New York City's First Black Mayor v. New York City's Second Black Mayor: A Story of Flawed Comparisons that Must be Put to Rest

I am a Native New Yorker. I spent the vast majority of my life here and have seen the city evolve through various epidemics and crises. As an African American woman, and at one time as a little girl, I'd never thought I would see the day that we would have a Black Mayor. This all changed when the City elected David Norman Dinkins.

I remember him being elected in 1989. It was right before my 13th birthday. My excitement was at its peak, since the City was in a state of turmoil. Crime as at an all-time high. The crack epidemic was ravaging neighborhoods; homes were decimated as families were broken for any litany of reasons; the streets were depleted of life due to the mass incarceration of black and brown people; HIV/Aids infections were at an epidemic proportion; and we were all galvanized by the fight to end apartheid in South Africa. In my mind, at the time, we were at the cusp of a revolution and hip hop was the soundtrack….

My direct memories were the crack vials that lined Hollis Avenue. I remembered the disappearance of the black boys in my band class each year. From 1986 through 1989, I would see the class go from 20 boys to 5 each year. Our band teacher, Mr. C.I Williams, would come to class dappered out: suit and tie…. everyday. He was a striking man. Tall, slender with flawless ebony colored skin. He donned an impeccably groomed goatee, and kept his hair cut in a close cropped salt and pepper fro. His eyes would be bloodshot every class; he was clearly exhausted and over extended. As time progressed, I would later learn that he played in clubs at night, and that he probably left his gigs to teach us each day with very little sleep to fuel him.

Mr. Williams would teach and discipline us with frantic urgency, as if our lives depended on it. And quiet as kept, it did. The ferocity of his temper and lessons were directed even more at the boys in my class. He fought vigorously, passionately to keep them there, within his grasp. He would plead with them to come to class; he would demand that they be serious; he would speak with an unmatched intensity about the perils of the street…. He knew that they would inevitably be consumed by the lure of fast money, which financed the hyper-consumption and materialism that defined the times. Yet despite his daily efforts, at the end of the year, only a small portion of the boys would remain. From 20 to at best 5 or 7, my boy band mates would end up: in jail, dead or in group homes. Collectively, the kids in the class would become desensitized to the loss. At some point, I simply came to expect that there would be attrition; empty chairs and a diminished horn section before our year-end recitals.

A conscious movement within the Black community also coincided with the crack epidemic. Hip hop became more infused with messages of empowerment, cultural legacy and advocacy. Black oriented sitcoms like "The Cosby Show" and "A Different World," instilled a sense of hope and pride. Spike Lee, Robert Townsend and other Black filmmakers began a trend of artistry that deviated from the debilitating exploitative

stereotypes that defined the late 60s and 70s. David Dinkins's candidacy as the City's mayor emerged under this confluence of events; my peers and I were ready.

From my personal recollection, my first memories of him was that he was an attorney that would eventually become Manhattan Borough president. Around my house, I was constantly reminded that he was part of the Gang of Four which also included: Percy Sutton, Basil Patterson and Charlie Rangel. Until he was elected Mayor, however, I had not actually seen or heard him speak. To me, as an impressionable teenager, between his education and his experience, it was clear that David Dinkins was more than qualified to be the City's Mayor.

When I saw him and heard him speak for the first time, I remembered having a sense of pride. At the time, I had not seen any Black man carry themselves the way he did. He was dapper, immaculately groomed and flawlessly articulate. There was a sense of grace and eloquence that he exuded. He defied the stereotypes that I was inundated with on a day to day basis. He was soft spoken yet firm; self-possessed yet humble; when he spoke, he commanded your attention.

When I saw him in Gracie Mansion, he planted the seeds in my young mind that Black people could be elected to the highest of offices. Prior to his election, we had always fallen short when we aimed beyond local positions. David Dinkins was indeed the mayor of the largest and most famous city on the planet. Again, I was filled with pride that he was a Black man who had defied the odds to become the first, I was thrilled to be alive to see it. Beforehand, I could only dream and hope.

These reflections bring to mind a line from Phife Dawg of A Tribe Called Quest. After Dinkins was out of office, in the song, "Check the Rhyme, " Phife would rap: "Mister Dinkins could you please be my Mayor? You'd be doing us a really big favor." All age groups in the Black community were galvanized, we were excited as we collectively felt validated in our increased cultural pride and our pursuit of excellence.

Unfortunately, his mayoralty was besieged by unprecedented racial unrest and conflict. After coming into office on the platform of peacemaker, Mayor Dinkins failed to deliver. He was hobbled by: the local riots in Crown Heights and Washington Heights; as well as the Black boycotts of Brooklyn Korean grocery stores. Additionally, prior to coming to office, there had been any number of racially divisive controversies: the unjust conviction of the Exonerated 5; the murder of Yusef Hawkins; and the vigilantism of Bernard Goetz…. After 3 terms of Mayor Edward Koch, the city was in a state of crisis; the time was defined by unseen heights of racial polarization.

Some attributed Mayor Dinkins's shortcomings to his temperament, while others scapegoated the NYPD Commissioner he appointed, Raymond Kelly. Those who possessed the latter perspective believed that Kelly may have sabotaged Mayor Dinkins's efforts to quell the unrest. Regardless of the cause, most viewed the Dinkins's mayoralty as an abysmal failure. Mayor Dinkins never disputed this finding and never attributed his failures to anything or anyone other than himself. He was a

class act, he showed grace in victory and in defeat. The same could not be said however, for Mayor Eric Leroy Adams, the City's second Black mayor.

The reality and legacy of Mayor Dinkins's term of office starkly contradicts the narrative depicted in the press. Although slow to act, Mayor Dinkins was a quiet and dignified force. It would later be acknowledged that he led the effort to clean-up Times Square; prior to, it was a tawdry, crime ridden red-light district. To this day, rooted in his love of the sport, Mayor Dinkins would also make New York City one of the biggest and most prestigious venues for tennis. An even lesser known fact was that he also helped to bring the Democratic National Convention to New York. Further, despite his issues with Commissioner Kelly, he would work with him to usher in an unprecedented expansion of the NYPD, which drove down the city's crime rate.

His accomplishments also touched the lives of everyday New Yorkers. Under his watch, Mayor Dinkins presided over a vast expansion of affordable housing. While little was known about the virus and at the height of its stigma, he worked tirelessly to implement programs to stymie spread of HIV/AIDS cases throughout the city.

Through it all, although unappreciated, Mayor Dinkins left the office with his dignity and integrity intact. There were no scandals; and there were no allegations of corruption or criminal indictments. For the time he was in office, the prestige of the position remained untarnished. For years to come, people both within and outside of the Black community spoke of Mayor Dinkins: as an avuncular statesman and with the utmost respect. And so it was for the 106th Mayor of the City…..

In 2021, 32 years later, the City would see its second Black Mayor: Eric Leroy Adams. Although he shared a number of similarities with Mayor Dinkins, it was clear that he was going to be a different type of Mayor. Adams professed to being: a bald shaven, earring pierced, self-avowed blue-collared Mayor. He proclaimed that the City had never seen a Mayor like him before, and for all of the wrong reasons, he was right.

Mayor Adams was no Mayor Dinkins. Both came from working class homes, however one man was brilliant and dignified, while the other had a career filled with scandal and dubious dealings. While Mayor Dinkins expressed himself with the clarity and diction of a leader, Mayor Adams mumbled and butchered the English language. While Mayor Dinkins had worked his way from a working class home all the way thru the military, college and law school; at best Mayor Adams slacked and slick talked his way through high school and college.

I became aware of Mayor Adams around the same time as I did Mayor Dinkins. Adams was a cop in the late 80s, and he was a master at self-promotion. Somehow he had affixed himself to the side of boxing champ Mike Tyson. I would then see him randomly with the Reverend Al Sharpton and the Reverend Minister Louis Farrakhan. Mayor Adams was ubiquitous…. Again it was debatable whether it was for the right reasons.

I would then hear him on 98.7 Kiss with Bob Sleigh and Wilson Pickett. The latter two would tirelessly advocate for the Central Park 5, now the Exonerated 5. Masseurs Sleigh and Pickett were amongst the first to believe in the 5s's innocence. They were undeterred and never wavered. They provided weekly updates on their case and their well-being on their shows. It was for this reason I tuned in, I considered the 5 to be my peers. As for Adams, it was on this platform that he began to carve out a niche for himself.

In hindsight, questions abound about Adams's motives. Was he being opportunistic? Did truly believe in the things for which he claimed to advocate? What was without question, however, was his consistent appearances on the show. At first he promoted the Guardians and then 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care. He said both groups were necessary to combat the racism and lack of diversity within the department. Despite being a transit cop, he then would raise issue with stop, question and frisk. Again in hindsight, it could be argued that these talking points did not reflect his core values and beliefs, and that they were simply fodder for his larger future ambitions.

He then emerged again as an Assembly person; subsequent thereto he would replace long-standing Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz. In both instances, I smirked yet thought very little of him. There were stories of dubious dealings, kickbacks and other scandals at each step, but again I thought little of his ascent. That was until he declared his interest in the mayoralty.

His election also found the City in crisis. While Mayor Dinkins had to address racial unrest and a recession, Mayor Adams faced the end of the Covid pandemic. In both instances, New Yorkers were weary of being overwhelmed, and we were weary of being in a constant state of crisis.

Unfortunately, even at the inception of his administration, I can't say that I had the same sense of pride about Mayor Adams's election. I cringed when he spoke. He attributed any shortcomings to an unspecified and uncorroborated diagnosis of dyslexia. Unlike the man I had heard for years on Kiss FM, this Eric Adams seemed slick, insincere and untrustworthy at the outset. This impression never left me throughout his mayoralty; in fact, it was further confirmed with each week that passed in his administration.

Then there were the appointments. He prided himself on superficial diversity. The reality was that the Deputy Mayors and his highest appointees consisted of his close family, friends and Freemason Prince Hall Lodge brothers. The press and controversy surrounding each appointment was abundant, yet Adams seemed impervious to their scandalous history and or lack of experience.

Unlike Mayor Dinkins, Mayor Adams did not carry himself with dignity or grace. He wore expensive suits like Mayor Dinkins, but unlike Mayor Dinkins, Adams came off as garish and sleazy. As the early weeks progressed, it also became clear that his personal work ethic was questionable.

Nights out at exclusive high-end social clubs seemed to characterize yet contradict the narrative of a working class mayor. Dinners with restaurateurs with extensive criminal histories seemed to undermine the dignity associated with the office. By day, he would insist that he was a plant-based vegan that ate his way from a fatal diabetes diagnosis. But by night, he would be flanked with scantily clad women with heaping plates of fried chicken, Titos vodka and cigars.

And again there were the questionable appointments. One Deputy Mayor was an un-indicted co-conspirator. The First Deputy Mayor had a history of domestic violence and assault, not to mention questions surrounding her job performance. Then there was the questionable attempt to hire his brother for a never before existing job. It was clear to me that when you had three members of the same family at the highest levels of city government, that something was clearly awry. Unfortunately, I was right.

The demise started with the abrupt resignation of the first Black woman to be appointed police Commissioner, Keechant Sewell. I remembered making the comment to a friend, that she wouldn't last. It was a cursory observation as the well-spoken and clearly intelligent Sewell was flanked between Adams and then Deputy Mayor for Public Safety, Phil Banks III.

A stream of women would then leave one after the next: Corporation Counsel and former Judge, the Honorable Sylvia Hinds Radix; former FDNY Commissioner, Laura Kavanaugh; and former head of the Civilian Complaint Review Board, Arva Rice to name a few. Adams would always give the same tired explanation: that each of the ladies sought to do something different with their lives.

Then there were the scandals associated with his replacements and those who stayed behind. Under Sewell's replacement, Eddie Caban, any number of scandals erupted at the NYPD. A night club extortion racket by the Commissioner's "evil twin." A sex for overtime scandal, where at least 400 members of service made over 100K a year in overtime. A little publicized cash for promotion racket that attracted FBI attention. Things finally came to a head when the Chief of Police's home was searched by the FBI; documents and electronics were seized. Despite the complaints, then Chief of Police Jeffrey Maddrey was allowed to retire with his pension in place and a good guy letter.

More resignations and scandals followed. The FBI would search and seize items from the homes of Phil Banks, David Banks, Sheena Wright, Ingrid Lewis Martin, Timothy Pearson and campaign fundraiser Breanna Suggs. Adams would smile through it all. He would conduct press conferences, one after the next, as if all of these unprecedented occurrences were par for the course. His insistence to this effect would become even more implausible upon his indictment, and upon the revelation that he himself had at least 7 burner phones.

As the scandals escalated and the press coverage became more intense, so did the frequency of Adams's reference to Mayor Dinkins. As a lifelong New Yorker, I was appalled. The two men had nothing in common besides the color of their skin. Mayor Dinkins's integrity was never in question. When he spoke, although the city may not have agreed, no one questioned his intelligence or qualifications to do the job.

The refrain I heard at the time was that Mayor Dinkins was too nice, too quiet, too laid back. Again, his integrity was never in question, and unlike Adams, he would not be indicted. More subtly and importantly, Mayor Dinkins refused to pander to the very communities that sought his demise, he had pride and self-respect. The same cannot be said of Mayor Adams.

In the wake of his indictment, we all bore witness to the lows to which Adams would sink to remain in power. Immediately upon election, he and everyone in his administration became fixtures in the Orthodox Jewish community. An unabashed Goyim, perhaps Adams learned from Phil Banks the importance of cultivating that dynamic. Banks like Adams would care less about the sleazy money for access and power/vote dynamic. Instead, both so called men shamelessly have thrown themselves to that community despite the overall lack of genuine respect or support.

Adams would lower himself even more as his case progressed. Upon the election of Donald Trump, Adams would debase himself and plead for a pardon. The price: New York City's collective sovereignty and reputation as a haven for immigrants. Adams would prostrate himself at the feet of Donald Trump after years of tearing him down. Under the so called guise of "working with rather than warring with the President," the city would see Adams make one trip after the next to Washington DC and Mar-a-Lago. At each turn, it was painfully clear that he was begging…. Mayor Dinkins would never. In protest, four more Deputy Mayors would simultaneously resign. Adams again would smile, stutter, mumble some nonsensical nonsense and brush off these resignations as well.

For all of Mayor Dinkins's shortcomings, he left the City better off than he found it. The same cannot be said for Adams. In an election that should have been a cake walk and landslide, New Yorkers are left with the inevitable prospect of electing yet another unqualified and inexperienced leader. It is because of Adams and the unprecedented corruption under his administration, that a 31 year old man without any substantive work experience is the front runner for the Mayoralty. His closest competition is a former Governor Cuomo, who had to resign in disgrace after numerous allegations of sexual harassment, and an untold number of unreported nursing home deaths during Covid. Then there is Curtis Sliwa, a man with a big heart, but again limited education and experience. He seems to know the city, but again, his quirkiness and failure to obtain any prior elected office make him yet another unknown quantity. Instead of being the inevitable prospect, Adams is the last and worst option.

Even with this dubious distinction, Adams has managed to debase the electoral process on his way out. Stories abound of the prospect that his withdrawal from the race comes

at a price. The monied elite would prefer a two man race between Zohran Mamdani and former Governor Cuomo. Adams has again evidenced his selfish tendencies ny refusing to withdraw unless his personal needs are met.

Speculation circulates on this front as well. Some say Adams needs to stay in office to pay off the legal bills he has accumulated while in office. Others say that he is holding out for higher office under the Trump administration. Then there are the stories that he has been offered money and jobs from the private sector to drop out. Adams has denied all of these rumors. He has steadfastly insisted that no such offers have been made, and that he intends to stay in the race until the bitter end. To further his point, he has insisted that the press and his opponents are liars bent on sabotaging his ability to raise money and his campaign by way of these alleged false narratives.

Perhaps Adams's stridency would be plausible if he were half the man that David Dinkins was, if he did not have an extensive track record for deflection and deception. Sadly, this is not the case and no one believes him. Like many others, when Adams tries to compare his plight to Mayor Dinkins, there is a collective disgust. At this point, by this time, it may be fair to say that we are all tired.... tired of Mayor Eric Adams.

As an African American woman approaching the age of 50 I am concerned. I worry about the future of New York City politics. I have questions about how this void of effective honest leadership will be filled. I wonder if there will be another Black mayor in my lifetime. I wonder about the future aspiring politicians and young people seeking leadership. When Mayor Dinkins left office there was hope, however after this disastrous mayoralty, under Adams, another Black mayor any time soon will be highly unlikely. Even with an honest mayor, we had to wait 32 years for a successor.

This essay has been resting on my mind for several months now. At times, I found myself grappling with whether I should say anything. To date, I have written on this blog, spoken out at Charter Commission Meetings, and have voiced my opinion on podcasts antagonistic to the administration. In return, I've already experienced retaliation from members of the Adams administration. I have been accosted at a restaurant by Timothy Pearson, and Michael Garner ran down on me in front of City Hall park. These occurrences are only the tip of the iceberg as it pertains to the perils of my dissent.

However, after hearing Mayor Adams yet again this week compare himself to Mayor Dinkins I could take no more. Mayor Dinkins was not the best Mayor, but he was a good man. The same cannot be said for Adams. Mayor Dinkins was the son of a barber, but somehow managed to pursue higher education, become a lawyer and eventually become a pillar within the Black community…. Again the same cannot be said for Adams.

When I remember Mayor Dinkins, I think of a man who possessed dignity, grace and the ability to express himself in a way that spoke to the hearts of the community. I cannot say the same when I think of Adams. When I think of Adams, I think of a shape shifting self-serving vindictive chameleon.

He has labeled each of his opponents liars, yet he lies every day. He insists that crime has reached unprecedented lows, yet gang violence and violent crime in general have proliferated under his watch. When confronted about the kickbacks, overtime abuses, the four police commissioners in less than four years, Adams simply responds: that its noise; and that if you live long enough you will be hurt by some people in your life.

David Norman Dinkins took responsibility and was accountable good or bad. He conceded fault in a substantive way, he was a man… the same cannot be said for Eric Adams…. As a New Yorker who has loved this city her whole life, it would do us all well if Adams stop with the disingenuous comparisons. He is unlike any other elected official in this City's history, and that's not in a good way. I'll close with this last entreaty, please let David Dinkins rest in peace, he has done nothing to deserve to be compared to the likes of Adams… David Norman Dinkins was a man of distinction and honor, far from perfect but certainly not deliberately deviant, again the same cannot be said for Eric Leroy Adams.

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