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Book Review by Daniel DiSalvo

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY

Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics, by Terry Golway.
Liveright, 400 pages, \$27.95

City of Ambition: FDR, LaGuardia, and the Making of Modern New York, by Mason B. Williams.
W.W. Norton & Co., 512 pages, \$29.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper)



"THAT'S WHAT'S THE MATTER."

BOSS TWEED. "As long as I count the Votes, what are you going to do about it? say?"

BILL DE BLASIO'S ELECTION VICTORY in 2013 made him New York's first Democratic mayor in 20 years, ending that party's longest absence from Gracie Mansion in city history. In electing de Blasio, who made afflicting the comfortable in order to comfort the afflicted the central theme of his campaign, New York voters affirmed their city's ideological as well as its partisan identity. Two new books examine different phases of the complex relationship between liberalism and the Democratic Party in city history. Terry Golway's *Machine Made* argues that the Democratic Tammany Hall machine, which dominated the city during the 19th century and early decades of the 20th, "prepared the way for modern liberalism" by creating a "model for a more aggressive role for government." In *City of Ambition*, Mason B. Williams contends that New York was reconfig-

ured during the Great Depression by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Both authors suggest that the trajectory of politics in New York profoundly shaped the character of American liberalism and of the national Democratic Party.

In key respects, the Tammany Hall understanding of politics' proper ends and means contradicts central axioms of modern liberalism, which promises that rational bureaucracies, shielded from politics and run by experts, will deliver goods and services to client-citizens, honestly and efficiently. Tammany was a massive get-out-the-vote operation whose precinct captains, district leaders, and other agents enlisted new immigrants to vote for candidates vetted and anointed by the bosses. In return, the machine provided its supporters with jobs, legal counsel, food, ice, clothing, and coal to heat their homes.

The organization simultaneously facilitated private enterprise and public works, while preying on businesses for kickbacks and plundering the public fisc to serve well-connected politicians. Such tactics made Tammany notorious for its smoke-filled saloons, graft, bribes, vote-rigging, demagoguery, and thugery. Thomas Nast's cartoons, which portrayed William "Boss" Tweed—the party's leader during the Civil War and its aftermath—as an obese, avaricious conniver, are the organization's most enduring images.

IN RECENT YEARS, HOWEVER, SCHOLARS have come to see Tammany in a different light. The machine was crucial to assimilating immigrants, its clubhouses offered forums for civic participation, and it forged order from the chaos of competing interests in America's biggest, most dynamic city. De-

spite all the graft and corruption, New York City managed to complete a number of public works projects while the private economy continued to flourish. Finally, it produced two great politicians, Al Smith and Robert Wagner, Sr., the so-called “Tammany Twins,” who did much to remake New York and the nation.

It would be hard to make a more vigorous case on Tammany Hall’s behalf than former journalist Terry Golway’s while still admitting, as he does, its faults. Golway’s account of Tammany, from its origins to its eclipse in the 1930s, unfolds within a larger story: the first great wave of Catholic immigrants after Ireland’s potato famine in the 1840s, and the subsequent religious divisions in American politics. By the mid-1850s, more than 25% of Manhattan residents had been born in Ireland. Indeed, half the city’s residents were foreign-born. (Manhattan was New York City until 1898, when it joined the city of Brooklyn and the counties of Queens, Richmond [Staten Island], and the Bronx to form the City of New York.) The WASP elite looked down on these immigrants for their Celtic culture and Catholic religion. Allegiance to the pope supposedly meant that the Irish could never understand Anglo-Protestant ideas of liberty. In the 1880s there were serious efforts to restrict the right to vote in the city to property owners and taxpayers. The Irish responded to such challenges with skillful, assiduous political organizing, the many fruits of which included dominance of the ranks and command structure of the police and fire departments.

Golway’s treatment of religion helps explain the attitudes of Tammany’s Irish toward slavery and segregation. He reminds readers that many high-minded reformers in America were anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, and pro-temperance as well as being anti-slavery. The first three attitudes pushed Irish Catholics toward the Democrats, the party of slavery and segregation, and diluted their concerns for blacks.

AFTER TWEED’S FALL—HE WAS CONVICTED for corruption in 1873—Tammany made allies of its former enemies, the city’s upper-crust civic reformers. Golway offers lively portraits of the leaders that guided Tammany all the way to the New Deal, including “Honest John” Kelly, Richard Croker, and “Silent Charlie” Murphy. Murphy in particular shines as the organization’s true genius. He was its longest-serving leader—from 1902 until his death in 1924—and he managed the rise of Smith, Wagner, Mayor Jimmy Walker, and even in some ways Franklin D. Roosevelt.

According to Golway, under Murphy’s leadership Tammany began pushing for minimum-wage and maximum-hours laws, workman’s compensation, and business regulations in the years before the infamous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. (The 1911 tragedy, which claimed 146 lives, spurred both New York and the nation to enact policies to promote worker safety.) Tammany thus made New York “a hothouse of progressive reform long before the New Deal.”

While Golway shows that Tammany Hall cannot be characterized as simply venal or undemocratic, his claim that it laid the foundations of modern liberalism is not altogether persuasive. Tammany fought against radical proposals proffered by political economist Henry George and newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst to socially reengineer the city. Al Smith did hire some experts, but reserved and frequently exercised the right to reject their advice if it contradicted Tammany’s political interests. Neither anti-business nor anti-capitalist, Tammany was quick to help entrepreneurs—including purveyors of vice in the Bowery—obtain a license or permit if they could be counted on to vote straight. Richard Croker amassed a personal fortune, owned stock in railroad and insurance companies that did business with the city, and retired to Ireland. Charlie Murphy’s family contracting business flourished; by the end of his career his residence was a Long Island mansion whose grounds included a nine-hole golf course. And while Robert Wagner became unions’ champion during the Depression, Tammany often kept labor organizations on the sidelines of city and state politics.

TAKING A LESS IDIOSYNCRATIC approach to the city’s history, historian Mason Williams picks up the story of New York politics in the 1930s. He recounts how it was only by marginalizing Tammany that Roosevelt and LaGuardia could create modern New York. According to Williams, FDR made his way in New York politics by first opposing and then quietly cooperating with Tammany Hall. Once he reached the presidency, however, Roosevelt missed few opportunities to undermine the Manhattan-based machine by favoring outer-borough party leaders like Ed Flynn of the Bronx. LaGuardia, a Republican who was elected mayor on a “fusion” ticket of multiple parties in 1933, was Tammany’s other nemesis. The “Little Flower,” as he was called, mobilized Italians and Jews, called for New York to become a “100 percent union city,” and criticized Tammany in five languages.

Together Roosevelt and LaGuardia used federal dollars funneled through the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other programs to offer jobs to the unemployed and relief to the needy. Bypassing the state government in Albany, Roosevelt sent \$50 million to the city in LaGuardia’s first hundred days in office. Williams demonstrates that to meet the emergencies of depression and war, the federal and city governments collaborated in various ways on public housing, health clinics, libraries, adult-education classes, public radio, and parks. The president and the mayor were also the key figures who brought about some of the city’s biggest, most consequential infrastructure projects—including the Triborough Bridge, the West Side Highway, the Belt Parkway, and the airport named after LaGuardia in 1953, 14 years after it opened—thereby transforming the neighborhood-based city into one prepared for modern transportation and commerce. In short, the New Deal made New York into the archetypical liberal city through unprecedented and unequalled reliance on “state-driven solutions to social problems.”

All this could happen, Williams suggests, only by cutting Tammany out of the process. Roosevelt and LaGuardia managed to implant “a cohort of technical experts committed to expanding the scope of the public sector.” Rather than empowering ward heelers, a professional civil service under the tutelage of urban planner Robert Moses would direct the provision of services. These Depression-era “geniuses,” many of whom were Jews and Italians previously excluded from public employment by the Tammany Irish and from corporate jobs by the WASP elite, served the city ably until the early 1960s.

NEW YORK CITY’S EARLY 20TH-CENTURY story is heroic, and Williams shows great admiration for government’s power to produce “public wealth.” Indeed, the city managed to assimilate a vast wave of immigrants and was at the heart of the coalition that pulled the country through the Depression and won World War II. In that respect, modern liberalism was born in Gotham, a legacy that remains emotionally resonant for millions of New Yorkers.

Yet, it could also be said that New Deal liberalism died in Gotham. While thorough in cataloguing the programs that transformed the New Deal city, Williams doesn’t subsume them into a larger argument about their meaning in the 1930s and ’40s. Nor does he adequately describe or explain how the model proved unsustainable as the city decayed in

subsequent decades. New York in the 1960s and '70s brought New Deal liberalism low. It was under attack from the Left, which sought simultaneously to liberate individuals from the bonds of conventional morals and restrict the activities of businesses. At the same time, the city's bloated public sector was the main culprit in the financial crisis of the 1970s. Worse, the New Deal framework, with its heavy emphasis on social and economic class, did little to prepare New York for the racial tensions that beset city life and politics during and after the civil rights era.

Thus, *City of Ambition's* asymmetry is its greatest flaw. We learn much about the durable benefits of the New Deal in New York, but very little about how the city's later problems were aggravated by sins of omission and commission in the 1930s. Even before the Depression, manufacturing was declining and economic growth slowing, never to return to its early 20th-century levels. Suburbanization, some of it federally subsidized, contributed to the slowing growth rate of the city's population, which caused property-tax revenues to decline. The result was a huge increase in city debt to cover all the new spending, even as the effective city bureaucracies of mid-century suffered from retirement of the Depression-era civil servants, replaced by less motivated,

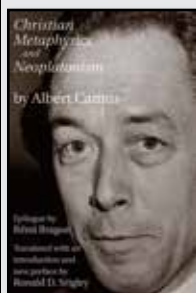
less talented time-servers. To make matters worse, city employees unionized, which undercut accountability. The black population increased with the Great Migration from the rural South, but their incorporation into the city's workforce and politics lagged behind that of previous groups of migrants, and still does.

TODAY, TAMMANY HALL HAS BEEN REPLACED by a top-bottom coalition. Affluent liberals from neighborhoods like Manhattan's Upper West Side or Park Slope in Brooklyn—Bill de Blasio's home—set the tone while the city's public employee unions set the agenda. However, the basic political problem remains the same: New York municipal government cannot deliver the reliable, high-quality public services it promises, and cannot control its own costs. The result is a huge disconnect between the city's dynamism in so many fields of human endeavor and its ossified structures for thinking about and delivering government services. Mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg addressed and in some ways alleviated these problems, but the fact that their 20 years in power were too brief to effect the necessary reforms shows the gravity and complexity of the challenge.

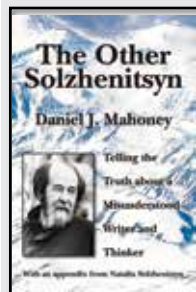
Tammany often overextended the city's payrolls and raided the public treasury to enrich itself. By contrast, Roosevelt and LaGuardia (like their Great Society successors Lyndon Johnson and John Lindsay) converted spending programs designed to address crises into permanent endeavors that became integral to city government. Today, public sector unions argue that what is good for the city's workers is good for the city. As the debts pile up, New York is increasingly dependent on the financial industry, notwithstanding Mayor de Blasio's denunciations of those who try too hard and succeed too well in creating wealth. The contracts he's signed with municipal employees can work—in the limited but crucial sense of not leading to a new fiscal crisis—only under the assumption that Wall Street never again has another bad year. New York liberalism, which came into existence as a consequence of capitalism's greatest crisis in the 1930s, has rendered itself utterly dependent on its nemesis.

Daniel DiSalvo is an assistant professor of political science in the Colin Powell School at the City College of New York and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. His next book, Government Against Itself: Public Union Power and Its Consequences, will be published by Oxford University Press in January 2015.

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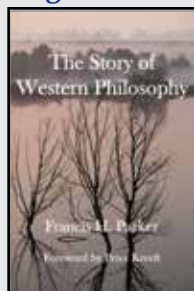
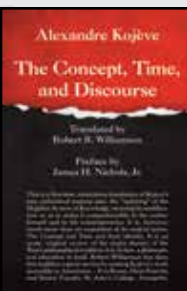


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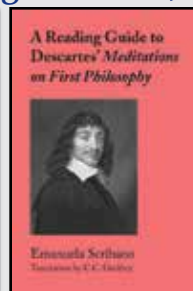
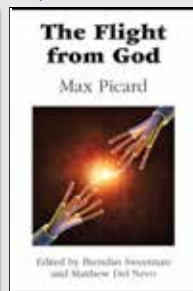


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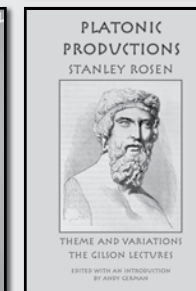
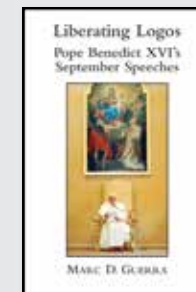
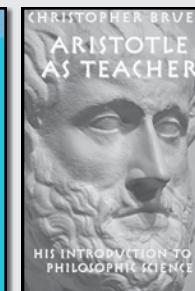
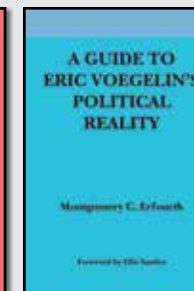


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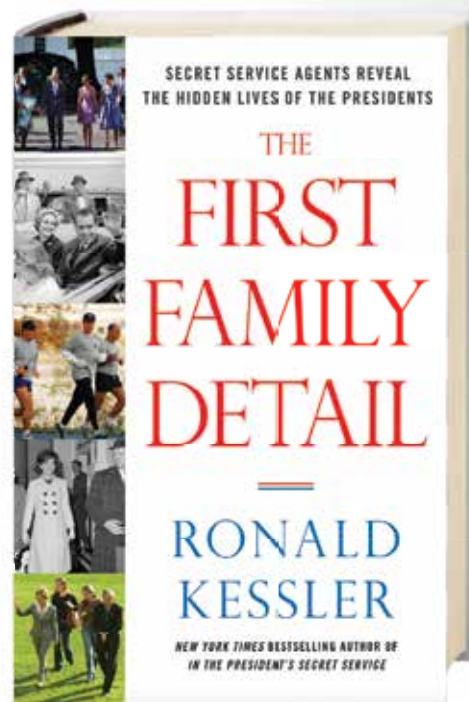
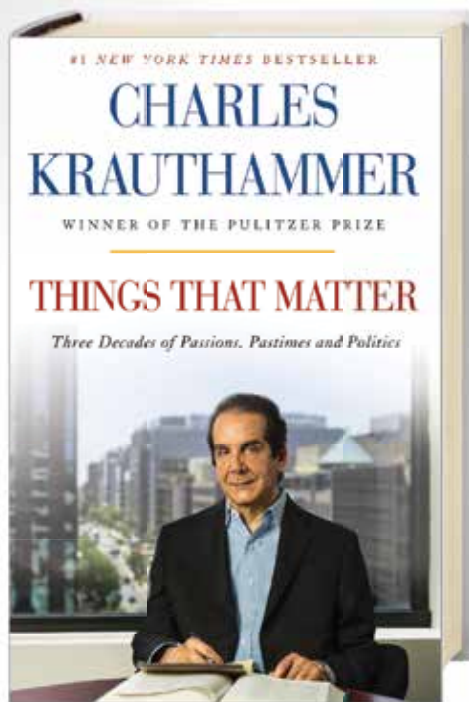
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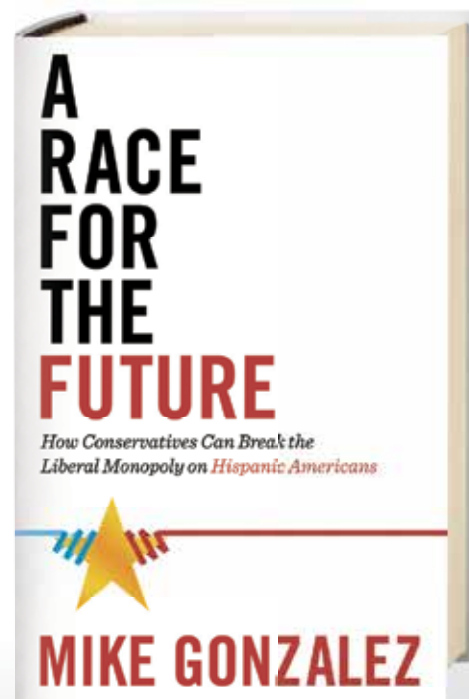
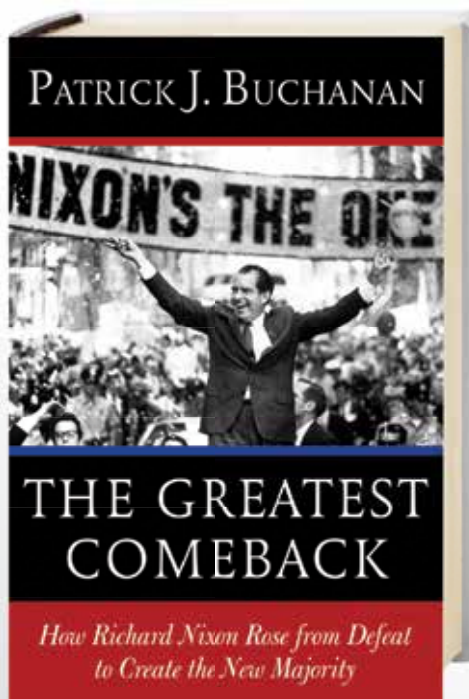
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