

FOREWORD BY MAYOR BILL DE BLASIO



I grew up in the Boston area in the 1960s and 1970s. I remember the thrill of watching the Red Sox games. I continued to be a Red Sox fan throughout my life, much to the chagrin of my Yankees constituents! I watched from across the Charles River the issues of race and class play out in the city of Boston—school desegregation and busing in 1974 and the inability of Mayor Kevin White to manage the racial conflict. I graduated from Cambridge Rindge and Latin School in 1979 and developed an early interest in politics. I followed Boston politics closely and was thrilled in 1983 when Mel King and Ray Flynn were in the final election, beating out the business-backed candidates. I remember the excitement and hope that filled the city when Flynn was inaugurated. He worked tirelessly to unite the city and empower its neighborhoods. These experiences helped shape my understanding of urban politics and progressive leadership.

The turning point in my progressive journey was a moment of profound personal reflection. It was 1977, and my older brother Steve Wilhelm—like Don Gillis, the author of *The Battle for Boston*—was arrested while protesting the Seabrook nuclear power plant. This event, a pivotal juncture in steering America away from nuclear power, filled me with an overwhelming sense of pride for my brother. As I sat on the steps of my high school building, this realization washed over me: “I’m supposed to be a progressive.” This personal epiphany marked a significant shift in my life’s trajectory.

This experience and my work on the David Dinkins mayoral campaign ignited my passion for public service. In 1990, I was fortunate to secure

a position in city hall. Dinkins, the first African American elected mayor in New York City's history, ran a campaign that pledged racial healing. He famously referred to New York City's demographic diversity as 'not a melting pot, but a gorgeous mosaic.' Inspired by Dinkins's vision, I was eager to contribute to this journey of uniting the city. The author, Don Gillis, was doing the same for Flynn, the mayor at that time.

When I was elected mayor of New York City in 2013, the first Democrat in twenty years, it was the same year Marty Walsh was elected Boston's fifty-fourth mayor. Marty, Ray, and I share a deep commitment to our cities' poor and working people. Marty and I served on the US Conference of Mayor's Cities of Opportunity Task Force. We prioritized addressing "the tale of two cities," economic and educational inequality. Inspired by the vision of our predecessors, we were eager to contribute to the journey of uniting our cities.

In NYC, we achieved universal pre-K, a publicly funded prekindergarten for all New York City children, serving ninety thousand three- and four-year-olds. Boston did the same under Walsh. We built thousands of affordable housing units, created jobs in emerging industries, and worked tirelessly to reduce income inequality, raise wages, and improve race relations—as Flynn and Walsh did in Boston. We created a guaranteed healthcare system, NYC Care, the nation's most extensive and comprehensive plan to guarantee healthcare for every New Yorker. Flynn launched Boston's first Immigrant Rights Unit to help the city's many immigrants with free healthcare and legal services. We both believed health care is a fundamental human right, not a privilege for those who can afford it. Like Flynn, I took on the downtown power brokers. The results were a redistribution of the benefits of growth. We had a measurable impact in reducing income inequality. While the problems persist, we made them the issues that future mayors can't ignore.

I first met Gillis when I was in Boston for a US Conference of Mayors meeting with other mayors from around the country to discuss strategies to attack income inequality. Gillis had his progressive trajectory. He started organizing tenants against displacement and the scourge of arson in the Fenway neighborhood. Later, as a youth street worker and public housing tenant organizer he joined the Flynn campaign and the mayor's office after the 1983 election. Flynn tapped him to lead neighborhood services and economic and workforce development efforts for his administration.

Gillis's book takes a deep dive into efforts to tackle the challenges faced by the city in terms of inequality, racism, and creating shared economic prosperity, primarily by Flynn, but also by Mayors Tom Menino, Marty Walsh, and Michelle Wu. He was uniquely positioned as a senior adviser

to Flynn for a decade in city government. He skillfully portrays the political dynamics that led to the rejection of the business-backed growth machine coalition and the reduction of racial conflict, marking a profound realignment of power relationships in the city.

Gillis incorporates the voices of community organizers and neighborhood leaders, who bravely fought these battles from within the government and in the streets. The voices he captures bring to life efforts to respond to bank redlining and mortgage lending racial discrimination, to control spiraling rents and condominium conversions, and the never-ending struggle to improve public education. Flynn created the first-in-the-nation appointed school board, not an uncontested endeavor as Gillis describes, a practice New York later followed in 2002. He also ended stop-and-frisk search practices by the police and instituted community policing, as we did in NYC two decades later. Confronting racial conflict and inequality is a requirement for mayors. Flynn needed to deal with eliminating the chronic racial violence he inherited and the impact of the Carol DiMaiti Stuart murder and its aftermath. I dealt with the killing of Eric Garner. Marty Walsh and I confronted the ramifications of the George Floyd murder. Gillis explores the role race played during these periods.

The book's theme is how cities can be progressive and raise the voices of those often left behind. Boston's community organizers have a long history of fighting against racism, educational inequality, urban renewal programs, and highway expansion, and expanding tenants' rights. The courts ordered busing to integrate Boston's public schools, put the city's public housing developments in receivership, and forced the cleanup of Boston Harbor. How Flynn took back control and led these agencies is part of the city's story Gillis recounts. Flynn's administration waged powerful grassroots campaigns against the growth machine alongside residents, community organizers, and activists. The book studies how these policy battles enlisted neighborhood, labor, tenant, and small business groups and how they paved the way for progressive policies.

The story of progressive city leaders, often overlooked in urban social history courses, is crucial to understanding urban politics. As an undergraduate urban studies student at NYU, I couldn't find books like Don Gillis's. The book provides a historical account and road map of how cities like Boston became progressive and the key elements that sustain progressive policies. Drawing upon a rich scholarship, oral history, and archival research, Gillis concludes with a comprehensive analysis of Flynn's contributions to Boston and the invaluable lessons we can learn from them. *The Battle for Boston* helps us understand the challenges in urban

America today and the role of progressive leadership in city politics. It is a must-read for students of urban politics and lovers of cities. It proves that progressives can win and put their vision into action.

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