Caproni bi-plane, I shall be glad to resume my upholstered seat in the House."

In October 1918, two weeks before the Armistice, LaGuardia returned to New York with a successful war record, an even stronger sense of leadership and the motivation to fight for his seat in Congress. He won re-election in a landslide.

“Incorruptible as the sun”

LaGuardia’s tenure as mayor

Fiorello H. LaGuardia’s years as mayor marked the emergence of modern New York City. His spirit for action transformed a city made up of individual boroughs into a single entity. His vision for the modern metropolis was imbued with a sense of humanity: He felt a modern city of bridges, tunnels and airports also must have adequate housing, schools and playgrounds. Throughout his 12 years in office he worked tirelessly to achieve those goals.

LaGuardia ran for mayor in 1933 on a pledge of cleaning-up city government and breaking the stranglehold of the Democratic Party’s Tammany Hall machine. During his first 100 days in office, the new mayor enacted an emergency Economy Bill: It was a bold attempt to restore confidence in the city, which had been lost in the early days of The Depression. It freed the city from the hold of the state legislature by creating a new charter. It also consolidated or abolished overlapping departments and regulated employee pay. With the bill, LaGuardia worked to wrest control of the city’s finances from the banks and to balance the budget. By the end of 1934, he had succeeded. He also had a surplus of \$6 million, which he promptly applied to the 1935 budget.

When he had the city’s finances under control, LaGuardia then worked with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration, and the New York City was the beneficiary of millions of dollars in federal aid from New Deal programs. The funds gave the city some relief, while the public-works projects put thousands of New Yorkers to work. LaGuardia and Roosevelt became friends, sharing a progressive spirit and enthusiasm for politics. They forged an alliance that crossed party lines and endorsed each others’ policies.

LaGuardia had a committed but tumultuous partnership with city planner Robert Moses, who is widely credited as being the architect of modern New York City. Together they were responsible for building bridges and tunnels that linked the five boroughs, hundreds of playgrounds and landscaped parkways, as well as numerous parks and beaches. LaGuardia’s administration also was responsible for razing slums and replacing them with public housing and schools. Hospitals were built, and child-welfare and other social projects were established to improve residents’ health.

To keep his campaign promises, LaGuardia went after corruption and organized crime by reorganizing the police force and other agencies and cracking down on racketeers. He became famous for turning up at murder scenes, automobile accidents and railroad wrecks. He was fully aware that police officers and firefighters could be harmed or killed in the line of duty at anytime, and he felt it was his duty to be there, to share the hazards with them.

He also was widely known for his puritanical streak, which kept him from seeing the difference between original burlesque theater, a genre only part of which featured nudity, and prostitution; literature with swear words and dirty magazines; or church bingo and numbers racketeering. They were all the same to him, and he worked to shut them all down—and some citizens never forgave him for this.

Most New Yorkers, though, found him an inspiring and lovable mayor. In 1942, he started a radio program on Sunday afternoons to talk about matters of the city and country. He called it "Talks to the People." Said one critic, "[It was] government by microphone. With a flip of the dial, he turns the metropolis into a small town."

In 1945, LaGuardia began dedicating a portion of the program to reading the Sunday comics to children. This started when the newspaper deliverers went on strike, but he continued the readings well after the strike ended. He was lauded for building the suspense from panel to panel, as well as for imparting his real-life moral at the comic-strip's conclusion.

Later that year, LaGuardia decided not to run for a fourth term. He was in bad health, and many long-time political friends were dying or had died, including Roosevelt. Although his legacy as mayor came to an end, he would long be remembered as the right mayor at the right time in the right city.

Upon hearing of his death, President Harry S Truman called LaGuardia's widow, Marie, to tell her he had always respected LaGuardia because he was "as incorruptible as the sun."

The New York Times recounted his achievements as mayor and wrote that he had given the city more than "material benefits; he had stamped on the serpent of municipal corruption until it moved only faintly; he had proved that 'reform mayors' need not end their careers in hopeless frustration."

"The Society of the Corrupt"

Tammany Hall

"Tammany Hall" was the name given to the Democratic Party political machine that dominated New York City politics from the 1850s until the election of Fiorello H. LaGuardia as mayor in 1933.

The Tammany Society of New York City was founded in the 1780s as a patriotic fraternal organization whose primary activities were social, with an initial movement to improve the image of Native Americans. (Tammany was the name of a Native American leader of the Lenape tribe.) By the turn of the 19th Century, though, the society's activities had grown increasingly political.

Throughout the 1830s and 1840s the organization expanded its political control by earning the loyalty of New York City's ever-expanding immigrant community, particularly the Irish. Recognizing that Irish immigrants were inundating the city at an unprecedented rate, Tammany Hall introduced itself to the new residents. Because the Irish spoke English and had a relatively good working knowledge of republican government, they were immediately identified as a potential gold mine of political clout. But their most advantageous aspect as Tammany's major constituency was that they possessed few or no skills that could translate into actual employment opportunities. Consequently, Tammany offered the Irish a great deal in exchange for their votes: jobs, a place to live and citizenship.

This exchange of political support for employment gain became the organization's common theme. Tammany Hall became the political force in New York City and immense power was conferred on the "bosses," like William Tweed and Jimmy Hines, allowing them to enrich themselves and their associates through corruption and administrative abuse.

Tammany Hall continued to ride high in the 1920s, when James J. "Jimmy" Walker was mayor. Walker, often called "Gentleman" or "Beau James," was known for his charming ways and fast living. He also was a songwriter, composing such songs as "Will You Love Me in December (as You Do in May?)." Walker was the perfect mayor for the Roaring '20s. The initial years of his mayoralty were a prosperous time for the city, due in part to the abundance of speakeasies during the Prohibition era. His affairs with chorus girls were widely known, and his popularity wasn't affected when he left his wife for Betty Compton, a showgirl.

But with the drastic social and cultural changes brought on by The Depression, Walker proved unable to govern in his second term. In 1930, New York Judge Samuel Seabury, with the support of Gov. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, began a crack-down on Tammany's injustices. Seabury was able to expose the corruption within the Democratic machine: On the witness stand, many Tammany officials claimed they accrued their excessive wealth by saving money in the tin boxes their wives kept in the kitchen, (These appearances were referred to as the "Tin Box Parade.") After being charged with corruption, Walker, who twice appeared before Seabury, resigned in 1932.

In 1933, Seabury nominated LaGuardia to run for mayor on the Republican ticket. He won and took office in early 1934—and removed Tammany's immediate control over City Hall. Although LaGuardia had beaten the organization in the 1916, 1918 and 1922 U.S. Congressional elections, it was not until he was elected mayor that he was able to eliminate its influence on the city.

After Roosevelt was elected president, it was LaGuardia's partnership with him in the New Deal that helped alter the demographic landscape of New York City, restricting immigration and making people less dependent on Tammany Hall for jobs and other assistance.

The Tammany machine had a small revival in the early 1950s, but through the fervent campaigning of Eleanor Roosevelt and her New York Committee for Democratic Voters, the once mighty political organization again faded from political importance. By the mid-1960s it had ceased to exist.

LaGuardia's two loves

Thea and Marie

Thea Almerigotti met Fiorello H. LaGuardia in 1915 while working as a dress designer in the garment district, and they fell instantly in love. Born in Trieste (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) like LaGuardia's mother, Thea was LaGuardia's opposite in looks: She was tall, with porcelain skin and blonde hair; he was short, with dark hair.

They had a lengthy courtship, and it is said that Thea understood nothing could come before LaGuardia's goals and the political work he set himself to do. Consequently, it was not until after he ran for Congress (he lost in 1914 and won in 1916), fought in World War I and returned to New York that they finally married. The ceremony was held March 8, 1919. He was 35 years old, she was 24.

They settled happily into a Greenwich Village apartment on Charles Street, and in June 1920, Thea gave birth to their daughter, Fioretta, named for LaGuardia's maternal grandmother. Unfortunately, the baby was born with poor health and Thea found it difficult to recover from childbirth. LaGuardia moved the family to the Bronx, with its fresher country air. When it was discovered that both mother and daughter had contracted tuberculosis, he rented a house on Long Island. When that move had no positive effect, he took them to a sanitarium in the Adirondack Mountains. That also didn't help and in May 1921, Fioretta died. Thea died six months later.

LaGuardia was devastated. Friends tried to console him and political enemies attempted to rouse him, but he didn't respond to either. He took a month off and traveled to Cuba. When he returned, though he still mourned his loss, he had firmly decided to carry on and to continue pursuing his political goals.

Marie Fisher was 18 years old in 1914 when she started out as a secretary at LaGuardia's law firm, Weil, LaGuardia & Espen. When he ran for Congress in 1916 she helped with the campaign, and after he was elected she became his secretary in New York. Her calm, well-mannered and reliable personality contrasted well with his volatile nature and outbursts of energy. She became completely dedicated to him. When LaGuardia went off to fight in World War I, Marie was the liaison to his constituents. When Thea and Fioretta became ill, she took care of LaGuardia's home, and after their deaths, while LaGuardia grieved, she was the family spokeswoman.

During the 1920s Marie was instrumental in building LaGuardia's political organization. She rarely took a forward position, instead staying in the background carrying out the plans, typing speeches and bringing order out of the campaign havoc. LaGuardia trusted her completely, and she became a fixture in his mind as well as in his office. She was always there when he needed her.

Marie married LaGuardia in his Washington D.C. apartment on Feb. 28, 1929. Minutes after the ceremony, LaGuardia went directly to the floor of Congress—Marie also accepted that his political career came first. As soon as she became his wife she stopped working in his office. LaGuardia once joked that by marrying her he had "lost a good secretary and gained a bum cook."

They adopted two children: Eric, 6, and Jean, 7, who was the daughter of Thea's sister. When they moved from their Harlem apartment to Gracie Mansion, a city-owned house, in 1942, they brought into their family LaGuardia's nephew, Richard, along with LaGuardia's cook, Juanita, and her son, also named Richard. LaGuardia often would spend his rare leisure moments playing with the children.

Marie was at LaGuardia's bedside when he died in 1947. She lived well into her 80s, readily upholding her husband's legacy through appearances, dedications and oral histories. She died in 1984.

"The Life of an Insurgent"

Fiorello H. LaGuardia

March 26, 1849: Achille LaGuardia, Fiorello H. LaGuardia's father, is born in Foggia, then part of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies.

July 18, 1859: Irene Cohen, LaGuardia's mother, is born in Trieste, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

June 3, 1880: Achille LaGuardia and Irene Cohen are married in Trieste.

Dec. 11, 1882: Fiorello H. LaGuardia is born in New York City.

1885: When LaGuardia was 3, due to Achille's position as a band master in the U.S. Army, the family begins moving about the United States—first to North Dakota, then upstate New York and finally Arizona, where LaGuardia spends much of his formative years.

1897: When LaGuardia is 15, the Army rejects him for service in the Spanish-American War. He becomes a Youth Correspondent for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, reporting from regiment stations in Alabama and Florida.

1900-06: LaGuardia is in the consular service in Budapest, Trieste and Fiume, all then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He establishes a humane, organized system to deal with the growing number of emigrants to America.

Oct. 21, 1904: LaGuardia's father dies from complications after eating rotten beef sold to the Army by crooked contractors. This event helps point LaGuardia toward fighting bureaucrats and politicians who prey on defenseless citizens.

1906: LaGuardia sails back to New York City, studies law and enters public service.

1907-10: He is an interpreter at Ellis Island, working for the U.S. Immigration Service.

1910: After receiving his law degree from New York University, LaGuardia sets up shop as a lawyer, aiming to serve the underprivileged. He quickly becomes noted for treating law as a service, not a business, often lowering or waiving his fee.

1912: He represents the workers in the shirtwaist-factory strike and helps them settle for a shorter work week and better wages. This gives him his first taste of leading people.

1914: LaGuardia joins a law firm dedicated to his ideas of helping workers, poor immigrants and housewives. He is assigned a young secretary, Marie Fisher, who remains with him the rest of his life. Also that year, he runs for Congress in New York City's 14th District. After a hard-fought campaign, he loses to the Tammany machine. He pledges to run again in 1916.

Jan. 1, 1915: In the aftermath of the 1914 election, LaGuardia, as a Republican, is appointed deputy attorney general of New York State. Though the appointment is an attempt to keep him in check, the opposite occurs: holding the position only encourages him in his fight against political corruption.

1915: LaGuardia's mother comes to New York to live with him; she dies six months later. That same year he meets Thea Almerigotti, and they begin dating. The young woman, who lives in New York City, was born in Trieste, like his mother.

Nov. 7, 1916: LaGuardia is elected to the U.S. Congress. He wins the seat for lower Manhattan's 14th Congressional District by 357 votes.

1917: America enters World War I. LaGuardia enlists in the Aviation Section of the Air Corps. After a month he is commissioned as a first lieutenant and is subsequently promoted to captain, then major. He serves on the Italian-Austrian front in addition to serving as political diplomat, maintaining and improving U.S./Italian relations.

1918: The war ends and LaGuardia returns home. He runs for re-election in the House of Representatives on a Republican/Democratic Fusion ticket, formed as an attempt to beat the rising Socialist Party candidates. He wins in a landslide.

March 8, 1919: LaGuardia marries Thea in New York City.

November 1919: LaGuardia is elected president of New York City's Board of Aldermen. He finds his position—and the board in general—to be ceremonial, and he abolishes the board when he becomes mayor.

June 1920: His daughter, Fioretta, is born and is not healthy. Thea becomes ill after having complications while giving birth. Both are diagnosed with tuberculosis.

1921: Not heeding the Republican political bosses, LaGuardia runs in and loses the mayoral primary. Fioretta dies May 8; Thea dies Nov. 29. LaGuardia returns to the Board of Aldermen, but is mentally and emotionally spent and depressed.

January 1, 1922: After taking some time off, LaGuardia returns to work at his new law firm, LaGuardia, Sapinsky & Amster.

November 1922: LaGuardia is re-elected to Congress—but this time he will represent the residents in upper Manhattan's 20th District. He serves five terms, through December 1932.

Feb. 28, 1929: LaGuardia and Marie Fisher marry in Washington, D.C.

November 1929: James J. "Jimmy" Walker, the Tammany Hall incumbent, defeats LaGuardia in the mayoral race. Despite a hard-fought campaign, he loses by 500,000 votes.

March 8, 1932: The United States House of Representatives passes the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act which protects the right of unions to strike. It is co-sponsored by LaGuardia.

Sept. 1, 1932: Jimmy Walker is forced to resign as mayor, thanks to Judge Samuel Seabury's crackdown on criminal activities committed by Tammany Hall officials and affiliates. A Tammany replacement finishes the remainder of Walker's term.

November 1932: LaGuardia loses his 20th Congressional District seat to a Democratic Tammany alderman. Disheartened, he considers giving up politics.

1933: LaGuardia and Marie adopt two children, Jean, 7, and Eric, 6.

November 1933: LaGuardia is picked by Seabury, who is anti-Tammany, to be the Republican mayoral candidate.

Nov. 7, 1933: LaGuardia wins the election, becoming the 99th mayor of New York City.

1934: LaGuardia's lifelong passion to improve the life of the city's poor was well-served during the first year of his administration. More than 50 playgrounds were built, and 60 parks were planned; many were in poor neighborhoods. This effort continued throughout his years in office: Public housing replaced slums, and schools and hospitals were built. He also forever altered the physical appearance of the city, with new roads, bridges and tunnels.

June 25, 1935: Heralding an expansion of health services, LaGuardia opens a child health station in the Bronx,

Dec. 3, 1935: He presides at the opening of the first publicly funded housing project in America—First Houses, on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

July 11, 1936: He helps open the Triborough Bridge.

Nov. 3, 1937: LaGuardia is re-elected mayor with the largest majority in city's history.

Oct. 15, 1939: He opens New York Municipal Airport #2 in Queens. The airport soon is named Fiorello H. LaGuardia Field.

Nov. 1, 1939: On behalf of New York City, he signs a contract to acquire the Inter-Borough Rapid Transit Company, completing the public takeover of the subway system.

Nov. 4, 1941: LaGuardia's re-election makes him the city's first three-term mayor.

1942: After living much of his adult life in an apartment on Fifth Avenue, LaGuardia is convinced to move into Gracie Mansion, the mayor's official residence, on the East River. Though the house is not his and Marie's style—he believes New Yorkers will think he has gone high-brow and become a snob—they agree the two acres of grounds are good for the children.

June 18, 1942: LaGuardia begins his "Talks to the People," a series of Sunday-afternoon radio programs.

1945: During the city-wide newspaper deliverers' strike, he begins reading the Sunday comics over the radio to the children of New York City. This proves so popular that he continues the practice after the strike is settled.

November 1945: LaGuardia decides not to seek a fourth term.

March-December 1946: LaGuardia serves as director general of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. The agency provides food, clothing and shelter to Europeans who have been displaced by World War II.

Sept. 20, 1947: LaGuardia dies of pancreatic cancer after a long illness. He was 64.

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