

THE
POWER
OF THE
MAYOR

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**David
Dinkins
1990-1993**

Chris McNickle



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A City Living in Fear

New Yorkers lived in fear the year they threw Ed Koch from office and elected David Dinkins mayor. During 1989, 1,905 murders left blood on the streets and sidewalks of every neighborhood in the city. More Americans died violent deaths within the confines of the five boroughs in those twelve months than would die in the worst twelve months of combat in Iraq following the US invasion in 2003. Fear hovered over every aspect of people's lives in a town grown more deadly than a war zone. Daily reports of shootings, stabbings, assaults, and attacks intimidated all but the toughest residents. They combined with a series of horrific events and confusing decisions during David Dinkins's first months as mayor to create a severe crisis of confidence. By October 1990, Dinkins's credibility as the city's leader risked becoming another chalk silhouette drawn on a city sidewalk, the ultimate victim of the crime wave.

Twelve homicides took place on the day David Dinkins declared in his inaugural address he would be the "toughest mayor on crime the city has ever seen." Two days later, he announced he would delay the hiring of the next class of police recruits due to budget pressure. A *New York Times* editorial called the move "Blunt, but Brave." None called it smart politics. During his first month in office, grim year-end statistics emerged, reporting at least thirty victims died from stray bullets in 1989, with dozens more wounded. "If there was ever any comfort in the knowledge that most murder victims know their attackers, even that has fallen prey to the random violence inflicted on New Yorkers.... Death by bad luck . . . has a powerful effect," one journalist wrote.¹

A few weeks after Dinkins's inauguration, a Manhattan resident beat a homeless man to death on the Columbus Circle subway platform. A six-foot-tall, two hundred-pound derelict—known to harass people regularly at the station—spat on, punched, and chased a

subway rider traveling home from a movie with his three-year-old son. The father fought back to protect his child and himself, crashing the head of the homeless man into the concrete floor of the station so forcefully he died. The Manhattan district attorney's office leveled manslaughter charges, but a grand jury declined to indict. The public mood surged ugly.²

In March, at the cruelly misnamed Happy Land Social Club in the Bronx, eighty-seven people burned to death or died from asphyxiation in a fire set deliberately by a thirty-six-year-old man angry with a former girlfriend in the building. After a bouncer ejected him, the arsonist bought a dollar's worth of gasoline, poured a trail of it through the single entrance to the building, and lit it, extinguishing the lives of all inside save three. In a grim irony, the ex-girlfriend survived. The scorned lover watched the club burn before going home to sleep, where police arrested him twelve hours later, his shoes still reeking of gas. The blaze caused the worst loss of life in a New York fire since the Triangle Shirtwaist Company burned in 1911. Sixteen months earlier, the city had ordered the club closed due to hazardous conditions, but it had continued to operate illegally. Who could blame New Yorkers for feeling their city had spun out of control?³

David Dinkins arrived at the gruesome scene with several of his senior advisors. He looked at the faces of the dead for a long time. And then the mayor went back and looked at each one again. Many of the asphyxiation victims had taken their final breaths with their eyes wide open, their faces stuck in macabre, lifeless stares. "I don't ever want to forget what it looks like when the city does not enforce the building code," the mayor said. Perhaps his gut felt painfully what in his mind he must already have known. As mayor, he would bear a measure of responsibility for any number of awful tragedies of a kind that could happen on any day.⁴

I. Tinderbox City

In the first few months of David Dinkins's administration, the case of Yusuf Hawkins came to trial. Brooklyn district attorney Charles J. Hynes charged eight white youths in the killing of the sixteen-year-old African American, shot to death in Bensonhurst without provocation in August 1989. The most notorious among them, eighteen-year-old baby-faced Joseph Fama stood accused of pulling the trigger. Keith Mondello, the same age, faced charges of second-degree murder and other crimes. Their proceedings began in April with separate juries.

John S. Vento, twenty-one, also faced second-degree murder. At first, he agreed to testify against the others in return for reduced charges. Then he changed his mind. Reports circulated that the Fama family had threatened him. In January 1990 he fled, only to surrender to police in Dayton, Ohio, in March. His trial would follow in June. Trials for the others on lesser charges would come later. Reverend Al Sharpton mobilized his masses shortly after the murder. He led a series of marches in Bensonhurst, weekend after weekend, to insist that violent racists could declare no street in New York City off-limits to African Americans. Hostile crowds greeted the demonstrators with cries of "Niggers go home!" When marchers chanted: "We want the killer!" bands of local residents responded: "We want to kill *you!*" The city's muscles tensed, waiting for the verdicts. Sharpton declared that acquittals would mean, "[Y]ou are . . . telling us to burn the town down."⁵

At the same time, a seemingly trivial matter elsewhere in Brooklyn had developed a racial head of steam. Around 6:00 p.m. on January 18, 1990, a Haitian American woman named Ghislaine Felissaint had been shopping at the Family Red Apple Market, a Korean-owned grocery store on Church Avenue in Flatbush. Felissaint claimed that as she sought to leave the store without buying anything because the line was too long, an employee stopped her and asked her to open her bag, presumably to make sure she had not stolen anything. When she refused, the store worker grabbed her by the neck, slapped her, and knocked her down, she claimed. Then another employee kicked her. Later she would report a cashier said, "I'm tired of the fucking black people." The original police report of the incident did not include the comment, and the woman accused knew little English and usually spoke only Korean.⁶

The store employees' version differed. They claimed Ms. Felissaint had three dollars' worth of produce but gave the cashier only two dollars. While the shopper looked for more money, the cashier began to wait on the next customer in line. Felissaint took offense, began yelling racial slurs, and threw a pepper at the cashier, who threw one back. Felissaint then knocked down some boxes of peppers and spit at the cashier, the employees claimed. The storeowner tried to end the altercation. He told the woman to forget about the dollar, and he asked her to leave, placing his hands on her shoulders, at which point Felissaint lay down on the floor in protest, with shoppers taking sides as the dispute escalated. The police arrived. They called an ambulance for Felissaint, who went to the hospital with some scratches on her

face. The police arrested the storeowner, Bong Jae Jang, for assault—charges a judge would later dismiss. The employees closed the store as a gathering crowd began to get violent, throwing rocks and bottles at the Koreans.⁷

The next day African American protestors appeared in front of the store, denouncing Korean disrespect for black patrons. They called for a boycott of the shop and of another Korean-owned grocery store across the street. Before long, militant activist Sonny Carson showed up on the scene, supporting the boycotters' call to shut the groceries down. For months a few dozen demonstrators paced the sidewalk outside the stores, verbally harassing and threatening would-be patrons, with devastating impact on the businesses.⁸

Korean merchants operating in various African American neighborhoods around the city had been subjected to intimidation tactics before, forcing some shops to close. Angry black militants harboring racist sentiments resented the presence of Asians in their midst, operating stores they believed African Americans should own themselves to provide jobs and income for local residents. Their hearts burdened by centuries of injustice and infected by the venom of bigotry that poisoned their outlook on the economic system they lived in, the activists could not admit an uncomfortable truth. The Korean family-run businesses succeeded while local initiatives remained inadequate to serve poorer African American neighborhoods.⁹

Cultural collision exacerbated the tensions. Koreans had little understanding of the troubled racial history they had entered, and they had a history of their own. One Korean man explained the circumstances that created conflict by analogy. "I don't like expressing it this way," he told a reporter, "but we Koreans are like the Jews—a small country located between hostile countries, always under threat of invasions. We had to protect to survive . . . that's been our history." Small wonder, the man implied, that Koreans reacted with an intensity that struck shoppers as rude and disrespectful when misunderstandings occurred. They were responding to two thousand years of Russian, Mongol, and Chinese invasions and, within the span of memory, decades of Japanese occupation. In Brooklyn the grocery boycott became the line in the sand in reaction to African American–Korean tensions. "This must stop and it will stop here," one storeowner said. "They cannot close," said another, referring to the two shops. "We could be next," he feared. Koreans and others sympathetic to the grocers' plight raised thousands of dollars a month to keep the stores in operation.¹⁰

Behind the scenes, Deputy Mayor Bill Lynch sought to negotiate an end to the boycott. He also tried to insulate the mayor from the controversy. "[A community] organizing tactic is not to bring the principal in unless you can close the deal, and we didn't have the deal," he recounted years later. So the boycott dragged on. The police, fearing confrontation would escalate tensions, attract publicity, and encourage the demonstrators, refused to enforce a court injunction that required protestors to stand back at least fifty feet from the stores to prevent physical intimidation. Many believed the mayor's office instructed the police to adopt this approach. "Not true," Lynch asserted when challenged on the subject. "The police [were] never ordered not to enforce the law. It was their decision about how to deal with it. I believe [from] discussions we had they did not want to exacerbate [the situation] by coming down on the protestors."¹¹

The police and the mayor's advisors believed that the activists and their supporters would tire and that the issue would simply fade over time if confrontation could be avoided. They underestimated the militants' determination to keep hate alive. And the hands-off posture fed the view that the mayor was a man of inaction, unable to respond forcefully to the city's problems. Worse still, some concluded that the city's first African American mayor lacked the courage and integrity to confront people of his own race, even when they sought to achieve their goals through intimidation and threats of violence. A dollar's worth of vegetables had created a symbol of racial strife that would not die.¹²

As the Fama and Mondello cases approached a verdict in May, Al Sharpton, advisor to the Yusuf Hawkins family, and C. Vernon Mason, advisor to the grocery boycotters, planned a joint day of protests in Bensonhurst and Flatbush. With two of the city's most skillful provocateurs of racial animosity poised to seize center stage, the risk of violence, particularly in Bensonhurst, seemed real. Suddenly Mayor Dinkins faced a battle in Brooklyn that put his pledge to heal the city's race-inflicted wounds at risk. Black activists threatened to eclipse the city's first African American mayor, cast him as irrelevant, not in control even of his own political base much less able to lead the entire city. "You've got to come out strong," Bill Lynch advised the mayor. "We need to calm the town down, or else there might be an explosion."¹³

Dinkins understood the threat to his credibility to govern, and he moved to preempt it. The evening before the protests, he invited one thousand public, business, church, labor, and community leaders to City Hall to hear a citywide appeal for tolerance. He requested

television coverage for the twenty-five minute talk. Four stations broadcast live, while others showed parts live or aired the entire speech later in the evening.¹⁴

The mayor told his audience and the city, "Together, we've tasted a tiny piece of the sweet substance called hope, yet again and again, we're confronted by the bitterness of hate." He pledged to do "whatever is necessary and whatever is right to maintain public order and public safety," and then he addressed the impending trial on everyone's mind. He called it "a painful passage for our city," and said, "[O]ne thing is for sure: No verdict can undo the damage that was done on that devastating night last August. The hate that was unleashed on Yusuf Hawkins can never be called back. The pain that ripped through his body, his family, and this city can never be fully healed. And his sacrifices must never be forgotten."

The mayor went on to stress that "this was a crime committed by individuals. All of Bensonhurst did not commit this crime; rather, a few people committed this crime in Bensonhurst. We must absolutely, categorically reject the notion of group guilt. We abhor those who preach it, and we must be mindful that predictions of violence and anger tend to be self-fulfilling." He left no doubt that he hoped the "individuals responsible for the death of Yusuf Hawkins will feel the strong arm of the law," and he affirmed his view that the legal system and trial by jury remains "the fairest and best method of judging our fellow citizens that anyone has ever come up with in the history of humanity." But whatever the outcome, he continued, "[W]e must repress our rage, channel our energies and come together to make this tragedy transforming."

The mayor inspired a standing ovation when he challenged the city's media, insisting they "must join in too—with public service announcements and programming that fights bigotry by teaching tolerance." The strong reaction reflected a broadly shared view that television stations and newspapers craved the emotional heat of racial animosity and stoked it with provocative reports and irresponsible headlines designed to attract viewers and sell newspapers. Their cynical competition created what one observer called a "ceaseless cacophony" that amounted to the "hijacking of the city" by journalistic carnival barkers promoting their shows without regard to the damage their provocative language caused. The mayor also challenged his audience and the citizens who elected him. "Right now, each of you must look into your own hearts, in your own families," he said. "Look honestly at yourselves—and your

own communities—and ask whether you can be swayed by prejudice, and what you're going to do about it. Because no matter how much government can do, government cannot substitute for the content of our character."¹⁵

Addressing the Korean grocers boycott, Dinkins condemned the harassment taking place in no uncertain terms. He described the circumstances of the newest immigrants from Asia in the context of the city's long history as a gateway for refugees seeking a better life, often greeted at first by discrimination from those who preceded them. The mayor allowed that "[b]oycotts can be an appropriate and effective response" to injustice. The tactic had played a vital role in the civil rights movement that was so important to Dinkins's political base and to the mayor himself. But he continued, "[T]his one is not and the vast majority of the people in that community know it. Whatever happened in the actual incident, did not warrant this sort of ongoing intimidation. . . . We will never allow any group or any person to turn to violence or the threat of violence to intimidate others, no matter how legitimate their anger or frustration may be." He called upon all involved "to set aside their intransigence, to come in, to sit down, to settle this, and to settle it now. My personal commitment is absolute." He outlined a series of initiatives to help foster tolerance, and he called on all leaders to go back to their communities and appeal for harmony.¹⁶

The speech inspired many in the audience, and the leaders present pledged to support the mayor's effort to restore the city's civility—a quality his personal demeanor seemed to embody at a time when New York sorely needed such a symbol. Some also offered implicit criticisms. "It was exactly the kind of strong message that should have been delivered months ago. I just hope it wasn't just a speech," Reverend Calvin O. Butts, III, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church told a journalist. Floyd H. Flake, also a pastor and a black congressman from Queens, suggested the mayor had to speak out because he "realized he has a city that sits on a tinderbox."¹⁷

And Vernon Mason was just the sort to strike a match. The next day as marchers gathered at the Slave Theater on Fulton Avenue in preparation for protests in Flatbush and Bensonhurst, the antiestablishment firebrand hurled disrespect at the mayor. "I could not believe what this Negro said last night. It was all I could do to prevent myself from breaking the TV," he told the crowd, who responded with chants of "Judas, Judas!" Mason went on to call the mayor "a traitor" and "a lover of white people and the system. And last night he bashed black

people. He ain't got no African left in him. He's got too many yarmulkes on his head," Mason continued, adding a dose of anti-Semitism to his nasty invective. Sharpton, displaying an uncanny ability to rile and inflame while claiming to be justice's responsible conscience, offered this advice to the marchers. "When we go out to Bensonhurst, we're going to see the zoo," he said. "And when you go to the zoo, if animals bark at you and lash out at you, you don't strike back." He then told the young people in the group very pointedly that if they did not intend to be peaceful they should not join the protest. With that as backdrop, five hundred people climbed aboard ten buses and drove to Bensonhurst, while two hundred others walked to the Korean grocery on Church Avenue and joined one hundred boycotters already present.¹⁸

In Bensonhurst, two hundred fifty police officers, including fifty riding motorcycles and others stationed on rooftops, kept the peace. When local youths tried to step in the way of the marchers, a blue wall kept them in their place. Some jeers and offensive gestures slipped past the protective screen, but nothing more. A similar air of controlled tension prevailed at the Korean grocery protest. No violence marred the day.¹⁹

On Thursday, May 17, 1990, a jury convicted Joseph Fama, and a judge would soon sentence him to thirty-two years to life in prison. The next day, Keith Mondello's jury convicted him of rioting, unlawful imprisonment, menacing, discrimination, and weapons charges, but acquitted him of murder and manslaughter. William Glaberson, writing for the *New York Times*, captured the atmosphere at the moment the jury announced its decision. "In the end, the hate was there in the courtroom, just as it was there on 69th Street in Bensonhurst on the August night when Yusuf K. Hawkins was shot to death." Momentarily, everyone seemed stunned when the jury foreman, an African American woman named Mimi Snowden, read the not guilty verdict on the murder charge. "But then, rage was coming from the group on the Hawkins side so fast, in a blast of angry voices, that it was often impossible to pick out words from the chorus of fury." Reporters heard Sharpton threaten the woman fulfilling her civic duty. "You are finished!" he screamed. Mondello was sentenced to five years and four months up to a maximum of sixteen years.²⁰

Dinkins continued his tolerance offensive. He spoke out frequently in the weeks surrounding the high-profile cases. At a church in Harlem, he told parishioners that all New Yorkers had immigrant roots. That all had come "to escape prejudice and persecution, hunger and

deprivation . . . [so] the children of the oppressed must now turn to each other as allies and neighbors instead of turning on each other as enemies." He acknowledged "everyone feels threatened and . . . on edge from the daily pounding of the prospect of crime," but collective blame of other groups for it would only "plunge" the city "into a cycle of fear and frustration that could spin out of control." He urged his listeners to consider and respect the special values and the different symbols that mattered in different ways to New York's many ethnic groups.²¹

"Violence is no way to express our displeasure," he said to reporters as he stepped to the front of a parade honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on May 22. Later that evening, he hosted a two-hour town meeting at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where Governor Cuomo, John Cardinal O'Connor, schools chancellor Joseph Fernandez, and other leaders came and spoke. The mayor introduced the evening as "the time to come together to create a wave of energy and unity so powerful that it could wash away the hate and the hurt." At Chancellor Fernandez's urging, many in attendance and around the city began sporting small blue ribbons as an emblem of support for the search for harmony. Joe Klein wrote in *New York* magazine, "David Dinkins had done about all that could be asked of a politician for the moment: He had set a moral tone and helped cool out a tough situation. He had done another thing, too—through his relentless civility, he had offered an alternative method of doing business to a fevered, frothing city." In an implicit criticism of the tone Ed Koch set from City Hall, Klein found it "nice to have a mayor selling sedatives, rather than amphetamines for a change."²²

Dinkins's efforts seemed to have some effect. In July, when a jury convicted John Vento of unlawful imprisonment while unable to agree on the charges of murder and rioting, the verdict's announcement unleashed none of the courthouse rage that accompanied the earlier decisions. Vento received two years and eight months to eight years in prison for his role in Hawkins's murder. As time passed the rest of Yusuf Hawkins attackers met their fates, some acquitted and some convicted of the various charges filed against them, with an absence of public drama. Reverend Sharpton would declare the outcome a "mixed victory." Some involved in the murder got off easy, he believed, and others in the crowd when Fama shot Hawkins were never even arrested. But the city's emotions on the issue were largely spent. Only for the family of Yusuf Hawkins and the families of those implicated in his murder would the pain of the incident continue undiminished.²³

Meanwhile, the boycott of the Korean grocers continued. At the end of August, a nine-person committee the mayor had appointed to investigate the incident published its report. It only added to the controversy. The document seemed intended to appease the protestors. It criticized the district attorney and the police department for not acting swiftly enough to investigate Ghislaine Felissaint's charges and for not assigning more resources to the case. It also endorsed the police department's decision not to enforce the court order to keep protestors fifty feet from the stores. Even more surprisingly, the committee found the event "incident based and not race based" even though protestors handed out fliers that read "Boycott all Korean stores," and "Don't shop with people who don't look like us." One protestor held a sign that said, "God is love, Koreans are the devil," while others called the grocers "yellow monkeys." The city council issued its own report in response, questioning the impartiality of at least three members of the mayor's committee while coming to very different conclusions on the substance of the matter. *The New York Post* described the report of the mayor's commission as "rewarding the racists." Ultimately, all efforts to mediate an end to the dispute failed because the boycotters refused to entertain discussions. In September, ten to fifteen thousand Asian New Yorkers showed up on the steps of City Hall in what was billed as an "Asian Rally for Racial Unity." The euphemistic label provided a fig leaf to hide Asian anger at the boycott and the city's feckless response.²⁴

Finally, months after many people of good faith had urged him to and days after a unanimous appeals court decision denied the city's plea to exempt it from enforcing the court order to protect the grocers' businesses from intimidating protests, David Dinkins rode out to the store and bought ten dollars' worth of fruit and potatoes from the shop. He accused "some of those involved as . . . wishing only to beat these store owners into submission and force them out of business.... It is time for those who stubbornly maintain that Korean merchants should go away to welcome them as full partners in the great enterprise of our democracy." The action cast the prestige of the mayor's office on the side of the Asian victims and in opposition to the black militants. Many thought it the right thing but very long overdue. The police pushed the protestors back fifty feet, shopping at the store resumed, and eventually the boycott withered. Still, the damage had been done. Some months later, the owner of the Red Apple Grocery sold the store.²⁵

In February 1992 the United States Commission on Civil Rights published a report entitled *Civil Rights Issues Facing Asian Americans in the 1990s*. In the section on the Flatbush Korean grocers boycott, it concluded:

[The] incident illustrates what can happen when racial tensions are unchecked and racial incidents mishandled by local governments. An incident that might have been managed in such a way as to improve racial relations in New York City instead ended up worsening racial relations and disillusioning many Korean Americans about the American political process.²⁶

Year's afterward Bill Lynch would cite the episode as one of his greatest disappointments. He wished he had not advised the mayor to stay away from the store for as long as he did. With admirable humility and loyalty, Lynch took the blame on himself. But ultimately the decision to wait so long had been the mayor's.²⁷

II. Metropolis of Murder

If the threat of race riots retreated, the unrelenting reality of violence persisted without pause. In April, *New York* magazine ran an article headlined: "Victims: The Stories of Seven New Yorkers Caught in the War Zone." It catalogued the intimate impact attacks caused on people's lives. "I don't think there's any law in New York anymore," a twenty-year-old college student—who had his back slashed while walking along East 79th Street on a sunny Sunday afternoon—told the article's author. He did not plan to return to Manhattan after graduation.²⁸

On June 16, 1990, *New York Times* reporter Donatella Lorch filed a story headlined, "Nine Hours, Nine Killings, No Answers." It began very matter of fact:

At 3 P.M., 14-year-old Shawn Chapman saw two friends being harassed by another teen-ager on a Bronx street. He tried to intercede. Without a word, the teen-ager pulled out a revolver and shot him.

At 6:10 P.M., Jacqueline Lewis hurried to pull a child away from her apartment door in Harlem. She knew that her roommate's boyfriend was outside and angry. A single shotgun blast tore through the door and killed her.

At 7:10 P.M., Kevin Nimmons was sitting in his parked Cadillac in Brooklyn. The windows were rolled up and it was raining gently.

In a matter of moments, a small group of men had walked up, pulled out their semiautomatic pistols and riddled him with at least 15 bullets.

The three deaths were among nine killings in the city in a nine-hour period beginning Thursday afternoon.²⁹

By summer, the ever-rising death count promised a new murder record would be set in 1990. A gunman who shot three people and killed a fourth left notes with his victims and sent messages to news organizations creating the scary specter of a New York Zodiac killer. Police feared the shooter sought to mimic a San Francisco serial murderer, never caught, who killed thirty-seven people between 1966 and 1974. Dinkins offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the killer's capture. In Greenwich Village, a young advertising executive, John Reisenbach, "a thin, wiry . . . man, with a happy-go-lucky, mischievous grin . . . as if a joke was inside his head just waiting to get out," stepped out of his apartment to use a pay phone. A homeless man, who "lived in the neighborhood parks among the disordered lives of the transvestite prostitutes and pimps and hustlers and homeless," accosted him and shot him three times. Reisenbach staggered twenty feet and fell into the gutter. There his college sweetheart and bride, Vicki, found an emergency medical services team hovering over him in a brave but futile effort to save his life when she came to find out why his call was taking so long. That was how she learned she had become a widow. The city's professional class reacted with horror. It could have been any one of them. During nine days in July, four children—one less than a year old—died from gunshots meant for others. One Brooklyn mother expressed her most profound fear. "We tell our children: Good morning; pay attention in school; be good. We don't say what is in our hearts: Come back alive; come back to me this afternoon."³⁰

New York magazine reporter Eric Pooley would write an article entitled, "Kids with Guns." A fourteen-year-old Harlem boy explained why he carried a weapon. "Where I'm from," he said, "guns are about common as water.... It's just like a part of life. Bein' strapped . . . that gives you the feeling of power.... I don't want to shoot nobody. But if they bully on me, disrespect my mother, or mess with any one of my family, they're just going to have to get it. That's what it's about." Having a gun had become a "symbol of power and prestige, a charged, mystical icon in the urban rite of passage from childhood to manhood . . . another consumer item, a status symbol to be showed off like a set

of gold chains," Pooley wrote. But once a teenager had a weapon, he wanted to use it. "The gun want to get blood on itself. It want to get a body on it," a youth explained. And the kids coined an expression to describe life in their neighborhoods that were filled with child-men who had both fathered and killed. "Make a life, and take a life," they said.³¹

The relentless violence frightened and sickened the city, yet the mayor seemed helpless to respond. An obnoxious journalist asked Dinkins if he considered himself "the toughest mayor on crime the city has ever seen," as he had promised. "I will be," he answered. Other reporters in earshot laughed at the vow, so at odds with the daily headlines. The reaction angered the mayor. "The rest of them had at least four years, some have had eight years, some had 12 years. I've had seven months. So I say again, I will be," he shot back. But the incident told a story. Fairly or not, public patience had run out. Every bullet the city's faceless army of thugs fired wounded David Dinkins's authority. Under pressure, the mayor reversed his position from just a few weeks earlier during budget negotiations when he declined to increase the number of new officers planned for the next year. He announced he would cut other services to hire 1,058 additional police and put them on the street by April 1991. But he delayed any actual hiring until the police department completed a full analysis.³²

In August 1990, for nearly two days, hundreds of correction officers blocked all access to Rikers Island, the city's largest prison. The protest came in response to a vicious attack by inmates on one of the guards. The Bronx district attorney charged the assailants with robbery, assault, and other crimes but not attempted murder. The decision angered the corrections officers, who also fumed that Mayor Dinkins visited an injured police officer in the hospital on the day of the attack but not the badly battered correction officer. And they complained that budget cuts made their jobs unsafe.

The unruly guards disrupted meal deliveries, causing inmates to riot and to take over one of their dormitories. A melee followed involving 250 officers for more than two hours before tear gas canisters brought order to the chaos. Many of the officers had been stuck on duty for more than forty-eight hours because of the bridge blockade. The angry, exhausted guards lined up some of the rioters and systematically beat them with nightsticks in retaliation for the attack on their colleague and the disturbance that followed. Investigators found bloodstained corridors littered with blood-soaked clothes when they inspected the

site where the riot happened. Seventy-seven inmates went to local hospitals, and another forty-three required treatment at the prison—all with head injuries. The official report said all the prisoners had hurt themselves when they tripped over furniture while evacuating their cells. Twenty-one correction officers also required medical care. The justice system—a cornerstone of the structures that maintained social order among New York's nearly 7.5 million inhabitants—appeared ready to crack.³³

A few weeks after the Rikers Island riots, the US Open tennis tournament came to Queens. New York's number-one tennis fan traveled to Flushing Meadows by police helicopter, lampooned in the *New York Post* as an ill-considered display of the perquisites of the mayor's office. Twenty-two-year-old Brian Watkins, a tourist from Utah, traveled to the matches by subway. After spending a day enjoying the event with his mother and father, brother, and sister-in-law, the family headed out to a late supper at Tavern on the Green. While they stood on the subway platform at 53rd Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan waiting to head uptown, eight youths entered the station. They slashed open the pocket to the father's pants to grab his wallet and threw the mother to the ground and kicked her in the head. Brian and his twenty-five-year-old brother, Todd, fought back. One of the attackers stabbed Brian in the chest. Wounded, Brian chased the muggers down the platform, trailing blood as he ran. Less than an hour later, doctors at St. Vincent's Hospital pronounced him dead—the eighteenth corpse to exit the city's subway system that year. The boys who killed him needed the money to pay for an evening at Roseland Ballroom, a popular discotheque on West 52nd Street. Police found five of the hoodlums there later that night, seemingly unconcerned about the murder they had committed. Detectives arrested them on the spot and the others shortly afterward. Some belonged to a gang that required a mugging as an initiation rite. Perplexingly, some came from middle-class families not typically associated with the type of lethal violence they perpetrated, adding another layer of anxiety to the city's psyche.³⁴

The innocence of the victims—out-of-towners enjoying a sporting event—the universal empathy for a son protecting a mother viciously assaulted—the pain of a mother, father, and brother witnessing the final, sudden gasps of life of a son and brother—the descriptions of Brian from his Utah hometown as a good and caring person—the location of the murder in the heart of midtown Manhattan, far from the city's most violent streets—an attack on five people traveling

together, three of them men—the triviality of the motive, a night of dancing—combined to create a public reaction of despondent horror. Some wondered why anyone would visit New York, indeed, why anyone would live there.

Dinkins offered the family condolences and expressed sadness at the tragic event. In an effort to limit the damage publicity about the murder would cause to the city's reputation, Dinkins urged reporters to keep the ugly event in perspective. Other large cities suffered from worse crime than New York, he reminded them. The city found the reaction unacceptable. It hungered for outrage. The attempt to spin down the tabloid headlines backfired. It ignited "a press riot, which just destroyed everything in sight, burned down everything it saw," in the words of press secretary Albert Scardino.³⁵

The *New York Post* editorialized on September 6, 1990: "When thugs commit murder, not to eat, but to go dancing at Roseland—and actually carry out the killing after they've already secured the money—someone in a leadership post (the mayor, the governor, someone) has to step forward and articulate the moral outrage all of us feel." And the next day the newspaper captured the city's disgust and sense of helplessness with a front-page headline that read pointedly in big, bold letters: "Dave, Do Something." Inside the paper, editor Jerry Nachman, referring to past mayors LaGuardia, Lindsay, and Koch, wrote, "[E]ach man knew he was the embodiment of the city's spirit. Each man knew that, during crises, the people of New York wanted action and, if not action, the symbolic gestures of action that galvanize change." He suggested the mayor show New Yorkers "the private David Dinkins insiders know very well: a man with strong opinions, a sharp temper capable of angry words and much more than the courtly figure we see on television. It's time for a new style," the columnist declared.³⁶

The mayor responded to the plea to show his temper by telling reporters, "I've seen styles that I don't wish to emulate. I've seen styles that, frankly, I don't think were so great, albeit popular at the moment." It was a thinly veiled reference to Ed Koch, who criticized Dinkins in his column in the same edition of the *Post*. So did columnist Ray Kerrison. "As the city plunges deeper into its life-and-death crisis, as small children, ordinary citizens, law-enforcement officers, visitors, and cab drivers are shot down, stabbed, mugged, robbed, and raped with increasing ferocity, the mayor fiddles and muddles and contemplates what he might do," the journalist wrote. Frustrated, Dinkins rejected what he deemed impossible standards and unfair criticisms

in his trademark formal language. "How, pray tell, can people simply say, 'Oh, well, you're not doing anything and Rome's burning and we saw you playing tennis someplace,'" when he and his staff were working seven days a week on the city's intractable problems.³⁷

Despite his protests, the mayor knew he had to take action to restore confidence. The day after the dispiriting "Dave, Do Something" headline, Dinkins and police commissioner Lee Brown appeared at the New York headquarters of the federal Drug Enforcement Agency. They posed with senior law-enforcement officials in front of \$5 million in cash and a machine gun seized from heroin traffickers. The posturing generated a front-page photograph of the event and the headline, "Dave Comes Out Swinging." Cardinal O'Connor invited the mayor to address the congregation at St. Patrick's Cathedral the following Sunday. "I come to you . . . to ask for your help in defending the public order of our neighborhoods against an onslaught by antisocial forces that threaten to tear our city apart," the mayor said grimly. While pledging a stronger police response, he told his fellow New Yorkers we must "come out from behind the locks on our doors and the bars on our windows," and "recognize crime is our problem . . . and that it is up to us to create the solutions," he said. "Come out and put your eyes and ears on the streets; come out to help stop the violence," he pleaded from the pulpit. The cardinal called on priests to support a new initiative the mayor had launched called a "Night Out Against Crime." The idea was to encourage a critical mass of law-abiding citizens one night a week to walk the streets together and reclaim them from the city's thugs.³⁸

At a rally a few days later in East Harlem, the mayor again pledged more police, as well as more social programs to provide young people with better options than drugs and violence. And he told the gathering a personal story. "Some years back, in the 1950s, a young man was putting himself through law school, managing a liquor store in Harlem," the tale began. "One day, someone walked into the shop while the young store manager had his back to the counter. When he turned to help the customer, he faced a gun that appeared, to his fear-struck eyes, the size of a cannon." The young man, of course, was David Dinkins, who assured the crowd their mayor, sometimes accused of being detached and aloof, understood "the horror and injustice of facing a criminal head on, who threatens your life, who takes away your last bit of control." The gun barrel remained "permanently etched" in his mind, he said.³⁹

A few weeks later, *Time* magazine ran a lengthy story headlined, "The Decline of New York." The cover featured a drawing of a magnificent skyline beneath which all manner of muggings and crime unfolded. They labeled it, "The Rotting of the Big Apple." The article acknowledged the obvious: "New York's plunge into chaos cannot be blamed on Dinkins, who has been in office for only nine months. In fact, he has inherited the whirlwind sown by decades of benign neglect, misplaced priorities and outright incompetence at every level of government." But it went on to note, "[S]o far, Dinkins' lackluster performance has strengthened the unsettling sense that he is simply not up to his job." And the article offered an ominous conclusion. "Unchecked violence has already dulled the luster of the Big Apple. The daunting task before its leaders is to prevent it from rotting to the core."⁴⁰

New York magazine political editor Joe Klein faulted the mayor for inspiring the media feeding frenzy. "The art of politics . . . is to build public confidence through the illusion of mastery—to seem on top of things. . . . [O]ver the past few months, Dinkins has given the opposite impression. . . . Dinkins hasn't seemed vaguely in control, or even in the general neighborhood, as the city has careened into despair," he concluded. He returned to the theme with cutting wit in a year-end wrap-up article. "David Dinkins spent his first year in office behaving as if he were still city clerk. . . . Too often he seemed a visiting celebrity politician when the city needed a pro." In November the magazine Klein wrote for ran a special report titled, "How to Save New York." The city's problems "seem insurmountable now, because its leaders and common folk alike can see no path through today's intractable tangle of recession, crime, race, AIDS, and other woes," editor and publisher Edward Kosner wrote. It asked more than forty New Yorkers for ideas. They had some good ones, but implementing any would require leadership many feared the city lacked.⁴¹

III. Caution in a City Crying for Action

Dinkins's criminal justice team had been grappling with the relentless violence tearing at New York with the kind of dispassionate analysis that leads to carefully considered policy rather than with the sense of urgency an intolerable situation demanded. Lee Brown, the mayor's handpicked choice for police commissioner, an out-of-towner who needed to meet the department he would command and learn how it operated, had a low-key, thoughtful style consistent with the academic credentials he brought to the job. He had inherited a mess.

One journalist described the police force Brown agreed to run as “embattled, demoralized, and desperately in need of rejuvenation.” A former Bronx borough commander who had become Minneapolis police chief, Anthony Bouza summarized its situation succinctly. “The department is really screwed up. It’s been adrift for sixteen years. They’re bloated and superannuated at the top, and they’re not doing well on street crime at the bottom.”⁴²

Mayor Koch had talked tough on crime but did little to help control it. All departments, police included, bowed before budgets during his first term in office. He allowed the NYPD to decline by attrition until it bottomed out at fewer than 22,000 officers in 1981, compared with 31,700 cops before the city’s fiscal crisis. The department clawed its way back to nearly 26,000 by 1989, still well shy of the size needed to police nearly 7.5 million people. The department’s physical plant, vehicles, communication equipment, and resources had suffered similar fates. Koch’s first police commissioner, Bob McGuire, described his job as crime management by “smoke and mirrors.” He remembered learning one night that in the entire borough of Queens not one radio car was operating during the late tour, “a petrifying thought for a police commissioner.”⁴³

When McGuire stepped down, Koch appointed Ben Ward the city’s first black police commissioner. Ward had walked a beat for the NYPD for seven years, earned a college diploma and law degree, and then served in senior police administrative posts. John Lindsay named him the city’s traffic commissioner, and later Hugh Carey named him corrections commissioner for New York State, where Ward earned praise for cleaning up a troubled system. Koch named him head of the city housing police, and then head of the New York City corrections system before appointing him police commissioner. But the man had a reputation as a drinker and for erratic habits. He entertained lady friends in his city offices and at times lost contact with the departments he ran. His involvement in a controversial event during the Lindsay years—when black Muslims in Harlem shot two police officers and the department backed away from the scene fearing riots—caused the Patrolman’s Benevolent Association to distrust him.⁴⁴

Yet the man met Koch’s needs. “He’s black. There’s no question about that,” Koch said, patting Ward on the shoulder when he announced his selection to the press. “If that is helpful, isn’t that nice,” he told reporters, his ever tactless tongue in cheek. Koch needed an African American police commissioner to defuse a rising chorus of

accusations by 1984 that he and the police force he oversaw were racist. Ward qualified as the highest-ranking and most experienced African American insider available for the job. While some credit Ward for launching important internal reforms as commissioner, departmental corruption and serious crime both surged on his watch. The police force he left behind remained troubled and ineffective. Under Koch crime rose sharply between 1978 and 1981, dropped sharply between 1981 and 1985, and surged again between 1985 and 1989, when crack-related violence hit the streets. Lee Brown and Mayor Dinkins inherited a rising tide of lawlessness. As a matter of objective fact, they took office during the worst crime wave in the history of New York City.⁴⁵

The New York Police Department had nearly 26,000 officers when Brown became commissioner. For historic, anachronistic reasons separate departments policed the city’s subways and public-housing units. The extra officers helped, some 3,600 for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and 2,100 for the Housing Authority, but the surge of crime throughout the city overwhelmed its law-enforcement machinery. None doubted it needed an overhaul and more resources. Changing a bureaucracy that size and finding the money to do it presented formidable challenges.

Key decisions confronted Commissioner Brown. New York continued to assign two officers to every patrol car, while in many major cities police cruised solo, effectively doubling their presence. New York cops feared single-officer cars raised safety risks at a time when drug traffickers wielded ever more powerful weapons with growing impunity. Drug-intervention forces—tactical narcotics teams—that flooded specific areas for three months at a time to shut dealers down had grown from four hundred to almost two thousand officers. That cut into the resources needed to police city streets, leaving the department beneath the minimum levels required according to the chief of patrol. Taking into account days off, vacations, sick leave, court appearances, administrative tasks, and special units, no more than three thousand officers cruised the city at any one time. And emergency 911 calls—nearly four million a year—absorbed 90 percent of patrol-car resources. One criminologist saw breaking this pattern as fundamental. “It really becomes a question of who runs the police department. Do you want the department to set the priorities, or [whoever] picks up the phone?” The structure in place left almost no officers on the beat to act as visible deterrents to violence and illegal activity. It reduced

cops to the justice system equivalent of sanitation workers, picking up human debris only after crimes littered the streets.⁴⁶

Relations between the police and New Yorkers in black and Latino neighborhoods remained strained. The force the city's second African American commissioner commanded remained over 70 percent white. The mismatch created tension inside the department and out. The rise in violent crime led predictably to more police shootings, most easily justified. But the split-second decisions required of armed officers, some experienced and some not, inevitably led to a number of contentious cases of white cops shooting suspects of color. Law-abiding dark-skinned New Yorkers found the chance a cop would shoot them by accident unsettlingly high.⁴⁷

Brown's signature program idea, community-based policing, seemed designed to address many of the problems crippling the NYPD. It proposed to put patrolmen on the street to learn the neighborhoods they needed to protect, to prevent crimes before they occurred, and to create a relationship of trust and mutual support between police and residents. An outsider himself, Brown reached for a consummate insider to help him implement change.

The department had sent Raymond W. Kelly, the head of the NYPD Office of Management, Analysis, and Planning, to Texas to brief the incoming commissioner soon after the Houston chief agreed to accept the job. Kelly's first words of advice were, "[A]lways remember it's HOUSEton Street, not HEWSton Street." The story is more than just cute. Kelly likened the NYPD to the Vatican—a complex institution with its own traditions, culture, and rituals often difficult for outsiders to fathom. In addition to laying out facts and figures, Kelly began Brown's education in the ways of New York and its cops.⁴⁸

Kelly had grown up on the city streets, the youngest of five children. His father worked as a milkman when deliveries still took place by horse and cart and later as a shipbuilder and an Internal Revenue Service clerk. His mother worked as a fitting-room checker at Macy's. While Kelly was still a youth, the family moved from 91st Street and Columbus Avenue to Queens, where Kelly attended Catholic high school. He would earn an undergraduate degree from Manhattan College in the Bronx, and over the years, law degrees from St. John's and New York University, and a master's degree in public administration from Harvard.⁴⁹

In 1963 Kelly graduated first in his class from the New York Police Academy. By the time Brown met him, he had accumulated more than

twenty-six years of experience inside the department. He had also served in the United States Marine Corps, including twelve months of combat duty in Vietnam. He remained in the reserves for years afterward, reaching the rank of colonel. In a number of sensitive NYPD assignments, both in the field and in headquarters, Kelly demonstrated skill and judgment. More than once, commissioners reached to him for the booby-trapped task of cleaning up dirty precincts. He got the jobs done without losing any limbs. As the head of the planning office he had developed a keen awareness of virtually all areas of the organization's activities. "Kelly knows every button, lever and switch" of the department, one deputy chief said of the man. When Brown asked former commissioner Ben Ward who could help him negotiate his way through the land mine-littered corridors of New York's Police Department, he responded, "[T]here was one guy, Colonel Kelly." So in February the new commissioner named the forty-eight-year-old two-star commander his first deputy. The move made Kelly responsible for key management functions, including budgeting, personnel, and disciplinary actions. It leapfrogged him over several of higher rank.⁵⁰

Robert J. Johnston, Jr., chief of department and the highest-ranking uniformed official on the force, remained in his role, reporting directly to the commissioner. Kelly previously had reported to Johnston and was considerably his junior. The chief, whom some described as a man with a "larger than life ego," reinforced his understanding of his role with the commissioner. He made it clear that he would answer only to the department's top official and that police operations and tactics rested outside the bounds of the first deputy's authority. Only in the absence or disability of the commissioner, or at the commissioner's explicit direction, or under certain circumstances at the scene of a large-scale incident, was the first deputy allowed to assume responsibility for the department's activities. Kelly, a consummate professional with a marine's respect for chain of command, honored the strictly cast lines of authority.⁵¹

Also in February Dinkins named Milton Mollen deputy mayor for public safety. The newly created post signaled the importance the mayor placed on combating crime. Born in Brooklyn the son of Russian immigrants, Mollen was part of what Tom Brokaw would enshrine as the "Greatest Generation." The day after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Mollen enlisted and became a navigator in the US Army Air Corps. When the war ended, the Brooklyn boy went to college and law school at St. John's under the GI bill. He ended up working with a

politically connected lawyer named Dennis Hurley. In 1951 Hurley and his team, working for Queens County Democratic leader James Roe, got an upstart challenging the organization's candidate for a judgeship disqualified from the ballot. A short time later, Roe arranged for Mayor Vincent Impellitteri to name Hurley as corporation counsel. Mollen went with him.⁵²

Mollen remained at the corporation counsel when Robert F. Wagner became mayor in 1954, and in time became a trusted advisor. When Robert Moses ran afoul of neighborhood activists with heavy-handed slum-clearance tactics, Wagner reached to Mollen to create the Housing and Redevelopment Board, an agency charged with overseeing the sensitive process of forcing people out of substandard housing to allow construction of new apartments. Mollen became the general counsel and then chairman, traveling to all of the city's neighborhoods to meet with local elected officials, community leaders, city administrators, and state and federal authorities. In Harlem he met Basil Patterson, Percy Sutton, Charles Rangel, and David Dinkins. In 1965, John Lindsay's mayoral campaign manager, Robert Price, tapped Mollen to run for city comptroller on the Republican and Liberal lines to add a Jewish Democrat to the ticket for ethnic and political balance. Mollen lost but went on to become a highly respected judge and the presiding justice of the Appellate Division of the state's Second Judicial Department in Brooklyn by the time Dinkins took office.⁵³

By then Mollen had reached the mandatory retirement age of seventy, and he was planning to enter private practice when the mayor asked him to serve as his coordinator of criminal justice. Mollen had worked with others who held that role in the past, including some highly competent people. They never proved effective. In his judgment the position lacked the clout to get things done. "If you leave it in its current form, not only do I not want the job, but my advice to you is abolish it," he told the mayor. Dinkins, convinced that the city's sprawling criminal justice system needed better coordination, asked Mollen how the role could be improved. Make it a deputy mayor, Mollen advised, so people will know that when your man speaks, he speaks with authority. Dinkins agreed, and a few days later Mollen accepted the job he had upgraded for himself with responsibility for coordinating activities across the city's many law-enforcement agencies—police, corrections, probation, and juvenile justice departments—as well as the district attorneys operating across the five boroughs.⁵⁴

In April the Metropolitan Transportation Authority attracted William Bratton to head up the transit police department. Bratton had earned a reputation as a charismatic and innovative head of the Boston transit police, leadership qualities the New York system sought to import. His arrival added more competent talent to the city's pool of senior police officials.⁵⁵

The team in place appeared strong, yet results did not follow rapidly. Police commissioner Brown had begun assessing the department's situation almost as soon as he arrived. By May the conflict between the need to add more police to protect the besieged city and the financial reality of a budget crisis came to a head. The mayor instructed Brown to provide a comprehensive report on police manpower and strategy by October 1, 1990, including an assessment of what it would cost to police the city properly and a plan for financing it.⁵⁶

Four months was not a long time to assess a department as complex as the NYPD, something that had not been done for two decades. But it was a very long time to wait for New Yorkers, who felt their lives threatened daily. "Six months after taking office with a mandate from the Mayor to 'take back our streets and our parks, by night as well as by day,' Police Commissioner Lee P. Brown, while well regarded, has yet to show that he can make a difference," *New York Times* reporter Ralph Blumenthal wrote in August 1990. "Even some supporters say that in the process of analyzing the department and formulating his plans . . . [Brown] has shed little of the stranger's aura of mystery that clings to him and his program, to the detriment of public confidence." One former department official had "no question he knows exactly what he's doing—he just hasn't shared it." He found the man an enigma.⁵⁷

Communication challenges emerged. After one press conference, a reporter present wrote, "Brown spoke like a college professor with tenure, his words a dense fog engulfing the journalists." Without clearer messages and a more forceful presence, some feared the commissioner would lose public confidence and his program would fail. Insiders wondered if his inexperience in New York's rough-and-tumble politics and budget battles left the NYPD disadvantaged at a time of exceptionally high stakes for the department and the city. It did not help that Brown accepted the role of president of the International Association of Police Chiefs, which often caused him to travel away from the city. Just as in Houston, New York critics dubbed him, "Out-of-Town Brown."⁵⁸

A few weeks before Brian Watkins's murder, Brown could point to a number of steps he had already taken to protect New Yorkers

more effectively. A ten-member Community Patrol Officer Program had been established in all seventy-five precincts around the city to put additional cops on the beat, with more to come. The department established overtime commitments for seven high-crime districts. All desk-duty detectives and officers spent one day a week on patrol, and low-priority 911 calls were being redirected to telephone units to take reports rather than dispatching radio cars. Officers were scheduled to change to steady shifts rather than rotate through three different eight-hour shifts—the wheel—that disrupted their lives and made them less effective. Special training and new procedures had been established for police shootings. Still Brown acknowledged what the city knew. These steps did not measure up to the task. The department needed a more substantial renovation and more resources to confront the crime epidemic terrorizing New York. “I think we’ve pulled our rabbits out of the hat. We have to face the fact that we are understaffed,” First Deputy Kelly told a reporter. Meanwhile, the analysis, and the killings, continued.⁵⁹

After Brian Watkins’s murder, public outrage caused politicians of all stripes to call for more cops. “The time for exquisite analysis is passed,” Governor Cuomo said. City council speaker Peter Vallone determined to wait no longer for a comprehensive initiative. He proposed the city hire five thousand more police over three years and pay for it with hiring freezes, service cuts, increased property taxes, and other sources. The *New York Times* responded to Vallone’s initiative by excoriating the mayor and his studious police commissioner. While pointing out some meaningful flaws in the speaker’s proposal, the paper called it a plausible reaction to an intolerable situation, while declaring

Mayor Dinkins has yet to do even that much. In response to rising public concern he promised earlier this summer to add 1,058 cops, then assigned Police Commissioner Lee Brown to conduct an exhaustive study of the Police Department’s needs. Now the mayor hesitates, pending the release of Mr. Brown’s report in October. . . . In terms of perceptions and public confidence, Mr. Dinkins’s call for patience seems weak and aloof. If he and Mr. Brown don’t know and can’t explain the basic points of an anticrime program by now, they can’t expect to retain the public’s trust.⁶⁰

Around the same time, stray bullets killed a thirty-year-old Bronx assistant district attorney, Sean Healey, who had been buying doughnuts at a grocery store near the borough’s courthouses.⁶¹

The mayor and his police commissioner stubbornly resisted the bullying by the city’s tabloids and editorial pages. Dinkins remained steadfastly committed to a comprehensive program that placed the need to police the streets in the broader context of a far-flung and complex criminal justice system. He insisted the plan take into account the predictable fallout more police would have on the rest of the city’s law-enforcement machinery—five district attorneys, civil and criminal courts, jails, probation officers, drug treatment centers, and so on—without which the additional cops could not be effective. He also wanted prevention programs directed toward young, disadvantaged youths who tended to commit the most violent crimes. Offered better options and responsible supervision, the mayor believed many young men could be convinced to follow a smarter path than the downward spiral of violence and prison followed by a vastly reduced chance for a productive life. In the tough budget environment the city faced, the mayor feared if he separated the demand for more cops from the rest of the services a comprehensive program required, he would never secure the votes he needed from the city council and the state legislature to finance them. “There was going to be only one bite at the apple,” First Deputy Mayor Norman Steisel remembered. “We had to get it right.”⁶²

Commissioner Brown delivered his report as planned, and on October 2, 1990, Dinkins released the details of his administration’s “Safe Streets, Safe City: Cops and Kids” program in an eloquent speech. “Fear is the ugliest of emotions,” he declared. “It is the child of ignorance and the father of hatred. It can spawn intolerance, greed and disorder. Unchecked, it may become the greatest criminal of all, robbing us of every freedom, crushing our birthright and burning our future before us. . . . Well, we are here tonight to present our battle plan against fear.” The proposal, developed by First Deputy Kelly and a team of seventy city and police department analysts and officers, called for expanding the city’s effective patrol presence by more than nine thousand cops through a number of measures. In addition to hiring six thousand more police for the NYPD, the transit, and the housing police, the plan called for reassignment of many tasks performed by uniformed officers to civilians or other agencies, notably the traffic and corrections departments, freeing up three thousand more officers. Kelly and Brown knew that to secure financing for the expansive initiative, their analysis had to be thorough and defensible. The team developed the staffing numbers through systematic analysis of the tasks required to protect the city, the time each one took, and

the optimum level of expertise and training each one needed. They built the assessment position by position, precinct by precinct. The plan would put cops on the street in numbers not seen in New York for many years with a clear commitment to community policing. The program's subtheme, "Cops and Kids," resonated powerfully with the mayor. Teens with access to gyms or involved in organized activities and after-school programs with competent adult supervision would not find themselves walking the streets at night, creating deadly mischief as a source of entertainment, he reasoned.⁶³

The cost of the initiative—the uniformed officers and the civilians plus additional youth services—amounted to nearly \$650 million a year as originally conceived. It was money the city did not have that the mayor would have to find in his own bare coffers or in the emaciated budget of the state. Even after various revisions scaled back some aspects of the program and extended the timing of others, the incremental cost totaled an estimated \$1.8 billion over six years.⁶⁴

For a time, the thoughtful and forceful plan to take back the streets restored the mayor's credibility. Some weeks after he announced it, he spoke at the Citizens Crime Commission. "While some may argue with my timing, quibble with the way I communicate, or quarrel with specific program or funding choices," the mayor said, "no one can dispute that my priorities—adding more cops and protecting and educating our kids—reflect the prevailing sentiments of an overwhelming majority of New Yorkers." Yet before long negotiations regarding the financing for the initiative began to drag. Recalcitrant Republicans in the state senate tried to force the city to commit to specific numbers of police in their districts. Then inconsistencies in budget reports created the specter of the city using the program as an excuse to raise taxes without a clear commitment to hire the cops promised. The negotiations dragged on into the next year before the fiscal provisions passed and the plan could move forward. The state senate-induced delay diminished the sense that the city's chief executive had seized control of the public safety issue.⁶⁵

Then the mayor's office slowed down the bold hiring plans even after they had been approved and financing for them secured because of the relentless budget crisis. Replacement hiring of police continued, and previously planned increases in the levels of cops occurred. The number of uniformed officers grew to nearly twenty-nine thousand from twenty-six thousand. But the first cadets actually hired under

"Safe Streets, Safe City" would not enter the academy for training until August 1993. They would not hit the streets of New York until February 1994. The people footing the extra tax bill and suffering the consequences of crime without the benefit of the additional police took note of the delay. The president of the Real Estate Board of New York, Stephen Spinola, wrote to Deputy Mayor Barry Sullivan on March 23, 1993, following a lunch meeting. "We have analyzed the implementation of the [Safe Streets, Safe City] program in the numerous budget documents and SSSC reports. . . . Our concern about the implementation of the program has been very simple. The additional officers have not been hired. . . . We have paid too much and waited too long for the hiring of these additional officers," he wrote. Spinola accused the administration of "pure sophistry" when budget officials pointed to classes of recruits hired in accordance with historic commitments and in response to attrition as if those cadets represented the additional forces some \$432 million in incremental taxes already paid were meant to fund. A month after Spinola wrote his letter, the state comptroller's office launched an audit "to measure the extent to which the funding obtained by the Safe Streets/Safe City legislation has resulted in an increase in the presence of the police on the streets of the City." So the comprehensive, thoughtful plan helped the administration briefly, but budget-constrained, disingenuous implementation hurt it.⁶⁶

Shortly before Christmas 1990 the new transit police chief, William Bratton, asked the MTA board to allow his officers to carry nine-millimeter semiautomatic weapons instead of thirty-eight-caliber revolvers. The new weapons carried more bullets and could be fired and reloaded faster than the old ones. Bratton claimed his officers needed them to match the arms drug dealers used. At the urging of the NYPD, Mayor Dinkins opposed the change, fearing the additional firepower would cause an increase in accidental shootings, and he tried to convince the MTA to vote down the proposal. Bratton disarmed the mayor's effort to block the weapons upgrade by announcing he would order his officers to use lower-power, hollow-point ammunition to reduce the likelihood of strays ricocheting or bullets piercing targets and causing unintended damage. The board approved the proposal. The event made the mayor look like a soft-on-crime political weakling. As 1990 wound to a close, police tabulated 2,245 murders—the most killings in any single year on record.⁶⁷

IV. A Brief Respite

In April 1991 more than two thousand cadets finished training and prepared for active duty. The new officers constituted replacements for the normal levels of attrition the department experienced. The mayor, presenting them as tangible evidence of the city's commitment to combat crime, declared them "the finest as far as the people of New York are concerned; the finest as far as their Mayor is concerned." The event took place in the backlash of the brutal March 3, 1991, beating of an African American motorist named Rodney King by Los Angeles police. A bystander had captured the event on videotape, and news stations had aired it repeatedly all across the country. To loud applause Dinkins declared that the L.A. cops caught on film "are not good cops.... They are not your friends. They have crossed the line from being protectors to being avengers and have themselves become a public menace." He urged the new recruits to avoid becoming "burned-out bullies with billy clubs."⁶⁸

The line between necessary force and abuse of police power remained as faint as it had ever been in New York. Unlike his predecessor, who engaged in endless rhetorical executions of criminals and sided with the police in the absence of compelling evidence otherwise, Dinkins expressed concern for the consequences of aggressive police actions. For many, weary of living in an unsafe city, the mayor's emphasis seemed misplaced. Others, however, shared the mayor's anxieties about police misconduct. Some months before the graduation ceremony, the Manhattan district attorney's office "had quietly created a special unit to handle police misconduct cases, including accusations of brutality and corruption, which the unit's chief said are rising sharply," according to the *New York Times*.⁶⁹

Some signs of progress emerged through the despair that surrounded the battle against violence and crime in the early part of the Dinkins administration. At year-end 1990, the New York State Department of Substance Abuse reported that the surging crack epidemic, perceived as a central factor in the crime wave, had peaked. While still an enormous problem, it had stopped growing, and evidence suggested the use of the cocaine derivative had declined along with the destructive activity associated with it. In April 1991, when the police published figures for the prior year, they confirmed the city suffered a record level of murders, as well as robbery and car thefts, but reports of assaults, burglary, and larceny all dropped by modest amounts from the prior

year. The numbers offered hope that the wave of illegal activity had begun to crest. During the first three months of 1991, major crimes fell by more than 7 percent. The actual levels of violence continued to intimidate, but the relentless increases had stopped—and reversed. During intense budget negotiations through the spring and into early summer, Dinkins made his commitment to restore public safety clear, virtually exempting the police department while other city agencies endured severe cuts. The mayor and his public safety team seemed to be less often on the defensive and instead appeared focused on implementing their comprehensive program to confront the violence so damaging to the fabric of the city.⁷⁰

In May 1991 at Tompkins Square Park in a fringe neighborhood on the Lower East Side, police tried to prevent a group carrying open beer bottles from entering the park during a rock concert. A melee followed, with people throwing bottles, lighting fires, and looting a pharmacy. The conflict brought with it reminders of a 1988 incident in the same place that left fifty people hurt and thirty-one arrested and generated more than 120 complaints of police brutality. Over the years, the park had attracted a gathering of homeless who lived there and also a group of young radicals sporting punk rock haircuts, body piercings, and anarchist tendencies. They asserted squatters' rights in abandoned buildings nearby and looked for opportunities to challenge authority for the sake of it. They organized demonstrations on behalf of the homeless that had little meaning for those they purported to represent. "We don't have time for protests," one of the men living in the park told a reporter. "We're not the purple-hair homeless. We're not let's pretend homeless. We're the authentic homeless." A local officer confirmed the situation. "The homeless were never the problem. It's those young people who are calling us names," he told a reporter. The Koch administration had given up trying to restore order to the park and allowed an uneasy truce to prevail among homeless, anarchists, and residents. A few weeks after the May 1991 melee, Dinkins ordered the bulk of the park closed for renovations, forcing the homeless and others to move out. Local residents split on the decision. Some found it harsh and inconvenient, while others welcomed it, but most New Yorkers took it as a sign the city intended to reclaim its public space and applauded. The city also removed the homeless from Columbus Circle at 59th Street, where an outdoor café was scheduled to open. The two locations "were symbols of a city out of control," Deputy

Mayor Barbara Fife told a reporter, and the mayor wanted order reestablished.⁷¹

Around the same time Bryant Park, the backyard of the New York Public Library, partially reopened. It had closed for renovations under Mayor Koch, at a time when homeless men and drug pushers had commandeered it. "Splendiferously" restored about a year later, in the words of one reporter, New Yorkers marveled at the transformation. Subtle but important architectural changes opened the space directly to the sidewalks and streets around it. The openness drew good people in and exposed the bad ones to the eyes of private security workers. "The social transformation of Bryant Park is as astonishing as its architectural evolution," Paul Goldberger would write in the *New York Times*. "Where once the park was the home of derelicts, drug dealers and drug users, it is now awash with office workers, shoppers, strollers and readers from the New York Public Library next door." At the same time, he noted, the space had "not been gentrified beyond all reason . . . the poor do not appear to have been driven out of the park, but merely to have begun to share it." So a sense of order returned to another prime patch of city land.⁷²

Mayor Dinkins and his team had a feel-good moment in June 1991 when the city hosted an enormous celebration for the servicemen and women who fought in the Gulf War. *New York Times* reporter Robert D. McFadden described the event as "a magnificent blizzard of ticker tape, patriotism and affection in a homecoming parade up lower Broadway's Canyon of Heroes." Crowds chanted "USA! USA! USA!" in an outpouring of national emotion and pride. "It's a great day to be back home in New York," Harlem-born and Bronx-raised General Colin L. Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a reporter. Incredibly, the police estimated nearly five million people lined the route that stretched from Battery Park to Worth Street. They called it the largest crowd for a single event in city history. Dinkins called it "the mother of all parades" and spent the day reveling in the attention. The event ended late in the evening with fireworks lighting the night over the East River and dazzling displays of color exploding over the skylines of Manhattan and Brooklyn. "I've never experienced anything like this," one private told a reporter. "The City of New York has spoiled us," he gushed.⁷³

Journalist Joe Klein detected deeper meaning in "New York's big, sloppy wet kiss to the returning heroes." He found them "a source of pride, a reminder . . . of what America *hoped* it would be all about."

In his view, "The contrast between that spirit and the despair gnawing away at the vitals of the city was part of what made the parade so moving, so much of a surprise. The hunger for heroes, for leaders—for an aggressive attack on our toughest problems—seems manifest and profound. But sadly, the mayor mopes and dithers."⁷⁴

V. A Collision of Religion and Race

A few weeks after the spectacular parade on July 16, 1991, someone firebombed the Fillmore Real Estate Office in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn, a solidly middle-class Jewish and Italian neighborhood. Successful African Americans seeking the comfort and safety Canarsie offered had been slowly moving in for some time. Most residents took the arrival of black newcomers in stride. The attitude seemed to be that anyone who could afford to buy a home there—they sold for \$200,000 or so—would probably be okay as neighbors. But a violent minority of locals felt otherwise. They adopted intimidation tactics, hoping to scare whites from selling homes to blacks and to terrorize African Americans into staying away. More than a dozen bias incidents occurred between the beginning of July and the first weeks of August, including a second firebomb at the Fillmore Real Estate Firm on July 27. The pattern made clear the violence came from an organized group, not the spontaneous actions of individuals. Reverend Al Sharpton rallied his marchers and, protected by four hundred police, walked Canarsie's streets chanting, "No justice! No peace!" Three dozen white youths paced alongside yelling, "White Power!" "Go Back to Africa!" and other insults. Some held up watermelons. One precociously malicious eleven-year-old boy told a reporter, "Everybody here hates Al Sharpton. We'd like to kill him." Mayor Dinkins met with local leaders a few days before the march to try to defuse the situation, while city community workers distributed anti-bias literature. Tensions continued to simmer. A third bomb would hit Fillmore in September.⁷⁵

The violence in Canarsie coincided with a rising sense of crisis in the relationship between blacks and Jews across the country, nowhere with greater intensity than in New York City. The special bond that connected the two minorities during the height of the civil rights movement—much romanticized, exaggerated, and simplified later on, but real enough at the time—had become badly worn. The morally pure crusade against racial oppression enforced by the rule of law solidified the connection between the two groups in the 1950s and early 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s, the civil rights movement evolved into

a far more ambiguous and controversial quest for social and political justice. The relationship between blacks and Jews evolved as well, and not in a good way.⁷⁶

Natural resentments born of the very different stations in society the two groups enjoyed had receded during the shared experiences of freedom rides, sit-ins, and marches. As those moments became memories, the resentments resurfaced. Nowhere were the differences more apparent than in New York City, with its huge and enormously successful Jewish population. The teachers who determined if African American students passed or failed and the landlords who collected the rent and evicted black tenants who could not pay were often Jews. The small business owners who fixed the salaries of black workers, the supervisors who decided which African Americans advanced and which did not, the social workers who controlled the flow of government resources as often as not in New York were Jews. The black writer James Baldwin once explained the situation in arresting language. "[J]ust as a society must have a scapegoat, so hatred must have a symbol. Georgia has the Negro and Harlem has the Jew." A certain level of black bitterness seemed the inevitable result of the asymmetric relationship. That in turn caused Jews to feel unappreciated for the commitment they had shown to civil rights' battles, including dangerous ones in which lives were risked.⁷⁷

Black militancy that emerged out of the 1960s intensified the distrust. Aggressive African American demands for fundamental change threatened anyone benefitting from the status quo, including Jews. Tangible issues, like the battle for local control of schools in New York, or more general ones, like broad-based demands for greater economic and social justice, challenged an established order. An evolving sense of identity traced African American roots back to Africa and its liberation movements. For some black leaders that led to a sense of solidarity with Palestinian aspirations for a homeland. They felt a symbolic connection to a group perceived as forcibly oppressed by Israelis, a European people like the ones who dominated blacks in the United States for centuries. Tensions with Jews inevitably followed.⁷⁸

The general tone of race relations, and between Jews and blacks in particular, deteriorated in New York City during Mayor Koch's twelve years in office. He engaged in aggravated public dialogue with the city's African American elected officials, as well as with more militant leaders. Many of them responded in unconstructive kind. The flow of violence streaming through New York with its racial crosscurrents

exacerbated tensions. Periodic anti-Semitic rants from black leaders added considerably to the hostile atmosphere. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan's description of Judaism as a gutter religion and of Adolf Hitler as a great man topped the list of nasty statements. Jesse Jackson's less vicious but still highly offensive reference to New York as "Hymietown" came from a man who presented himself as a serious candidate for president of the United States. That raised the stakes of the damage.⁷⁹

"Black anti-Semitism and Jewish antiblack racism are real, and both are as profoundly American as cherry pie," Princeton scholar of race in America, Cornel West, would write. By the early 1990s, the relationship between the two groups, once characterized by an appreciation of "common histories of oppression and degradation" that "served as a springboard for genuine empathy and alliances," had reached a "nadir," he concluded. It was in the midst of this troubled atmosphere that African American City College professor Leonard Jeffries launched a battery of verbal missiles at New York City's Jews.⁸⁰

Jeffries belonged to a group of scholars who studied African American history as an expression of black nationalism. After earning his PhD in political science from Columbia University, he produced few scholarly publications. He established his reputation instead on the basis of a dynamic and provocative lecturing style. When City College created a department of African American studies, he became chairman with an immediate grant of tenure. Along the way Jeffries articulated a fantastic theory about the races. Blacks were the "sun people," possessed of an abundance of melanin that gave them intellectual, creative, and physical advantages over whites. Caucasians were the "ice people," a materialistic, warlike, and greedy race representing the "cold rigid element in world history."⁸¹

Despite the dubious quality of his scholarship, Jeffries ended up a consultant to a New York State Department of Education curricula committee in 1990. Concerns that the state's social studies program lacked sufficient attention to the role of racial minorities in American history caused education commissioner Thomas Sobol to appoint a task force to develop a more inclusive one. Jeffries offered a scathing indictment of what the state's schools taught, saying, "[T]he spillover of racism into the American education system has been so profound that it has produced the 'Miseducation of America.'" He presented his conclusions in harsh, accusatory tones that generated controversy, backlash, and publicity that the man clearly enjoyed.⁸²

In a rambling lecture at the Empire State Black Arts and Cultural Festival in Albany on July 20, 1991, Jeffries indicted the state's history curriculum. Some "very nice white folks . . . who go to church and the synagogue . . . didn't hesitate to distort history in what I call a racial pathology," he said. Education in America, he declared, was "designed to support the system of white supremacy," making it "the sacred mission [of] . . . black folks" to change it. The complete "denigration" of African Americans in the movies, he announced, "was a conspiracy planned and plotted and programmed out of Hollywood, where people called Greenberg and Weisberg and Trigliani and whatnot . . . put together a system of destruction of black people." "We went to the movies every Saturday and saw native Americans being wiped out and Africans being denigrated. . . . It was by design. It was calculated," he asserted accusatorily, by "Russian Jewry [who] had a particular control over the movies and their financial partners, the Mafia." Together, he insisted, they "put together a system of destruction of black people."⁸³

Jeffries denounced as "slick and devilish" three members of the curricula committee, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Arthur Schlesinger, Harvard scholar of ethnicity Nathan Glazer, and Columbia University urban historian Kenneth T. Jackson, who dissented from the committee's conclusions. They thought some of the recommendations had been based on inaccurate representations of American life and were unconstructively divisive to teach to youngsters. Jeffries also denounced US assistant education secretary Diane Ravitch, who had advised the commission. A renowned Texas-born scholar of education in America, and New York City's schools in particular, Ravitch had objected to history that branded everyone as "either a descendant of victims or oppressors," fearing the practice fanned "ancient hatreds" and recreated them in each new generation. Jeffries responded by calling her "the new standard" for cultural oppression of African Americans. "The old standard," he explained, "was a Bible Belt Texas rural family. . . . Now the standard is . . . a sophisticated Texas Jew." Jeffries managed to work denunciations of Albert Shanker and Ed Koch into his speech as well, and he reported that the "head Jew at City College, Dr. Bernard Somer," had confirmed to him that "everybody knows rich Jews helped finance the slave trade" as his justification for teaching the subject in his classes.⁸⁴

Unsurprisingly, the provocative, fantastic speech generated a powerful response. Many called for City College to dismiss the man. Others denounced his ideas but believed academic freedom of speech

so important it trumped even Jeffries's foul classroom diatribes. Some dismissed the man's significance. "If you talk about the scholarly community as represented by the academy, Len probably isn't taken that seriously," one black professor who declined to be identified told a journalist. "Many people would think of him as a polemicist rather than a scholar." The presence at City College of another professor, Michal Levin, who promoted white-superiority doctrines, only made matters worse. Eventually, City College administrators reappointed Jeffries to his department chairmanship for a limited eight-month term instead of the standard three years. When it expired, they forced him to step down from his departmental role while maintaining his position as a tenured professor. Jeffries filed a suit in federal court claiming the action violated his civil rights. A jury found in his favor.⁸⁵

Black-Jewish tensions weighed heavily in the sweltering New York City summer air on August 19, 1991, when *New York Newsday* ran a front-page article under the title, "Blacks and Jews: What Went Wrong." African American columnist Sheryl McCarthy wrote, "[T]he recent furor over the Leonard Jeffries affair has shed light on the growing mistrust, even contempt, with which some members of these groups view each other." In her article, McCarthy recounted the many decades of collaboration and partnership between blacks and Jews in opposition to discrimination. She catalogued the many sources of mutual resentment as well. In conclusion, she wrote, "[T]he biggest point of contention . . . the one that cuts the deepest, is the unspoken competition of which group has suffered more," the Jews who survived centuries of anti-Semitism and the holocaust, or blacks who endured hundreds of years of brutal slavery. The sad result was that "two groups that should be working together, find themselves increasingly polarized."⁸⁶

Such was the state of relations between blacks and Jews in New York City on Monday, August 19, 1991, captured in the headline that filled the front page of the tabloid sitting on newsstands in Brooklyn, when a Grand Marquis station wagon collided with a Chevrolet Malibu and caused Crown Heights to erupt.

Every Monday evening for many years, Grand Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson, world leader of Lubavitch Judaism, visited the graves of his wife and of his father-in-law, who had been his predecessor. A three-vehicle motorcade, led by an NYPD cruiser from the 71st Precinct in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, escorted him to the cemetery and home again. Yosef Lifsch, a young Hasidic man driving the chase

car with three additional passengers on August 19, 1991, accelerated through the intersection of President Street and Utica Avenue, trying to keep up with the two lead vehicles. He claimed the traffic light had just turned yellow from green. Others said it shone red. As he sped up, a car entering the intersection from another direction struck his station wagon, causing him to careen onto the sidewalk. His car struck and killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old black boy kneeling on the sidewalk, repairing the chain on his bicycle. The car injured the boy's seven-year-old cousin, Angela, too.

Police, a Hasidic-sponsored Hatzoloh volunteer ambulance, and several city emergency vehicles arrived on the tense scene within minutes. A crowd of African Americans had already gathered, menacing the hapless driver involved in the accident and his passengers. The police ordered the Jewish ambulance to remove the Hasidic men from the area to protect them and to defuse the tensions their presence caused. "Get your people out of here or they'll all be killed," a cop told the Hatzoloh driver, according to one report. City EMS officers along with another Hatzoloh volunteer tended to the victims. But the image of Jewish men leaving the scene in a Jewish ambulance while the black children they struck lay dead or injured infuriated the crowd. Rumors began to circulate that no one provided any help to the two youngsters. Decades-long embers of resentment flamed into violence. The accident occurred at 8:20 p.m. Not long after nine o'clock, callers began inundating the police department's 911 switchboard with reports of a riot. The calls continued for four days.⁸⁷

Crown Heights had been home to African Americans since freed slaves moved there to farm early in the nineteenth century. Over time, successive waves of Irish, Jewish, Italian, and other immigrants moved into the area, which became home to moderately well-to-do newcomers for several decades after World War I. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, white working-class New Yorkers began moving to the suburbs. The neighborhood became predominantly African American and heavily Caribbean as well. Large numbers of West Indians immigrated there, bringing with them immigrant discipline and ambition, along with social structures and cultural values specific to the various islands. The Orthodox Jews in the area belonged to Chabad Lubavitch, an East European Hasidic sect that fled the Nazi holocaust in the 1940s. They brought their traditions and their belief in a rabbinical dynasty with them to Brooklyn, where they established their worldwide headquarters at 777 Eastern Parkway. Since their religion

strictly forbids use of motor vehicles on the Sabbath, its members clustered near headquarters. When other white New Yorkers left the area, the Lubavitch stayed. They numbered ten to fifteen thousand or more of the two hundred thousand who lived in the community, but the impact of the group's presence far exceeded its numbers.

The Lubavitch believed themselves the leaders of a historic, divinely mandated mission on behalf of all Jews. Their distinctive dress—black suits, white shirts, wide-brimmed, black fedora hats, curled side burns, and long beards for the men, and wigs and dark full-length dresses for the women—followed nineteenth-century East European customs. Such anachronistic traditions, coupled with extreme devotion to the Torah and Jewish law, made the group highly insular. They discouraged their children from contact with people outside the sect and built a fully developed social infrastructure to manage their affairs with minimum reliance on others. The grand rebbe at one point forbid the Lubavitch to move from the neighborhood and strongly discouraged followers from selling property to outsiders. Indeed, tensions arose surrounding high-pressure tactics by the Lubavitch to expand their real estate holdings in the community. The Lubavitch, in their own minds, constituted a small minority surrounded by a sea of often hostile others. They felt constantly at risk of attack because of their distinctive appearance and practices and the ever-present reality of anti-Semitism in the minds of a people who fled the Nazis. To survive, they needed to band together and to use the strength of their ties to their community to compensate for their limited numbers.

The police escort for the grand rebbe's visits to the cemetery had emerged initially during the Lindsay administration when a competing group of Hasidim threatened the Lubavitch leader's life. Over time, the privilege had taken on great symbolic importance. The sect's members did not view the police protection as an act of special consideration but rather recognition befitting the leader of a worldwide religious movement, much the same way the police escort the Pope. Black residents who observed the weekly demonstration of influence saw it as a double standard made all the more offensive by the generally intolerable level of crime they experienced and the inadequate police protection they received themselves.

Mayor Abe Beame, himself a Brooklyn Jew of East European heritage, keenly understood the intense cohesion of the Lubavitch and the political significance of ten thousand or more committed followers. He extended additional privileges to the group. The city closed certain

roads on the Jewish Sabbath, ignoring the inconvenience it caused others, and Beame agreed to reorganize the structure of the area's advisory boards to create Community Board Nine, generally perceived as a move to provide the Lubavitch with a district over which they could exert influence. Whether the decision actually accomplished much is unclear. But it created the distinct impression the city treated the Hasidic in Crown Heights one way and other citizens lacking the same degree of cohesion and access another. Mayor Koch tempered the relationship between the Lubavitch and the government some, but the suspicions and resentments surrounding the group in Crown Heights remained intense.

Activities unrelated to government exacerbated the problem. Hasidic neighborhood-watch groups designed to protect their community in an unacceptably lawless New York struck some blacks as vigilante committees aimed at them. Brooklyn reverend Herbert Daughtry accused the Lubavitch groups of cowardly violence against blacks—assaulting women and children, but “seldom . . . men,” and then “only in droves.” He organized African American patrols in response, announcing provocatively that when “men meet men, we will see what the people in the long black coats will do.” The Hasidic volunteer ambulance corps, Hatzoloh, appeared to some a statement that the Lubavitch valued the lives of their own but not others. And the particular tension between the Lubavitch and African Americans took place in the context of general feelings of unfair treatment from the city and by the police common among black New Yorkers. A 1984 Carnegie Corporation report described Crown Heights as “awash in a sea of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and violent conflict.” In 1987 some five hundred blacks marched on Eastern Parkway and compared the Lubavitch to South Africa's ruling Afrikaners. In 1988, after the slashing of a Hasidic man and an attack by blacks on a group of Yeshiva students, two hundred Lubavitch stormed the 71st Precinct to demand more protection.⁸⁸

When the grand rebbe's motorcade struck Gavin and Angela Cato and the Hatzoloh ambulance spirited the men responsible away from the scene of the killing amid rumors that the medical technicians had refused to treat the injured children, leaving one to die, the long-standing resentments exploded. At the site of the accident, blacks and Hasidim argued fiercely, and rocks and bottles flew back and forth accompanied by racist and anti-Semitic insults. Bricks plummeted down from rooftops, and several shots rang out. By eleven o'clock,

roving bands of black youths had begun hurling stones through windows and assaulting people. They overturned cars, lit them on fire, and attacked police. One group of marauders shouting, “[T]here's the Jew. Get the Jew!” stabbed Yankel Rosenbaum, a twenty-nine-year-old Hasidic graduate student from Australia, in the lungs. Police arrested sixteen-year-old Lemrick Nelson for the stabbing. From his ambulance gurney Rosenbaum identified the teenager as his attacker. Later that night Rosenbaum died, and police charged Nelson with murder.⁸⁹

The spontaneous violence caught the police by surprise. The commander of the 71st Precinct, Captain Vincent Kennedy—his first day in that job—mobilized several task forces and rallied 350 officers in response, drawing from police assigned to a nearby B.B. King concert after it ended. He assigned officers to protect Lubavitch headquarters and shops on Utica Avenue and President Street and deployed the remainder in a fixed-post formation across thirty square blocks around the location where the riots began. The commanding officer of the Brooklyn South Patrol Borough, Assistant Chief Thomas Gallagher, supported the strategy. He hoped that the visible presence of several hundred cops on the street coupled with “restraint and non-confrontation . . . [would] limit violence, and prevent the police from becoming the focus of the crowd's hostility.” But the angry youths turned into a roving mob. The law-enforcement tactics adopted, more appropriate for a large group of peaceful demonstrators, allowed the mob to engulf the neighborhood in chaos until about 4:00 a.m., when it simply ran out of steam. Morning brought an uneasy calm. Some observers praised police restraint. Hasidic residents condemned the NYPD for failing to protect them and their property.⁹⁰

Senior police officials received reports of the riots Monday night or early Tuesday morning, yet none took clear command of the situation. The top brass of the department seemed caught off-balance. Robert Johnston had retired as chief of department just a few days before. His successor, David Scott, happened to be on vacation on August 19. The chief of detectives, Joseph Borelli, served as acting chief of department, and Mario Selvaggi, a former Manhattan borough commander, had been appointed chief of patrol on the very day the riots occurred. First Deputy Commissioner Ray Kelly sat outside the formal chain of command, authorized to give orders to uniformed officers only if the commissioner became incapacitated or asked him to take charge. In theory, the first deputy could assume control of a major incident. But doing so without explicit instructions from the commissioner would

constitute a serious violation of police protocol. The local commanders, many themselves new to their roles as a consequence of the shuffle of the chiefs above them, lacked clear guidance.⁹¹

Commissioner Brown and Mayor Dinkins, along with Deputy Mayor Mollen, met at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn about 12:30 a.m. as Monday night bled into Tuesday morning. The mayor spoke with Gavin and Angela Cato's fathers, and, along with Brown and Mollen, met with Yankel Rosenbaum at his hospital bed. The mayor talked to the young scholar, held his hands, and sought to comfort him. At the time, the attending physicians told the mayor they expected the man to recover. Tragically and inexcusably, the doctors identified only some of Rosenbaum's wounds, allowing him to bleed to death hours later. At the hospital, the mayor also met with Rabbi Joseph Spielman, chairman of the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council. Spielman expressed fear of renewed violence and demanded the city provide adequate protection. Later, the mayor went to the 71st Precinct, where he met with the local commanders and several elected officials to discuss the situation and the police response.⁹²

The next morning Deputy Mayor Mollen telephoned police commissioner Brown to ask about his plans that day for Crown Heights. The weather forecast called for rain, Brown reported. He assured Mollen bad weather invariably discouraged protesters and that his department had the situation under control. The two men left it at that. They did not have a particularly good working relationship, and communication between them was often terse and strained. Mollen had tried to clear the air when he detected a certain coolness toward him from Brown early on. The commissioner paid lip service to the need for cooperation, but the relationship never evolved. Over time, the deputy mayor concluded it had more to do with Brown's natural reserve than anything personal. Still the ability of the two men to work together effectively remained limited as a consequence.⁹³

The same morning, the mayor convened a meeting and named Deputy Mayor Bill Lynch the point person to coordinate the city's response. The experienced community organizer assembled a team that included representatives from various city agencies—the mayor's Community Assistance Unit, the Human Rights Commission, and the Department of Juvenile Justice—to focus on community outreach. Lynch hoped to dispel the rumors that ignited the riot, and more generally to ease the ferocious tension between the neighborhood's blacks and Jews by getting them to talk to each other.⁹⁴

The city set up a communications command center at Public School 167, right in Crown Heights. Tuesday morning and afternoon Lynch and other city and local officials met there for four hours with community leaders. Dinkins's staff, Lynch in particular, felt it best that the mayor not attend the talks as that would draw attention to the situation rather than de-escalate it. During the meetings blacks insisted that the city arrest the driver of the car that hit Gavin and Angela Cato. They complained bitterly about the failure to hold him accountable, accusing the city of a double standard. Deputy Mayor Mollen, an experienced judge, had discussed the issue with the police the night before. He had told them to follow normal procedure without regard to the politics of the situation and not to do anything different because the driver happened to be white and the child killed black. The city rarely prosecuted drivers in traffic accidents unless egregious negligence occurred. Of 351 fatal crashes the prior year, only eleven indictments followed. The police typically defined negligence as a violation of at least two rules of the road. The driver of the car that killed Gavin Cato stood accused of running a red light and speeding, but eye witnesses contested both charges. Ultimately, the police made the judgment that the accident was just that. Jewish leaders who participated in the meetings left no happier than the blacks. They criticized Lynch's handling of the session, saying he never responded to the rumors as originally intended and that he ignored anti-Semitic comments, accusations Lynch denied.⁹⁵

Meanwhile, hundreds of angry black youths gathered in the streets again, determined to secure justice for the injured children with their own hands. Local politicians and city officials would later report the crowd included relatively few Caribbean youths, despite the large proportion of the local black population they represented. "I doubt many of those children [the rioters] were Caribbean," one local minister told a reporter. "The parents tend to be very strict. They'd never allow such behavior." Differences between the two segments of the black population meant little to the Lubavitch. Hundreds of angry Hasidim took to the streets, determined to defend their turf. Violent clashes had already occurred when Sonny Carson appealed to teenage demonstrators in front of the 71st Precinct to take action. "Somebody's got to pay!" he yelled. "You know, we do a lot of talk. We ain't talking no more." With that, the crowd marched to President Street and Utica Avenue, clashing violently with Hasidim along the way. "Bricks were coming out of the sky like raindrops," Al Sharpton told a reporter for the *Amsterdam News* about the fusillades of dangerous objects that

flew in all directions. A splinter group broke off from the crowd, yelling, "Death to the Jews!" as they roamed down a side street. When the rioters reached the intersection where the accident occurred, they accosted the police so violently with rocks and bottles that the commander ordered the officers to retreat to safety. The mob routed the NYPD.⁹⁶

Jews, overwhelmed with fear, placed panicked 911 emergency calls—ultimately, nearly eight hundred of them—to report attacks. One woman called three times within three minutes. "They're headin' down to my house. They're breaking the windows. Utica and President, please come! . . . Where are the police. . . . What are you doing to us?" she lamented desperately. "It's a pogrom! You know what that means?" another distraught woman shouted at a dispatcher as a mob surged outside her apartment house hurling rocks and bottles at it. The police seemed unwilling or unable to restore order. The mob smashed and overturned police cars, lit fires, and looted shops. With too few officers deployed to respond to the outrages safely, police stood by while the rioters broke the law. Orders to "hold the line" and "stand fast" were issued, and officers were told "not to take independent action" that would isolate them and put them at risk. The restrained posture left the cops feeling like sitting ducks. *Channel 11* news reporter Tim Malloy told New Yorkers watching that night: "This is as ugly as it gets. . . . It's escalating. There's no sign it will cool off." Another reporter left the neighborhood around midnight "horrified . . . that civilians and police could be injured, windows broken, and patrol cars burned in the streets with almost no police response." The violence continued until midnight when the heavy rain Commissioner Brown had been counting on finally dispersed the crowd.⁹⁷

Wednesday morning the mayor met with senior advisors and agreed to go to Crown Heights that afternoon to meet with community leaders. Meanwhile, the Lubavitch complained bitterly to Herbert Block, the mayor's liaison to the Jewish community, and to Dinkins and Milton Mollen as well, that the police were not arresting people flagrantly violating the law and that the danger was mounting, not subsiding. One rabbi told Mollen, "Jews, because they were Jews, were being physically attacked." During the course of the day on the steps of City Hall, Reverend Al Sharpton and Alton Maddox held a press conference. They gave the city seventy-two hours to arrest Yosef Lifsch or else they would "mobilize their forces to make a citizens' arrest." Lifsch, fearing for his safety, fled to Israel. Sharpton and Maddox would eventually

follow him there in an effort to serve him with notice of a civil suit through the United States Consulate in Tel Aviv.⁹⁸

Marchers took to the streets in Crown Heights again Wednesday afternoon. Four hundred African Americans arrived at Lubavitch headquarters, where they hurled rocks and bottles at the building. They burned an Israeli flag and yelled, "Heil, Hitler!" Richard Green, an African American community activist who had created a black and Lubavitch basketball team in Crown Heights, would later tell an interviewer that many of the youths yelling the deeply offensive words did not actually know who Hitler was, so removed were they from any grounding in the history of the world or their neighbors. One hundred Hasidim retaliated against their attackers with stones and bottles. Police in riot gear kept the two groups apart, but once again the mob outnumbered the officers. Commissioner Brown appeared near the scene in advance of the mayor's arrival at the local school serving as a communications center. As he did, a group of rioters converged on his car, pelting it with rocks and bottles. The situation became intense, beyond the capacity of his security detail to control, as the violent mob surrounded them.⁹⁹

Ray Kelly learned of the disturbances in Crown Heights on Monday night, but in his first deputy role he had no authority or responsibility for police operations or tactics. So on Tuesday and Wednesday Kelly went to his office and tended to his management duties. He had watched television reports of the riots those days with concern, but he knew the responsible members of the department were focused on the crisis. Then, late Wednesday afternoon, a call came in over the police radio—"ten-thirteen Car One." *Ten-thirteen* is the police code for "officer needs assistance." It is, to policemen, the most urgent signal. It means one of their own is in distress. *Car One* was the department's designation for the commissioner's vehicle. Neither Kelly nor anyone else at headquarters ever remembered a New York City police commissioner issuing a ten-thirteen. Ray Kelly left his office, got into his car, and drove to Crown Heights.¹⁰⁰

The distress signal Brown's security detail issued brought reinforcements to protect him. At least nine officers suffered injuries helping him to maneuver through the attacking crowd to get into the school. When the mayor's car approached, police made him wait until the mob passed. The best they could do was to redirect the rampage. They seemed helpless to stop it. Kelly saw the mob of youths throwing rocks and bottles as he drove down Eastern Parkway. By the time he arrived

at the communications center, he found a visibly upset Mayor Dinkins in conversation with an unusually animated Lee Brown. "These are kids, these are kids," Kelly recalled Brown telling the mayor, in disbelief that the police force he commanded—the largest in the nation—could not suppress the roaming bands of teenagers subjecting the mayor, his police commissioner, and everyone in Crown Heights to senseless, dangerous violence. Kelly approached Brown. "Would you like me to get involved?" he asked. Brown said yes, giving Kelly the authority he needed to take charge. He left the mayor and the commissioner and headed for the 71st Precinct, which he had once commanded. Years later, Deputy Mayor Mollen could not "fathom" why Brown had not called upon Kelly sooner.¹⁰¹

After meeting with his senior staff and talking to a group of fifty youths inside the school building, the mayor tried to address a crowd on the street through a bullhorn. "Will you listen to me?" the city's chief executive pleaded. "No," came the mob's reply. When he said, "We will have justice, but we will not get it through violence," people booed and threw bottles at him. His security detail discouraged him from walking four blocks to the Cato residence to meet with the family of the slain boy and injured girl. "He was told by the police brass not to walk over there . . . and the thing that really got me to back up was that they believed there were six guns in the crowd," Bill Lynch said. "I don't believe anyone would have shot him, but I wasn't going to take that chance." Mollen also remembered rumors of a gun in the crowd. So they went by motorcade, the wrong way down a one-way street, adding to the general confusion. The police cordoned off the two ends of the street, but not before a crowd had already gathered in front of the Catos' apartment building. When Dinkins and Mollen got out of the car together to walk about fifty feet to the building, someone threw a bottle at them. "It whizzed right by my head," Mollen, seventy-one at the time, remembered.¹⁰²

About the same time the mayor arrived at the Cato residence, populist journalist Jimmy Breslin was traveling to Crown Heights by taxi to cover the mayor's efforts to restore calm. "A group of youths blocked his cab, demanded money, smashed out the windshield with a baseball bat, piled into the back seat punching him, then pulled him from the car, ripped off his clothes and beat him until two passersby, one wielding a large knife, rescued him," *Newsday* reported. "And somewhere up in the higher echelons of journalism some moron starts talking about balanced coverage," the indignant writer, who had been

left stranded in his underwear, lamented. Also that night, Patrolmen Benevolent Association president Phil Caruso accused police brass of using tactics that jeopardized officers' lives. In a statement posted the next day in precinct houses around the city, Caruso wrote with disdain, "[I]n Crown Heights, mob rule now prevails. Over the last three nights, New York's Finest have been transformed into New York's lamest." He went on to say cops "need not cower in fear . . . if police officers are placed under life-threatening attack, they should use their nightsticks or firearms" in self-defense.¹⁰³

When Dinkins and his entourage left the Cato residence, the mayor again tried to address a crowd of angry youths. Again he met intransigent hostility, and in a tense moment the mob surged toward the mayor, but he left unharmed to meet with the Crown Heights Emergency Committee. There, rabbis declared the situation out of control and demanded Dinkins call for the National Guard. They accused the mayor of instructing the police not to make arrests, an accusation Dinkins denied. The meeting ended with the mayor's commitment to ensure safety. Back at Gracie Mansion, the mayor spoke live with *Channel 4* news reporter Mary Civiello. "[T]his administration will not tolerate lawlessness and violence, under any circumstances," he told the city. "We are not going to permit thugs to take over this city," he told reporters at a news conference that same night. A short time later, word arrived that a sniper with a shotgun wounded eight police officers as the violence escalated. The mayor, Commissioner Brown, First Deputy Mayor Steisel, Bill Lynch, and Milton Mollen headed for Kings County Hospital where they learned the officers' wounds were superficial. En route, Mollen had called ahead and requested the hospital set aside a room where the mayor and his top advisors could meet. In no uncertain terms, the group agreed the time had come for the police to put an end to the chaos on the streets with whatever force necessary. Some remembered reading the riot act to Commissioner Brown, but by then the man needed no great convincing.¹⁰⁴

Earlier in the evening, after the meeting with the Crown Heights Emergency Committee, Commissioner Brown had gone to the 71st Precinct, where he found Ray Kelly and other top officers. Kelly had already made his rounds. He had gone to borough headquarters at the 67th Precinct, where he had talked with the deputy chief in charge. The man's answers to Kelly's questions left the first deputy unimpressed. "He wasn't particularly well organized, he did not know what was going on, it bothered me," Kelly recalled. The commanders on the scene, he

realized, "were not being as proactive and aggressive as, in my judgment, they should be. . . . In reality, they were reluctant to make arrests." Kelly could only speculate why—no one articulated a reason to him. "Maybe they read in the tea leaves that an African American mayor and police commissioner" would not want them to adopt an aggressive posture against black youths. But as far as Kelly was concerned, the constraint "was self-imposed," and, whatever the reason, it led to "a lack of aggressiveness when aggressiveness was needed." Kelly, Brown, and Chief Selvaggi agreed to implement new tactics under Kelly's leadership. At 7:00 a.m. the next morning, the first deputy laid out a plan to deploy some 1,800 officers organized into four sectors, each with appropriate command structures, each saturated with foot patrols supported by mobile response units and reserves. Police were instructed to escort any gangs that emerged and disperse them. If they resisted, fifty mounted police and special teams in vans were available to close off streets, pin rioters in place, and allow the police to sweep in and lock them up. Instructions were clear. If "anyone does anything, arrest them," the chiefs told the cops. They were not to wait for assaults, destruction of property, or other violence before acting. Police posted on roofs would prevent a recurrence of sniper fire, and a searchlight-equipped helicopter would provide aerial intelligence.

A large group formed Thursday at the emotionally charged intersection of President Street and Utica Avenue, but the police presence maintained the peace. Gangs broke off from the crowd and began to roam, but the police followed and reacted at the first sign of trouble. They arrested sixty-one people that night, more than the combined total of the prior three days of riots. Someone fired six shots at two cops. The bullets struck their cruiser three times but missed the officers. Other serious acts of violence occurred, but far fewer than before. Each one elicited a more forceful response. The mob got the message. Scattered episodes continued for a few days, but the riot ended. A tense truce took hold on the streets of Crown Heights.¹⁰⁵

Earlier that day, Bill Lynch called Al Sharpton to ask for his help restoring order. Sharpton met with the mayor, along with several of his top advisors and senior police officials. Parents of some of the black children who had been arrested attended as well. Sharpton complained that the police had detained only African Americans while Jews had also played a role in the disturbance. He insisted that the mayor release the black youths being held in jail. During the meeting, the parents lit into Dinkins and called him an Uncle Tom. The insults provoked

an angry response from the beleaguered mayor. The tense meeting accomplished little. Deputy Mayor Lynch remembered Sharpton as "not playing the role of an honest broker" at a time when he might have helped defuse violent tensions.¹⁰⁶

The rioters injured at least 38 civilians and 152 police officers. Twenty-seven police vehicles suffered damage or total destruction. At least six local businesses reported looting, arson, or property damage. Yankel Rosenbaum lay murdered. And one woman, a holocaust survivor, killed herself. Neighbors attributed her suicide to a mob-induced revival of the terror she had experienced decades before at the hands of the Nazis.¹⁰⁷

Dinkins spoke at Gavin Cato's wake. He described the event to a crowd of over two thousand people as "[t]wo tragedies—one a tragedy because it *was* an accident, the other a tragedy because it *was not*. Two precious lives lost, senseless and for no reason. And yet, brothers and sisters, in the tragic deaths of these two young people, also lie the seeds of our redemption. We have an opportunity now to right old wrongs—to heal old wounds—and to make our city a better, more just place." He also promised to continue his efforts to "rid our city of the scourge of racial hatred and violence."¹⁰⁸

The next day Dinkins attended Gavin's funeral. As the congregation entered the building, the "keening shrieks" of the young boy's mother "penetrated every corner of the church, and every soul in it," Joe Klein would write. The mayor spoke briefly, urging all to "increase the peace." Yet speeches by Reverend Al Sharpton and Reverend Herbert Daughtry overshadowed the mayor's. "I heard the word peace, but they don't want peace," Sharpton declared. "They want quiet." And Reverend Daughtry warned that, unless the city ended its favoritism toward the Hasidic community, "we will be back here very soon and it may be fire next time." Neither criticized the violent rioters. Sonny Carson, C. Vernon Mason, Colin Moore, and other activists also attended, turning Gavin Cato's funeral bier into something of a political stage. When the service ended, Sharpton, who movingly told the congregation that "we are ready to say goodbye to a young man who we should be saying good morning to," led the funeral cortege that walked for three miles behind the little boy's coffin from the church to his grave.¹⁰⁹

The Rosenbaum family had requested that Yankel's body be flown to Australia for burial earlier in the week. Arrangements called for the hearse to slow as it passed by Lubavitch headquarters in symbolic respect for the man's connection to his coreligionists and faith and

then to continue to the airport. Yet the community needed to grieve, and, by the time the hearse arrived at 8:00 a.m. Wednesday morning, a thousand people or more had gathered. The hearse stopped, and a group of men lifted the casket and carried it down Eastern Parkway while speakers offered eulogies and prayers.

The mayor's liaison to the Jewish community, Herbert Block, happened to be present. He had been told there would be no service, and so he had made no arrangements for the mayor to be there. In the charged atmosphere, Dinkins's absence at the memorial for the slain Jew seemed a glaring slight to any unaware of the sequence of events. When reporters questioned him about it, implying he lacked compassion for the Jewish victim, Dinkins became visibly angry. Pounding his fist on a podium, his voice rising, the mayor lashed out at the press. "Nobody has asked me. . . . Did you talk to [Rosenbaum]? What did he say to you? Did you touch him? Did you hold his hand? But I did. I held his hand. He held mine. He looked into my eyes. I looked into his. We talked to one another. He is dead now. So now I am being obliquely criticized for not having attended the funeral?" the exasperated mayor spat out in disgust. He insisted that he had demonstrated compassion and concern for Yankel Rosenbaum when it mattered most. Yet, however unfair, the symbolism of the mayor attending the memorial service of the black victim, but not the Jewish one, made matters worse.¹¹⁰

And inexplicably, Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, whose motorcade killed Gavin Cato, never expressed condolences to the family. He made no statement, public or private, of sorrow or remorse about the event. The driver, Yosef Lifsch, and other Lubavitch did, but not their leader, whose personal involvement in the event that ignited the riots made his silence deeply troubling. His posture angered African Americans. Through intermediaries, Deputy Mayor Lynch sought some expression of concern. Nothing. The rebbe's supporters offered excuses. Some remembered a few cryptic remarks that may have referred to the violence that had erupted around him, which they said was the rebbe's way of addressing all such matters. One suggested Schneerson was too important to be decent. "The Rebbe is an international figure," the man said, dismissing the issue. "If there is an incident in Washington, D.C. should the President get involved with white and black leaders to settle the insurrection?" The explanations rang loudly hollow. Some speculated that the man had reached a stage where he no longer had his full faculties. Aloof to the point of arrogance, seemingly indifferent to the deadly consequences of his convoy for a seven-year-old boy, silent

when his people and those who lived with them needed a compassionate voice of reason to help restore calm, on this occasion, whatever the reason, the grand rebbe failed as a leader.¹¹¹

A few weeks later, a journalist named Arnold Fine published an interview with Governor Cuomo in the *Jewish Press*. Fine reported that Cuomo told him he spoke with Dinkins the day after the riots started and quoted the governor as saying, "[T]he Mayor said that the night before had been sort of a day of grace to the mob, and that wouldn't happen a second day because it was abused and because there were crimes perpetrated that were not prevented." Dinkins adamantly denied ever saying such a thing, and the governor denied having told Fine he did. No one else remembered the mayor using the phrase "day of grace." Some speculated the governor made the statement to disassociate himself from Dinkins's handling of the riot. Others believed that the *Jewish Press*, a conservative publication, fabricated the charge to embarrass the mayor.¹¹²

The rumor persisted, unsubstantiated in any way, that the Dinkins administration had handcuffed the NYPD. In the minds of many, as soon as the mayor allowed the police force to mobilize itself, it shut the rioters down. Indeed, many thought cops among the victims of the violence, subjected by a black politician to excessive restraint against a black mob that left more police injured than anyone else. Little awareness emerged about the dysfunctional response of the senior command during the first days of chaos until much later, long after people had made up their minds about what had happened. The mayor found himself in an impossible situation. If he berated the police, he berated his own administration and his own choice of commissioner. If he kept his own counsel, he received all the blame for the tragic events.

Eventually, Governor Cuomo would ask Richard H. Girgenti, New York State director of criminal justice, to issue a report on the riots and the city's response. It laid out the facts in great detail and leveled plenty of criticism at Lee Brown and the police department's top brass. "A collective failure by top-ranking NYPD officials delayed the implementation of appropriate tactics to control [the] disorder," the report stated. It even criticized Ray Kelly: "Given the seriousness of the disturbances, it is unfortunate that the First Deputy did not assume a role in coordinating the development and implementation of a different strategy sooner," it said of the man who provided the experienced leadership it took to end the violence. "It is regrettable . . . Kelly did not seek an active role prior to late Wednesday," it repeated elsewhere. When asked about the report years later, Kelly said matter-of-factly: "It was politics. No one who understood

the culture of the department, no one who understood the organization structure . . . the role of the first deputy, would have written that."¹¹³

Norman Steisel, distracted by tense budget negotiations during the first days of conflict at Crown Heights, felt he let the mayor down. His role included oversight of major disasters that required a response from multiple city agencies. In his own mind, he should have involved himself and played a greater role helping to marshal the resources needed to deal with the disturbances sooner and more effectively than happened.¹¹⁴

Bill Lynch would remember the events at Crown Heights as one of his greatest disappointments. With admirable humility and loyalty, he blamed himself for the tragic sequence of events since he had been the administration's point person. In some ways, he seemed the perfect man for the job. He had long experience as a community organizer. He was a leader who at other times in his career had managed to defuse the anger so often present in young black men raised amid broken homes and street violence, limited job opportunities and racial discrimination. Yet Lynch's very experience blinded him in Crown Heights. He saw the rioting teens as "misdirected" children of promise who had veered down a wrong path and needed to be guided back to a better one for their own good. "We've got to get a program together to work with these young people, to get them something to do and to diffuse this whole thing," he told a reporter after the riots subsided. But while the rampage raged, he seemed unable to understand the youths were attackers—victimizers rather than victims—who had gone beyond mobilization to mob, who sang no civil rights anthem but screamed anti-Semitic slurs. Their march created terror, not justice. Intent on violence, only force could stop them.¹¹⁵

Lynch would forever remember Crown Heights as overblown in the press. The night eight police officers suffered shotgun wounds was the night Lynch did not believe a hostile crowd would really shoot David Dinkins. He wondered suspiciously how the police concluded there were "six" guns in the mob they warned the mayor not to walk through. He remembered people throwing objects at Dinkins and acknowledged someone could have been hurt, but "they weren't 'mad[ly]' throwing rocks," he would say, playing down the severity of the action. Lynch's background, training, and instincts did not allow him to appreciate the seriousness of the violence until two additional nights of avoidable rage had terrorized the Jews of Crown Heights—something neither he nor Mayor David Dinkins would ever have wished upon them.¹¹⁶

For David Dinkins, the Crown Heights riots constituted an unmitigated disaster. The man who promised to heal racial tensions had presided over the city's worst race riots in twenty years. The man who had built a lifelong record of support for Jewish causes appeared unwilling to get tough with black mobs engaged in the worst outbreak of anti-Semitic violence in American history. The man who vowed to be the toughest mayor on crime the city had ever seen stood accused of ordering the police not to arrest people committing serious unlawful acts. At the intersection of President Street and Utica Avenue in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, confidence in David Dinkins's ability to lead the city lay mortally wounded.

In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, some members of the media rallied to the mayor's defense. "One has to have sympathy for David Dinkins and his aides, neck-deep in this ugly tide of anger and misunderstanding," Joe Klein wrote in *New York* magazine. And he praised the mayor's "stubborn persistence in returning to the area, even after he had been pelted with rocks and bottles and called a traitor," as an act of real courage. The editors of the *New York Post*, often the mayor's harshest critics, praised him. The day after the massive show of police force put the mob down, they wrote that "the mayor's actions throughout the crisis have been right on target—and we have every reason to hope that in coming days and nights he will do whatever is required to restore calm to Crown Heights." The mayor would later quote the editorial in his defense. Yet in the very same issue of the *New York Post* columnist Mike McAlary came to a different conclusion. "It has already taken David Dinkins one day longer to reclaim a dozen blocks in Brooklyn than it took Boris Yeltsin to reclaim the Soviet Union [after a coup attempt]. . . . Indeed, blacks and Jews are said to agree on only one thing in Crown Heights today, and that is our mayor's inability to lead." In stark, simple terms McAlary concluded: "David Dinkins has failed his city." The mayor's political future, he declared morbidly, "lies dead" with Yankel Rosenbaum.¹¹⁷

Notes

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14. Todd Purdum, "Dinkins Asks for Racial Unity and Offers to Mediate Boycott," *NYT*, May 12, 1990.
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Policing the Police

Crown Heights added to a sense of despair permeating New York. A little over a year earlier a *Time/Cable News* survey showed that more New Yorkers than ever wanted to leave the city and more than ever before thought the city would be worse off in ten or fifteen years. Perceptions had only deteriorated since. A few weeks after the Brooklyn riots, *New York* political columnist Joe Klein wrote:

Add to [the conflict in Crown Heights] an atmosphere of racial antagonism nearing the point of hysteria in the city, the frothing and bubbling of conspiracy theories, the rise of an almost casual anti-Semitism, the endemic street crime, the family disintegration and hopelessness in the black community, the constant tattoo of minority youths shot dead by police under questionable circumstances, the daily tide of bile fantasies and paranoia on talk radio (white and black), the sagging municipal finances and waning civic presences in the poorest neighborhoods, the spiritual depression caused by the lack of leadership, the sense of a steady stream of families and businesses heading for the exits—given all that, the senseless caprice of Gavin Cato's death and the murderous fury of the anti-Jewish riot that followed seemed to push New York toward yet another spiritual crossroads.¹

By year-end Klein would surmise, "Crown Heights may have been the last straw for both the public and Dinkins himself. Afterwards, his administration seemed to disintegrate."²

Discouraging events continued to damage the collective psyche. Less than a week after the police put a stop to the Brooklyn riots, a drunken subway motorman ran his train off the tracks at 14th Street, killing five riders and injuring more than two hundred passengers in the worst accident of its kind since 1918. The front car leapt into a support pillar that sheared it in half. Four of the nine cars behind derailed and

ran into each other, creating a tangled metal mess. Rescue workers and the mayor expressed astonishment that more people did not die. The tragedy suspended service on the IRT line from 86th Street on the Upper East Side to Bowling Green at the tip of Manhattan for six days, disrupting life for more than four hundred thousand riders every hour during peak periods. Two hundred Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) employees worked round the clock in twelve-hour shifts to restore service. "We rallied to get the job done because we wanted to show the public that not all transit workers are drunks, and that most of us work damn hard to keep this system safe and running smoothly," a track worker said, obviously appalled by the deadly irresponsibility of his coworker.³

In October 1991 the *New York Times* also sensed the dispirited public mood:

New Yorkers are losing heart. And it is no wonder that many fear their city is disintegrating. A huge budget deficit means dirtier streets, unkempt parks and shorter library hours. Almost a million New Yorkers are on welfare, supported by an ever-thinner base of taxpayers. Homeless mental cases huddle in corners everywhere, or beg aggressively. Drugs so ravage neighborhoods that desperate parents in the Bronx are driven to chain their daughter to a bed to save her from the streets. And every macho teen-ager seems to be packing a gun.

Who can feel safe in an era of random shootings? Who does not fear the flare-up of race hatred when vicious whites in Queens club a black athlete senseless in Atlantic Beach and vicious blacks stab a young Jew to death in Crown Heights?

At a time when we crave strong leadership, Mayor David Dinkins has been dishearteningly passive and Gov. Mario Cuomo has been irresponsibly remote.

Yet they concluded, "New York has emerged from worse crises, over and over again, and been stronger than ever. . . . Great cities don't die; they adapt."⁴

As the mayor and his team fielded the political fallout from Crown Heights and tried to contend with the public mood of despair, Commissioner Brown and the police department pursued the "Safe Streets, Safe City," blueprint for transforming New York from chaos to order. The budget pressure that delayed the rise of the department to full force dealt a blow to a key element of the program, but other aspects

proceeded despite ongoing money woes. The department launched a pilot plan for single-officer patrol cars and redeployed civilians. It launched Operation All Out to reduce the number of cops locked in headquarters and sent them into the streets. In the months and years that followed, the operation added a quarter of a million tours of foot patrol duty. Implementation of the community-policing strategy caused the number of officers assigned to neighborhood beats to rise fourfold.⁵

A public relations campaign responded to people's need to know that the city had launched a program to restore safety. Posters appeared around the city of an elderly couple walking on a city street with the reassuring figure of a policeman in full view atop a caption that read: "The beat cop is back." When analysts tabulated year-end 1991 figures, they announced crime fell in every major category for the first time in thirty-six years—albeit modestly. During the first three months of 1992, the pattern continued. Chief Bratton's efforts in the subways also began to take hold. Major crime under New York's streets declined 15 percent in 1991 to the lowest it had been in four years.⁶

The mayor should have benefited from the positive momentum building behind anticrime initiatives, but he continued to adopt positions that undermined his law-and-order credentials. The NYPD launched a controlled pilot program with police supervisors to determine the impact of issuing semiautomatic weapons. The state legislature deemed the program inadequate and threatened legislation—supported by the Patrolman's Benevolent Association—to require the city to issue the more powerful pistols to all cops. Commissioner Brown and senior NYPD officials feared the impact the greater firepower could have in New York's concrete canyons. At their urging, the mayor opposed the measure loudly, just as he had when the transit police sought a weapons upgrade. Dinkins deeply resented the legislature's interference in management of the city's affairs, yet he found he had to compromise and expand the experiment by one thousand more weapons to beat back the push by lawmakers. So for a second time on the issue of new police firearms, the mayor looked like a soft-on-crime political weakling. His posture did nothing to improve his standing with the rank and file on the police force.⁷

From the first of the year through March 15, 1992, New York registered 149 bias incidents. The figure represented a dramatic increase from 68 during the same period the prior year, despite accelerating

declines in most other categories of serious crime. Gay bashing was on the rise, and racial and ethnic tension kept the city on edge. Then, on Wednesday, April 29, 1992, a jury acquitted the white police officers videotaped beating Rodney King. A stunned nation gasped as Los Angeles erupted in riots, which African Americans in some other cities joined in sympathetic outrage. In Harlem, Councilman Adam Clayton Powell, IV, captured the fury of his constituents. "It makes you hate this country," he told a reporter. "It makes you hate the flag. It makes you hate cops. It makes you hate all white people who can even think to begin to excuse this verdict." Thursday night, riots erupted in other cities, and a soft blanket of fear fell on New York. Friday, unfounded or grossly exaggerated rumors of race-related attacks began to spread. That afternoon, shops spontaneously closed. Without a word spoken, Wall Street bankers evacuated the financial district.⁸

Dinkins reacted to the dangerous verdict with unaccustomed speed and effectiveness. As soon as he learned of it, he reached to community leaders across the city to encourage peaceful marches and protests. He put the police on alert and publicly condemned the decision while declaring violence off-limits. He walked the streets of Harlem, thanking people for controlling their anger. He made common cause with blacks, bitter about the injustice inflicted on one of their own, a transcontinental reminder of the type of humiliation any African American could suffer at any time. The heat of the anger caused the City of Angels to burn and riots ignited in several other urban areas—San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, and Las Vegas. In New York, David Dinkins kept the peace. "Dave, Take a Bow," read the front page of the May 4, 1992, *New York Post*.⁹

A few weeks after the riots that never happened, the mayor traveled to Queens, where people treated him like a conquering hero. Sometime before, his team had initiated a series of local City Hall events during which the mayor would conduct his business from one of the boroughs outside Manhattan for five days. They were part of the administration's effort to take the mayor's message directly to the people and a symbolic statement of his commitment to represent all New Yorkers. "I expected big trouble after the King verdict," one resident, washing a large plate glass store window, told a reporter. "This window could be gone. This store could be gone. I give him credit," the man said of the mayor. The week coincided with the announcement of an unexpected budget surplus, play-off victories by the Rangers and the Knicks, sunshine, and blossoming trees.¹⁰

Realtor Donald Zucker described a change in the city's mood toward Dinkins. "We voted for David because we thought he could ease racial tensions. He has; we're appreciative. But the economy fell off a cliff. That wasn't his fault, but he wasn't *handling* it. People wrote him off, but now he's pulling it back together. His budget looks good. Crime is down. Real estate taxes have been frozen. He hit his stride." Morale among his staff reflected the change. "There's a sense of having been underwater for two years, and now finally coming up and getting a gasp of air. It's nice not to be drowning for a change," one aide said. A little while later another reporter took up the same theme. "Political Memo: Dinkins Is Mastering the Art of the Mayor," a *New York Times* headline read. "I think we're beginning to find ourselves," a senior aide said. "When John Lindsay came in, people said, 'These people can't even find the lights.' I think we're beginning to find the light switches, and things are working a lot better."¹¹

A more cynical political insider reacted differently. "The good news is just a blip. A happy little blip that will soon be forgotten." The mayor himself feared as much. "You're on a roll, aren't you?" a reporter said to him. "It'll end," Mayor Dinkins replied with an old pol's sage smile the reporter wrote. The comment proved prescient.¹²

On Friday, July 3, 1992, in the lobby of 505 West 162nd Street, in the heavily Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights, Officer Michael O'Keefe and two plainclothes partners sought to arrest a suspected drug dealer thought to be carrying a gun. The target, a Dominican named Jose Garcia, known to friends as Kiko, resisted. In the struggle that followed, O'Keefe shot and killed him. Two women who claimed to witness the event reported the police beat Garcia senseless and that, while he lay helpless on the ground, pleading for his life, O'Keefe shot him in cold blood.¹³

The next day, reporters found the words, "Kiko, we love you," written in the dead man's blood on the wall near where he died. Neighbors described him as a decent man. Rumors circulated that O'Keefe was a dirty cop, and the killing an assassination by a policeman dealing drugs in the neighborhood he had sworn to protect. The charge had currency because the local precinct, the 34th, had come under federal investigation for providing drug dealers in the community with protection in return for bribes. The story caused sporadic protests to break out on Saturday, with local residents lighting trash cans and a car on fire and throwing debris into the streets in demonstrations of disgust. Police responded by closing off

the street where the dead man lived, and sanitation trucks cleared away the burning refuse.¹⁴

Monday, simmering tensions continued to boil. Anticipating trouble, Dinkins sought to contain potential violence by visiting Garcia's family and assuring them a full investigation would take place. Family members expressed appreciation for the mayor's sympathy and concern. Newspapers published photos of the mayor consoling them.¹⁵

A demonstration organized by Councilman Guillermo Linares, the city's first Dominican elected official, began peacefully later that evening outside the building where the shooting occurred. Then the crowd marched to West 181st Street and approached the 34th Precinct, O'Keefe's assigned station. There, sixty officers in riot gear confronted the crowd. Spanish chants of "killer cop" and demands for justice punctuated the night. Things turned ugly. Someone hurled a powerful M-80 firecracker at the police, and then a bottle. Pockets of protesters—bands of fifty to one hundred people—threw garbage cans into the street, overturned dumpsters, smashed car windows, and set other cars on fire. A police helicopter hovered overhead, shining a spotlight on the mob until someone fired a shot at it and hit it, forcing the helicopter to retreat. A man who hurled a bottle at cops fled across a rooftop on 172nd Street and fell five stories to his death when the officers gave chase. The chaos engulfed some forty square blocks. Four police reported injuries, none serious, and eleven arrests occurred on charges ranging from arson to disorderly conduct. Reports surfaced later that drug dealers provoked some of the violence, seeking to use the emotions hovering on the streets where they plied their illegal trade to turn the people against the police. The outbreak deflated the prestige the mayor won just weeks earlier when he led the city's response to the Los Angeles riots. It occurred the week before the Democratic National Convention would come to town, raising the stakes of the disruption.¹⁶

The mayor urged calm the next day over Spanish television and English, and he returned to the neighborhood to address local residents personally. Cardinal O'Connor joined him, assuring people that the Catholic Church—an institution with more credibility than government in the neighborhood—would insist on a full and fair investigation of the shooting. Having learned the lessons of Crown Heights, police responded with sufficient force and discipline to prevent the violence from spreading, while local elected officials and community-outreach experts initiated contacts between protesters and police. Dinkins

invited Garcia's relatives to meet with him at Gracie Mansion, and he arranged for the city to pay to transport Garcia's body to the Dominican Republic for burial. He walked the streets with local officials, Dominican celebrities, Commissioner Brown, and others, promising justice and calling for calm. Latino leaders gave him high marks for his handling of the crisis.¹⁷

Yet the investigation into the killing revealed something very different than what many imagined. Garcia had indeed been armed with a loaded thirty-eight-caliber revolver. Investigators confirmed his association with a drug gang and that he often carried a concealed weapon. Testimony of the witnesses who reported the incident as a police-sponsored murder did not stand up to scrutiny. Forensic experts determined it unlikely the accusers could have seen what they reported from where they said they stood when it happened. Pathologists who examined the body refuted the charge the man had been beaten, and they found cocaine in his system at the time of his death. For the police rank and file, Dinkins's behavior smacked of betrayal. He had offered comfort and condolences to the armed drug dealer's relatives at a time when a courageous officer who put his life on the line stood falsely accused of vicious crimes.¹⁸

I. A Police Department at War with the Mayor

The Washington Heights riot coincided with rising tension between the mayor and the department he relied on to protect the city. Distant rumblings of an insidious wave of corruption in the NYPD, first heard several months earlier, had become a steady beat. Rampant drug dealing and the battle to contain it had put more cops in greater contact with huge amounts of money than ever before. A half-dozen years earlier John Guido, who oversaw the division responsible for investigating police corruption from 1972 to 1986, retired. Feared and hated by dishonest cops, Guido helped keep the department honest. When he left, the office he ran lost stature, power, and institutional memory. On May 7, 1992, Suffolk County detectives arrested five New York City police officers and dozens of others across Long Island for running a cocaine ring. The cops were all thirty or younger. The episode, disturbing enough on its own merits, suggested the torch of corruption had been passed to a new generation.¹⁹

As supervisors reviewed wire-tap transcripts, it became apparent the dishonest officers had developed routines to avoid detection. The department's internal procedures to prevent corruption seemed

wanting. Questions had emerged about the cops involved, particularly one, Officer Michael Dowd. Yet, despite serious suspicions, the NYPD had not managed to make a case against him until Suffolk police busted his gang. Commissioner Brown asked Robert J. Beatty, chief of Inspectional Services, which included the internal affairs division responsible for investigating allegations of police misconduct, to assess what went wrong. Then on June 15, 1992, the *New York Post* reported that over a period of four years during which an internal affairs field unit sergeant suspected Dowd of crimes, senior police officials refused to allocate the resources necessary to pursue a serious investigation. The reason seemed to be that such a scandal in a captain or commander's jurisdiction hurt careers. Brown, uncomfortable leaving the investigation in the hands of the division now accused of conscious neglect, asked First Deputy Kelly to lead a second, independent review.²⁰

Before long the United States attorney for the Southern District of New York launched a federal probe of the department. The arrest of the Brooklyn drug gang had caused a number of police officers to acknowledge a widespread problem. Honest cops still found themselves surrounded by a culture that discouraged reporting the misdeeds of another officer—even serious ones. Credible reports of cops taking bribes to ignore drug trafficking and acting as guardians for dealers made their way to the prosecutor's office. In one case, informants alleged a group of officers cordoned off a block that served as a hub of illegal activity to prevent other officers from combating the dealers. Another report suggested that the same Michael Dowd arrested in Brooklyn had been hired by a gang in the 34th Precinct to protect them. "If they are looking for other Dowds," an officer in the 34th Precinct told a journalist, "then they have come to the right place." The cop insisted on anonymity.²¹

The mayor determined he could not let the police department investigate itself. He appointed a five-member independent panel chaired by Milton Mollen to investigate police corruption. Mollen had retired from the administration a few months earlier, at the age of seventy-two, but the former deputy felt he could not turn down the mayor's request. He agreed to lead the highest-powered look at NYPD corruption since the Knapp Commission twenty years earlier. "To me it's crystal clear," Dinkins said. "It is absolutely essential that the people have confidence in the Police Department. I believe they will not have that confidence unless there is this kind of independent inquiry." The mayor named his one-time law partner and New York

State Court of Appeals Judge, Fritz Alexander, his new deputy mayor for public safety.²²

At the same time that he created the Mollen Commission, Dinkins renewed his support for an all-civilian complaint review board to replace the police-dominated structure that investigated accusations of abuse. This long-standing controversial idea had divided the city for decades. In May 1966, Mayor John Lindsay had signed an executive order creating a civilian review board. The decision infuriated the police. They perceived it as an implicit indictment of their integrity. They feared a witch hunt and resented the outside control. The president of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association announced that the city's police officers did not accept the mayor's decision and launched a campaign to place a referendum on the ballot that would allow the citizens of New York to decide if they wanted the board or not.²³

Two of every three New Yorkers voted to abolish the board, leaving Mayor Lindsay's prestige badly damaged. Blacks and Puerto Ricans overwhelmingly favored the civilian review board, and Catholics of every European descent opposed it vigorously. There was slight softening of Catholic opposition among wealthier, better-educated members of the faith, but nearly 90 percent of all Irish and Italian Catholics and more than 80 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics of other heritages rejected the board. The pattern among Jewish New Yorkers was more nuanced. Working-class Jews at the lower end of the economic and educational spectrum, many of whom lived in neighborhoods that bordered black ghettos, voted against the board in large numbers. Upper-income, well-educated Jewish professionals who lived in the city's safest neighborhoods voted fairly strongly in favor of the plan. The daily threat of crime and violence was more distant to them. The outcome reaffirmed that, as a group, Jews were more liberal than the city's Catholic voters. It also revealed limits to Jewish liberalism. Strong support for civil rights did not overpower a desire to live in safety.²⁴

A quarter of a century later, little had changed but the demographics of the city. Proponents of law and order continued to see a civilian board as an unnecessary means of second-guessing the cops who had to deal with dangerous criminals on the street. Critics feared naïve citizens who lacked investigative training and who had little experience with the real stresses police face would punish officers for using the level of force sometimes required to be effective. Supporters of a civilian board perceived it as a necessary check on a powerful paramilitary organization whose culture prevented effective self-discipline.

The racial divide the issue created persisted. African Americans and Latinos tended to support the idea while whites tended to oppose it. People of color had an easier time imagining themselves the victims of police abuse. Whites feared the cops less than they feared the consequences of making it harder for the police to enforce the law.

Dinkins's two initiatives—the commission to investigate police corruption and a renewed push for a civilian review board—put the mayor and his police commissioner at odds. Brown saw the moves as mayoral meddling in his department's affairs, an expression of lack of confidence in him and the NYPD and damaging to morale. When the mayor announced his positions, Brown did not join him and declared he would lobby against the civilian review board proposal at the city council. "In his 36 years of policing, he has never seen an external board that works," his spokesperson told the press. Just over a month later, Brown resigned. His wife, Yvonne, had cancer and wanted to return to Houston for treatment near her family. "My priorities are quite clear," the commissioner said. "My family comes first." Yvonne Brown's life ended before the year did. The mayor appointed Ray Kelly acting commissioner and praised Brown's work. So did Philip Caruso, head of the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (PBA). Caruso had less kind things to say about the mayor and his recent decisions.²⁵

Seeking to channel patrolman anger at Dinkins into opposition for the civilian review board, Caruso organized a protest at City Hall on September 16, 1992. Ten thousand angry cops showed up, some wearing T-shirts saying, "Dinkins Must Go!" Others carried signs that said, "Dear Mayor, have you hugged a drug dealer today?" When First Deputy Mayor Steisel caught sight of a sign that referred to the often-tuxedo-clad black mayor as a "washroom attendant," he knew things would get bad. Una Clarke, an African American politician, sought to enter the building the cops had blockaded. An off-duty policeman standing in her path turned to another and said, "[T]his nigger says she's a council member," before letting her pass.²⁶

Rudolph Giuliani, gearing up to challenge Dinkins for the mayor's office in 1993, joined the protest. From the podium, he described the mayor's policies as "bullshit" and he led the crowd in anti-Dinkins chants. Caruso and Officer Michael O'Keefe also delivered impassioned criticisms of the mayor. After their leaders finished their vulgar speeches, the men and women responsible for maintaining public order responded like the mobs the city normally expected them to control. They swarmed over barricades, surrounded City Hall, stopped traffic

on the Brooklyn Bridge for nearly an hour, roughed up several reporters, and trampled automobiles while their on-duty colleagues stood by. Some hurled racial insults at the mayor's office. "He never supports us on anything," Officer Tara Fanning of the Midtown South Precinct told a reporter, summing up the crowd's anger with the mayor. "A cop shoots someone with a gun who's a drug dealer and [Dinkins] goes and visits the family," she said with obvious disgust.²⁷

Furious at the off-duty officers' behavior, Dinkins denounced the event as hooliganism and held Caruso responsible. He accused Giuliani of crass opportunism, seizing "upon a fragile circumstance in our city for his own political gain." Acting commissioner Kelly oversaw a swift investigation. Within a week, he ordered forty-two officers disciplined and issued a thirteen-page interim report that condemned the actions as "unruly, mean-spirited and perhaps criminal." Reports that racial epithets punctuated the near riot led him to declare that such language would be grounds for immediate dismissal. Ironically, a year earlier, Commissioner Brown had circulated a "Message from the Police Commissioner" to the department that began: "Police Officers' use of ethnic slurs or other abusive language demeans our profession, and undermines the public's confidence in our ability to do an increasingly difficult job." At the time no one would have imagined such slurs would be directed toward the mayor.²⁸

Kelly declared the behavior of the protesters "an embarrassment to a department widely respected for its professionalism." He acknowledged that "[p]ublic confidence in the Department has been shaken" and would need to be restored. Not long afterward, Dinkins officially appointed Kelly to the commissioner's post. Before the year ended, the mayor and the city council created a thirteen-member all-civilian review board, with many council members citing the ugly demonstration as the turning point that solidified their support. The mayor won a political victory, but it came at a cost. "The thing that every mayor tries to avoid is exactly what Dinkins has," urban historian Richard Wade noted. The city's chief executive and the city's police department were at war.²⁹

The mayor had no illusions about the depth of deterioration in his relationship with the NYPD. A few weeks after the offensive protests, he called every precinct commander in the city to Gracie Mansion on a Saturday morning "[b]ecause it is important . . . after all that has happened in the last few weeks that we . . . meet. We need to talk. . . . We need to get things back on track. And we need to start right away."³⁰

He praised the senior police professionals for their work that had helped cause crime to drop “across the board for the first time since nineteen fifty six, and for all but one month in the past two years.” Together, he said, they had “at least captured the upper hand against the forces of social disintegration,” a proud achievement. He went on to say that he envisioned “a New York where police officers are held in more respect than they have ever, ever been.” Accomplishing that goal in “an era in which African Americans and Latinos—people of color, long commonly thought of as ‘minorities’—have become the majority . . . with a police department whose demographics are more like the demographics of this city thirty or forty years ago,” presented special challenges, he told the group. And “as the first African American Mayor of New York,” Dinkins believed he was “in a unique position to understand why there has sometimes been alienation between cops and the communities they serve.” He thought that put him in a unique position to help achieve the objective of a police department respected and welcomed in every neighborhood.³¹

Then he got to the heart of the matter. “I accept the fact that most officers do not agree with the way I handled the situation in Washington Heights last July,” he said. And “I accept that, when a crowd of thousands of police officers gathered outside City Hall on September sixteenth, they had a perfect right to be there—and a constitutional right to express their views. Actually, I had a pretty good idea of what those views were before September sixteenth, but never mind.” Yet he asserted the officers “who engaged in . . . illegal and unacceptable conduct . . . were an embarrassment to this city, [and] to the shield.” He asked the commanders to recognize “[t]hat whatever I have done, I have done in what I honestly believe was the long-term interest of promoting and securing . . . respect and admiration” for each member of the department. He also asked them to recognize that his own respect and admiration for the police was genuine and that they take that message down through the ranks. The mayor also met with all of the police department’s chaplains and rabbis. “[T]o continue the sound and the fury of the past few weeks will accomplish nothing,” he told the people responsible for the spiritual well-being of the city’s police officers. With the help of God, the mayor hoped all would find a way to put the bitter moment behind and move on.³²

II. Religion and Race Redux

Within days of the disgraceful police action, Lemrick Nelson’s trial for the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum began. Prosecutors presented their opening statement to a courtroom packed with Hasidic Jews and the defendant’s family and friends. They accused the teenager of killing the Australian scholar “in the frenzy of the moment,” while the mob screamed, “Kill the Jew!” Police had arrested him nearby shortly after the attack and found a knife in his pocket with Rosenbaum’s blood on it. Before an ambulance took him to the hospital, Rosenbaum had identified Nelson as the one who stabbed him. The lawyer of the accused teenager countered that the arresting officers framed his client to distract attention from the “police riot” that the NYPD launched against Crown Heights residents. He also insisted Rosenbaum would have lived except for medical negligence at Kings County Hospital.³³

The case appeared open-and-shut when it started. But the prosecution’s story contained contradictions. Confusion emerged surrounding details of Rosenbaum’s identification of Nelson when police brought him back to the scene of the stabbing. Sloppy treatment of evidence damaged the credibility of key witnesses. In the end, inconsistencies in police testimony deftly managed by Nelson’s attorney led the jurors to acquit the accused murderer on all charges. “The police were not honest,” one juror told a reporter. And in an act of supreme insensitivity and poor judgment, the day after the trial ended, the jurors joined Nelson and his attorney for a dinner to celebrate their shared experience.³⁴

The Hasidim and many other New Yorkers reacted with stunned disbelief and outrage. Jews gathered outside Lubavitch headquarters on Eastern Parkway shortly before 9:00 p.m. on the evening of the verdict, where some speakers talked of revenge. Isolated incidents of bottle throwing, shoving, and fights between Hasidim and blacks occurred. Heavy police presence in fully equipped riot gear and a general lack of violent intent kept the situation from spiraling out of control. Yet the verdict left many with a dispiriting sense that the racially divided city they lived in could not deliver justice. Outside the courthouse, after Nelson’s acquittal, Hasidim adopted the battle cry of black militants, chanting, “No justice, no peace!” In the circumstances, it seemed less like a defiant call to action than an objective observation about life in New York.³⁵

The next day Dinkins announced the reassignment of fifty detectives to the Rosenbaum investigation, and the city offered a \$10,000 reward

for the capture of Rosenbaum's killer. The act had a surreal quality. At face value, the jury's decision meant they did not believe Nelson committed the murder, so launching a renewed investigation to search for the murderer seemed necessary. Except in the minds of many Lemrick Nelson was indeed guilty, and he could not be tried on the same charges again. So an elaborate, renewed investigation appeared a cynical charade. Dinkins provoked more anger when he refused to condemn the Lemrick verdict as he had when a jury acquitted the Los Angeles police who beat Rodney King. Saying the videotape in the King case created a difference as clear as "night and day," Dinkins dismissed the critics of his seemingly contradictory positions. Governor Cuomo launched a special inquiry to determine what happened, and so did Commissioner Kelly.³⁶

None of the official actions lessened the outrage among Jews in Crown Heights and elsewhere around New York. "It was not just Yankel," the murder victim's brother, Norman, told a crowd of protestors who gathered at Lubavitch headquarters. "What we had in this neighborhood was a pogrom." Jewish leaders denounced the verdict, and with reinvigorated, vicious emotion, many once again condemned David Dinkins's handling of the Crown Heights riots. The charge that he had deliberately prevented the police from responding more forcefully in the first days of rioting recurred persistently. Riverdale rabbi Avi Weiss organized a demonstration in front of Gracie Mansion. "If New York's finest were allowed to do their job," he declared with bombast, "Yankel Rosenbaum would be alive today." The protesters he led brought with them a coffin, a symbolic reminder of Rosenbaum's death. Some, including Weiss, carried posters that read, "Wanted for Murder," under a photograph of the mayor. Weiss would later regret hoisting the sign. Yet it revealed the emotions the dubious verdict unleashed.³⁷

Dinkins felt compelled to confront the accusation that he held back the police. He spoke to 125 rabbis at Jewish Theological Seminary a few weeks after the Lemrick Nelson verdict. With Rabbi Weiss seated prominently in the front row of the audience, Dinkins talked of "the lynching" of Yankel Rosenbaum and all that had followed. "Some people look at this large and very complicated picture and see only two things: the Mayor is African American and the rioters are African American and they conclude that therefore, the Mayor must have held the police back. But," he continued, "there is not a single shred of evidence that I held the N.Y.P.D. back and there never will be.

And every time this utterly false charge is repeated, the social fabric of our city tears just a little bit more." Reminding his audience of his lifelong opposition to anti-Semitism, he told them, "I know that all decent, fair-minded New Yorkers share my sorrow, and my desire to bring to justice the bigots who committed this unspeakable crime. At the same time, I note with shame that some people no longer even seem interested in finding Yankel Rosenbaum's killers—they are more interested in my political scalp."³⁸

The Nelson acquittal coincided with a troubling rise in anti-Semitic episodes around the city. The police registered nineteen criminal acts against Jews during the high holidays in 1992. "The quality of the attacks has clearly changed," New York City human rights commissioner Dennis de Leon, noted. "In the past, there were more anti-Semitic incidents of property damage than any other kind. Now there seem to be more one-on-one personal assaults." The American Jewish Committee polled New Yorkers and made the disquieting discovery that nearly half believed Jews had too much power and influence in the life and politics of the city. Two-thirds of Latinos and nearly as high a percentage of blacks supported the view. Well over one-third of Jews declared anti-Semitism a major problem, and nearly 60 percent said the problem had gotten worse during the past year. "There is a sense among Jews that they are no longer welcome in the city," city councilman Herbert Berman declared. "What frightens me is I don't think City Hall understands. The mayor's inability to make people feel he is truly sensitive to these issues has exacerbated the issue."³⁹

Two weeks after his address at Jewish Theological Seminary, the day before Thanksgiving, the mayor addressed the entire city on the topic of Lemrick Nelson's acquittal and the broader issues Crown Heights had come to symbolize. Most stations carried the sixteen-minute speech live. "In the past weeks our nightly news shows and morning newspapers have been filled with charges and countercharges.... A few members of the clergy have forsaken the prayer book for the press release.... Round and round the spinning wheel of accusation goes and where it stops nobody knows," Dinkins began, obviously fed up. He recounted the events that had taken place in Crown Heights the prior August and in highly personal terms his meetings with the Cato family and with Yankel Rosenbaum before his death. "Yankel Rosenbaum, here in New York to study the Holocaust, was stabbed for one reason and one reason only—because he was a Jew," Dinkins said, making sure all knew that he had not missed that essential point.⁴⁰

"By their own accounts . . . the Police Department did make tactical errors in judgment and deployment of police officers in the early hours of the disturbance which may have delayed a return to normalcy. I know and accept that when a mistake is made that it is the Mayor who is called to account," Dinkins told the city. But he called the claims that he had instructed the police to temper their response "false, reprehensible and despicable." And he could not, he declared, "allow a quiet riot of words and epithets to poison our citizenry."⁴¹

"Race baiters and rabble-rousers do not understand our lives," the mayor said to the citizens who elected him. "Because every day and every night, on subways and buses, at work stations and in offices, at lunch counters and in libraries, in our parks, and in our movie houses, New Yorkers live and work and learn and play, side by side and shoulder to shoulder. . . . I was elected to be the Mayor of all our people. And I am Mayor of all our people," he declared. His comments refuted any suggestion that the city he led could not live in harmony and any notion that he favored one group over others. Of the posters bearing his picture that said "Wanted for Murder," the deeply offended mayor asked the city, "In burying a seven year old boy and a quiet bible scholar, did we bury decency too?"⁴²

Over the next several months, the mayor "tried to talk the problem away, appearing before countless Jewish groups, but no matter how good his intentions, the strategy wasn't working," Craig Horowitz wrote in *New York* magazine in an article headlined, "The New Anti-Semitism." One rabbi pointed out the obvious. "Mayor Dinkins knows he's very, very vulnerable politically," he said. "[A]nd he's gonna become more vulnerable as time goes on," the man surmised. The mayor met with Crown Heights leaders of every persuasion, searching for ways the city could restore the community's confidence in government. As a matter of decency and responsibility, he wanted to. As a political matter, he had to. *New York Times* reporter Todd Purdum, in an article headlined, "Crown Hts. Drives Contest for Mayor," summed up the situation. "The scalding racial tensions of Crown Heights have unfolded against the backdrop of next year's New York city mayoral race, and while none of the three announced candidates would put it this way, all are trying to turn the undercurrents of anger and recrimination to their political advantage."⁴³

Yankel Rosenbaum's ghost haunted David Dinkins and New York for years. The dead scholar's brother, Norman, refused to let his sibling's death pass into history without justice. He had attended Lemrick

Nelson's state trial every day, and when that jury acquitted he sought federal prosecution on civil rights charges. With strong pressure from senators Alfonse D'Amato, Daniel Moynihan, and others, a reluctant Justice Department indicted Lemrick Nelson shortly before the statute of limitations expired. It brought him to trial in 1997, along with Charles Price, a drug addict and petty criminal accused of helping incite the riot that raged around the stabbing. A federal jury convicted both men, and the judge in the case sentenced Nelson to the maximum penalty of nineteen-and-a-half years.⁴⁴

Still the matter did not rest. After a lengthy appeal, in 2002 a federal court ruled the judge in the first civil rights case mishandled jury selection and ordered a new trial. By the time it took place, the Rosenbaums had filed a civil suit against Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn where Yankel had been treated for his stab wounds. A New York State Health Department report found the hospital negligent and determined that with proper care Yankel Rosenbaum would have lived. On the basis of that information, Nelson's lawyers adopted a new strategy. Now the man confessed to the stabbing but claimed he had not intended to kill Rosenbaum. He also denied that he had attacked him because he was Jewish or to prevent him from using a public street, the accusations that justified the federal civil rights action. The jury convicted anew, but on charges with a maximum penalty of ten years, which Nelson had virtually served by then. On June 2, 2004, Lemrick Nelson left his federal prison in Beaumont, Texas, for a halfway house in New Jersey. In 2005, fourteen years after Yankel's death, the Rosenbaum family finally settled the hospital suit for \$1,250,000.⁴⁵

Along the way Dinkins's successor, Rudolph Giuliani, settled a civil suit on the matter. New York City paid eighty Crown Heights residents and institutions and the Rosenbaum family a total of \$1,100,000. Announcing the settlement, Giuliani apologized "to the citizens of Crown Heights, to the Rosenbaum family and to all of the people that were affected by [what was] probably one of the saddest chapters in the history of the city." The decision and statement infuriated Dinkins and former police commissioner Lee Brown. "It is obvious to any fair-minded person that within the first few hours of the rioting when he was stabbed, no police action, no matter who the Mayor was, could have protected [Yankel Rosenbaum]," Dinkins told a reporter. Holding him responsible for the tragic death, in Dinkins view, meant every mayor was to blame for "everybody who has been mugged or shot or stabbed" during their term. And the city also settled a civil suit with

the family of Gavin Cato for \$400,000 in response to claims the city's emergency medical service delayed treating the young boy after the tragic accident.⁴⁶

III. Kelly Takes Command

While the mayor dealt with the racial politics of the city, Ray Kelly dealt with the racial politics of the department he now ran. The rude racial slurs directed toward the mayor by white police officers during the riot at City Hall and the image of a white police force battling African Americans in Crown Heights had raised the sensitivity of the city and its police commissioner to the need to recruit more African American cops. A survey of the nation's fifty largest cities ranked New York worst in terms of the racial alignment of its police department and its people despite the fact that its last two commissioners had been African Americans.⁴⁷

A department veteran of nearly three decades by the time Dinkins named him commissioner, Kelly, with his Irish Catholic heritage, reflected the organization's ethnic past. Over the years he had worked inside six precinct houses across three boroughs and had developed a knowledge of the department's affairs few could match. In his first six months on the job, he worked seven days a week, often ten to fourteen hours a day, sending an unmistakable message that he was in command. Kelly's background, experience, and drive gave him strong credibility with the rank and file and the PBA, something the mayor desperately needed in his new commissioner. As he pursued meaningful change, none could claim Kelly did not understand how the policies he promoted affected cops on the street or the sensitivities of the department's overwhelmingly white, working-class officers.⁴⁸

The man's very strengths made him suspect to African American and Latino leaders. Abyssinian Baptist Church leader Calvin Butts, III, suggested that had Kelly been younger he would have been one of the cops protesting at City Hall. Kelly understood the problem. "I knew I'd better hit the ground running because I bring so much baggage into this job," he acknowledged. "I'm stuck with this face"—the chiseled look of the marine he was, set in unmistakably Irish features. "I'm a cop for 29 years—part of this system, but I think that's my strength. I'm reaching out—it's the Nixon-to-China approach," he said. Even as acting commissioner, he had taken to visiting black churches on Sundays and meeting with prominent African Americans and Latinos

to hear their concerns. The need to add more of their own to the police force featured prominently in these talks, which in turn required a review of the department's selection process. In particular, African Americans did poorly when faced with psychological screening. Tests that identified normal behavior for white working-class candidates miscategorized responses offered by blacks who grew up in tough inner-city neighborhoods where distrust of the police was common. The mismatch sometimes eliminated as many as nine black applicants out of ten who passed the written exam.⁴⁹

In a bold move shortly after his appointment, Kelly postponed the next round of cadet recruiting to allow for a comprehensive review of the hiring process. He intended to eliminate the cultural biases that froze in time the ethnic makeup of the force. Unlike the two African American commissioners who preceded him, because he was white, he could pursue an aggressive policy for hiring blacks without fearing accusations of favoritism. His first official day on the job, Kelly declared recruiting more black officers his "most vital" priority. He promised an "all out" marketing plan to overcome the reluctance of many young African Americans and Latinos to apply to the NYPD since they grew up distrusting cops. Without more black and Latino representation on the force, Kelly feared "increased tension between the communities and the police. Tension leads to hostilities and that will lead to more cries of racism in the department," a charge Kelly claimed not to believe, but one he knew needed to be defused.⁵⁰

True to his word, Kelly expanded the outreach drive. Instead of 16 recruiters, he put to work 109, 86 of them black or Latino. He visited dozens of black churches to get out the word. His sales pitch was simple and direct. "Our department does not now reflect the community it serves," he told parishioners. "To put it bluntly, it is disproportionately white. We have to change the composition of our department, and that's why I'm here. That's why I'm turning to you for help," he would say. "We need the kind of talent that is right here in this community, the kind of talent that is too often overlooked." The pool of African Americans signing up for the exam ballooned to over 14,000 from just 1,800, and more than 13,000 Latinos applied as well. Kelly also secured approval to award city residents a five-point bonus on the qualifying exam, which improved the chances for city-bound people of color over suburban whites. The policy had the added advantage of increasing the number of officers who actually lived in the city that employed them and that relied on them for protection.⁵¹

Within six months, Kelly had reversed his reputation among black and Latino critics. Calvin Butts declared he had changed his mind about the man. "I was against Kelly from the start," Reverend Charles Mixon of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship in Queens confessed. "I told the mayor I did not think this man could deal with the situation of African Americans. But he came out to see us, sat in our churches, made it clear he was trying to make a difference. I've changed my mind about him. A lot of people have," he concluded of Kelly.⁵²

On corruption, Kelly struggled. He knew he had to act to maintain public confidence, yet he feared the impact on morale of holding his senior officers accountable for illegal police activity when the culture they lived in made it all but impossible for them to punish corrupt cops and continue to function in the department. Cops "ratting" on other cops remained for most a forbidden act, a violation of the code imposed by the "blue wall of silence."⁵³

In November 1992 Kelly released a 160-page report prepared under his direct supervision: *An Investigation into the Police Department's Conduct of the Dowd Case and an Assessment of the Police Department's Internal Investigation Capabilities*. It described an internal affairs division that had become a "bunglers bureaucracy of inexperienced, poorly trained detectives using inferior equipment and ineffective techniques, and closing out cases with sloppy, misleading reports." It took seventy pages to document twenty separate internal affairs investigations of Michael Dowd over the years. Offenses ranged from harassing his girlfriend to sex with prostitutes at a Brooklyn bar. He had been accused of drinking alcohol on duty and of smoking marijuana. Reports said he stole money from prisoners, drug dealers, and corpses. Fellow officers said he trafficked in narcotics and protected kingpins in return for bribes of thousands of dollars a week. They said he had reported a stab wound received when a drug transaction went bad as an injury in the line of duty, and on and on. Yet until Suffolk County detectives busted Dowd, he faced no serious charges. The NYPD disciplined him three times for departmental infractions, never for crimes.⁵⁴

Kelly claimed to find no evidence that senior department officials interfered with any investigation of Dowd, and he punished no one. His report did not contemplate the possibility that the department's investigations did not catch the brazenly dishonest and decadent cop once in twenty tries because officials who feared their careers would suffer saw to it he never got caught in their command. "There's no

heroes in this report," but "I don't think it's clear who is accountable here," Kelly said. In his mind, the episode revealed a "systems problem." He did not believe it would "do much good to take out somebody who was in the middle of the system.... In order to have accountability, you have to have a reasonable shot at being aware of what happened." He believed the "overlapping responsibility and bifurcated authority" that had developed between the internal affairs division and the field units made it too hard for commanders to exercise real control over investigations. Singling out a handful of senior cops for "ritual blood-letting" struck Kelly as arbitrary and ultimately damaging. "Negative discipline only works so far; you need loyalty and trust" to make the police department work seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day, Kelly told a reporter. Cleaning up dirty precincts, Kelly had learned that punishing supervisors for corruption that occurred on their watch created a dysfunctional response. It motivated otherwise good cops to look the other way, to deny incidents rather than confront them. So his message seemed to be stricter discipline in the future, but no accountability for the past—a pragmatic cop out.⁵⁵

Not everyone found Kelly's logic convincing. "It's easy to find culprits just by reading Kelly's report," one said. "It wasn't just that the system stank. Some people inside the system did too." Kelly knew his position risked damaging his personal credibility, but he made his decision and moved on. He elevated the internal affairs division to full bureau status, equal in standing to the department's patrol forces and detectives. It would report directly to the commissioner, and it would receive more resources and better surveillance equipment. It would operate with a more tightly controlled central unit to improve its effectiveness. Kelly, as commissioner, made a point of meeting with the head of internal affairs every day. Before the year ended, he named John S. Pritchard, III, his first deputy. A former NYPD detective and FBI agent, Pritchard had been the inspector general at the MTA, where he earned a reputation as an aggressive corruption fighter. His appointment reinforced the message that Kelly would root out bad cops going forward, even if he declined to punish senior commanders for past transgressions. And since Pritchard was African American, his presence in so high profile a position furthered Kelly's goal of creating a department that could attract more black cops as well.⁵⁶

A year later, the Mollen Commission would issue a twenty-page interim report on its investigation into police corruption. It would deliver its final report in July 1994. It concluded no individuals could

be held accountable for the extent of corruption in the NYPD. Yet it accused the department in stinging language of fostering a culture that tolerated even gross and violent misconduct by police officers. It did not find the type of wide-scale graft the Knapp Commission had found permeated the department in the 1970s. Instead it asserted that small gangs of rogue cops thrived because senior officials feared their careers would suffer if they exposed the misdeeds in their units and because officers themselves feared the social and personal consequences of reporting their peers' illegal activities. "We find . . . shocking the incompetence and the inadequacies of the department to police itself," the interim report stated. It declared the department's unwillingness to confront corruption a system-wide, institutional flaw. The need to police the police required an authority outside of the department, the panel concluded. They proposed that a commission like theirs become a standing body to investigate accusations of wrongdoing. The return of a special state prosecutor charged with the responsibility, a post created after the Knapp Commission that had existed until 1990, when Governor Cuomo shut the office in a cost-saving move, seemed another logical solution to a problem sure to persist.⁵⁷

At first, police commissioner Kelly objected to the language and recommendations of Mollen's panel. But as detailed revelations emerged during public hearings, Kelly declared himself "revolted" by the behavior described. He accepted the wisdom of an outside body authorized to scrutinize accusations of police corruption as long as it did not impede the power of the commissioner to punish cops when the department found them wanting.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, beneath the dramatic headlines and extraordinary tensions surrounding the police department, the city actually became a little safer. In 1992 the overall level of crime fell nearly 8 percent, the second consecutive year of decline. That had not happened since Robert Wagner served as mayor in the 1950s. The number of incidents reported, well over six hundred thousand, remained alarmingly high but constituted a reversal to a level last reached in 1985. Murders fell below two thousand again—still intolerable by any reasonable standard, but at least a welcome shift in direction. Mayor Dinkins cited the numbers as evidence the "Safe Streets, Safe City" program his administration launched had begun to accomplish its goals as he set his sights on reelection. His opponents, of course, would present things differently.⁵⁹

Notes

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Measuring Mayor Dinkins's Mettle

Mayor Dinkins grappled with the extraordinary challenges New York City faced between 1990 and 1993 with grace and dignity, with poise and compassion. He brought to his task ample intellect, keen understanding of municipal issues, and a history of reaching across the boundaries of race and religion with unusual skill. Yet he proved the wrong man for the times.

Suffering from a fiscal crisis, a crime wave, and a broken school system, New York needed an aggressive reformer—a mayor who would restructure city government and its costs, who would restore a sense of law-and-order to its streets, and who would revamp an educational system that crippled the city's ability to teach its children. Faced as well with serious racial tensions that threatened the civic peace, New York needed someone to heal its black-and-white wounds. The emotions surrounding race relations in 1989, particularly after Yusuf Hawkins's killing, caused the desire for harmony to trump all other considerations in that year's election for mayor. That made David Dinkins, with his fierce civility and his promise to craft New York's feuding tribes into a gorgeous mosaic, seem a fitting choice.

In the process of selecting a man they hoped would heal the city, New Yorkers elected a Tammany-clubhouse politician with a liberal philosophy of government. He had African American sensibilities toward law enforcement and other issues and a cautious, dispassionate decision-making temperament. David Dinkins had little interest in government reform, he harbored a deep suspicion of the NYPD and its use of force, and he maintained an abiding commitment to community control of schools at a time when that system had failed.

Tragically, Mayor Dinkins mishandled the Korean grocers boycott, the Crown Heights riots, and the Washington Heights disturbances, and he pursued policies that contributed to cultural collision at the school board. As a consequence of these decisions and others, his fundamental promise to heal racial wounds, the basis for his election, went unfulfilled. When asked in June 1993 if race relations had deteriorated or improved while Dinkins governed, a majority of New Yorkers declared them worse—whites and Latinos by very large margins. Blacks surveyed said race relations had improved rather than deteriorated by a measure of 38 percent to 34, the barest of margins even among the mayor's most sympathetic supporters. In a 2001 essay, "David Dinkins and the Politics of Race in New York City," Roger Biles called Dinkins's 1989 electoral victory a "political coming of age," while his "failure to convince voters of his ability to deal fairly and evenhandedly with all ethnic groups and races . . . proved a lethal shortcoming," in 1993.¹

The narrowness of Mayor Dinkins's 1993 defeat belies the softness of his support. His policies lost him key backers, like the United Federation of Teachers. Unions that stayed with him complained that inspiring enthusiasm for the candidate had become very hard. A majority of Puerto Rican community leaders polled rated the mayor's leadership as poor. Felix Rohatyn, a committed Democrat, backed his party's candidate even though in October 1993 he told a journalist that New York's spirit was lower than during the 1970s when the city flirted with bankruptcy. A black weekly in Brooklyn, the *City Sun*, in a front-page editorial, encouraged the mayor to shake off his reserve. "Frankly, you are beginning to look like a wimp," it wrote. Herbert Daughtry, among Dinkins's more militant African American allies, backed him in 1993, even though "Mayor Dinkins has not been able to ameliorate the pain, despair, and anger" many New Yorkers suffered, despite gallant efforts. Many of the ballots cast for David Dinkins in 1993 were not votes of confidence, but rejections of his opponent that overpowered disappointment with the incumbent. Such is often the way in America's two-party system.²

New York's successful leaders inspire confidence across the diverse population of the city. David Dinkins did not. A large majority of white New Yorkers doubted his capacity to govern when the city first elected him. In significant measure, his rise to power and his promotion of all the groups in New York's gorgeous mosaic upended a status quo dominated by white men for decades. Faced with their displacement, many were bound to find themselves uncomfortable with their

new mayor. It is easy to argue that nothing New York's first African American mayor did would have attracted more whites to his cause—that the sliver he won in victory and defeat was all he could hope for in a racially petrified city. Yet the more convincing case is that Dinkins's decisions destroyed whatever chance he had to improve his standing with whites of good faith. Different choices could have diminished white discomfort. Instead, his policies intensified white anxieties, and white support for him drifted down. Latinos cut their vote for Dinkins in 1993 by 10 percent—to 60 percent from 70 percent. Support among Asian New Yorkers fell too. African American voters cast almost all their ballots for Dinkins in 1993, just as they had in 1989, but fewer bothered to go the polls. Dinkins's coalition never collapsed, but it sagged and weakened as a result of his poor leadership.

The two ethnic coalitions in play during the 1989 and 1993 mayoralty campaigns had been wrangling for power in New York City since the 1960s. The liberal one consisted of African Americans, a majority of Latinos, and a crucial element of liberal white voters, mostly Jews. The conservative one consisted of Catholics, not-so-liberal Jews, and a significant minority of Latinos. By the time Dinkins ran for mayor, demographic shifts left the two groups nearly evenly matched in the numbers of voters each could command. This explains how David Dinkins could win one election and lose the next by such narrow margins. Modest changes in turnout were sufficient to affect the outcome, along with modest shifts in voting patterns by Latinos and Jews, the two groups with significant standing in both camps.

Successful New York mayors elected with narrow mandates adopted policies and postures that expanded their popularity. Fiorello LaGuardia won only a plurality in 1933. In 1937, he won by a landslide. Robert F. Wagner won less than a majority in a three-way race for mayor in 1953 but secured the greatest margin of victory of any mayor up until his time in 1957. Ed Koch went from a bare majority in 1977 to huge wins in 1981 and 1985. Rudy Giuliani would expand his slim margin of victory in 1993 into much broader support in 1997. The shrinkage in Dinkins's coalition stands out by contrast.

The composition and narrowness of David Dinkins's 1989 victory should have made solidifying his base and expanding it within the constraints of the city's ethnic realities a fundamental goal. His administration's actions suggest a strategy based on the mayor's clubhouse heritage and his liberal political philosophy. In Tammany's heyday, Democratic party bosses controlled the municipal workforce, and

they conspired with the mayors they helped to elect, or bullied them, to secure as many jobs as they could for party workers at taxpayer expense. The bosses cared not at all about efficient government. By the time Dinkins came to power, municipal labor leaders had secured control of the city's workers and in significant measure played the role party officials once had. The public unions that provided the mayor with crucial support in his bid for office expected the spoils that go to the victors. The mayor sought to accommodate them, and he also wanted to expand delivery of the social services that he believed in and that his base relied upon disproportionately. Since municipal union membership and its leadership were heavily black, Latino, and liberal, and since expanding city social services would create more union jobs, in theory the pieces fit nicely together. But the dire budget environment and the risk of a fiscal takeover by the Financial Control Board placed such limits on the approach that it proved untenable.

Dinkins's political philosophy exacerbated his disconnect with his times. As a classic urban liberal, he believed government had a compelling obligation to help the poor, the disadvantaged, and the vulnerable to balance the inherent unfairness of life in a capitalist society. This philosophy dominated public discourse in New York City between the days of the Great Depression—when economic collapse left many destitute for reasons perceived as beyond their control—and the 1970s. New York City's near bankruptcy in 1975 and all that followed had caused many New Yorkers to reconsider the limits of local government in the decade and a half prior to Dinkins's election. During the 1980s President Ronald Reagan recast in decidedly limited terms the proper role of government in social policy. New Yorkers never adopted the views wholesale, but they were not deaf to the sounds of a newly engaged debate over the philosophy of government in America. The emergence of the Manhattan Institute as New York's preeminent urban policy think tank makes this evident. Dinkins's liberal outlook, a consensus position in New York when he formed it as a young man, reflected the thinking of less of the city than it once had by the time he became mayor. No less than his clubhouse heritage, his political philosophy conflicted with the distressed budget realities he faced.

The tension between greater efficiency and more expansive services roiled David Dinkins's government inside and out. His administration's efficiency experts and its social service advocates sparred with each other continuously, allowing their competing visions and priorities to spill unhelpfully into the press at times. The confusion that followed

demonstrated that David Dinkins—displaying a Tammany leader's reluctance to commit—never established a clear statement of the policies he wanted his senior staff to pursue within the constraints he faced. He also never established an effective decision-making process for sorting through the extraordinary range of options between more efficient and more expansive government, and reconciling the many inherent conflicts between the two. Without clearly articulated priorities and without a strong decision-making process to control a bureaucracy as large and unwieldy as New York's, David Dinkins's vision for the city ended up reduced to reactive rhetoric that seemed to ascribe comparable importance to every worthy idea, providing little sense of direction. He became a mayor perceived as responding to events rather than controlling them. Fiscal monitors lacked confidence in his budget management. Liberals and social service advocates accused him of betraying his promises and his commitment to their causes.

The lack of a clear decision-making process translated into a sense that the mayor did not truly command the government. "Certainly, David conveys a picture of decency and concern, but not of leadership," Robert F. Wagner Jr. said, speaking about the incumbent toward the end of the 1993 campaign. Manhattan borough president Ruth Messinger, a reliable Dinkins ally, offered a sympathetic interpretation that still recognized the mayor's approach to decision making harmed his standing with the city. "This is an administration that because of tough options and the Mayor's style, has made a commitment to being deliberative. Very often that doesn't please anyone," she acknowledged. *New York Times* journalist Todd Purdum came to the same conclusion. "He strives so hard to offend no one, that he often offends nearly everyone. At worst, he presents himself as a toothless sap," the journalist wrote, even as he hastened to add that the image was "something that the many aides who have been excoriated for falling short of his exacting standards will tell you he distinctly is not."³

J. Phillip Thompson, III, in *Double Trouble: Black Mayors, Black Communities and the Call for a Deep Democracy*, writes, "Dinkins had no framework to guide him" in the process of engaging with adversaries to "fight for [his] own concept of justice." Thompson, who worked in the Dinkins administration, observed firsthand the conflict between social service advocates and budget hawks that "repeatedly played out . . . with frequent feuding and occasional undermining of the mayor by his deputy mayors." Eventually, the fiscal crisis gave the money men the upper hand, and they pursued a series of "policies that

Dinkins's union and minority constituents opposed." Weaker union support meant Dinkins needed exceptional support from black civic organizations and from black activists to win reelection, particularly in Brooklyn, but he had to secure it without alienating white voters. According to Thompson, this presented Dinkins with the "impossible choice" to "go black" or "go white" in his reelection campaign, since his media strategy could not simultaneously appeal to the competing priorities of the two groups. The media strategy went white, and Dinkins lost, Thompson concludes.⁴

Dinkins complained about his treatment in the media and in moments of candor accused journalists of holding him to a higher standard than white politicians. In his mind, his administration's mistakes received prominent headlines and his successes scant attention. In *David Dinkins and New York City Politics: Race, Images and the Media*, Wilbur C. Rich asserts that deeply rooted national stereotypes make it "permissible for the public to hold reservations" about the intelligence of blacks and "their work ethic" and to cast them as more interested in the trappings of power than the substance. When Dinkins's actions could be cast in that light, for many whites these actions took on a self-validating quality, carrying greater currency than if a white leader did the same. Consciously or unconsciously, Rich believes journalists often wrote of Dinkins in unflattering "pre-packaged images" pertaining to his African American heritage and to his clubhouse background. Dinkins "may have been aware" that the media "was deflating his image, but he lacked the rhetorical skills to reframe the questions," Rich writes. "Dinkins's political socialization as a clubhouse politician did not prepare him to take control and impose his will on political events . . . politicians like Dinkins . . . do get to the top, but their personalities prevent them from dominating their environment." He describes Dinkins as a politician "careful not [to] offend any powerful group leaders or coalitions," ultimately undermining his own authority with indecisiveness.⁵

Whatever prejudices laced Dinkins's media coverage, the fundamental flaw in his communications with the city stemmed from inconsistent management of the government rooted in an effort to please irreconcilable constituencies. When policies lack coherence, so do messages about them. Priorities announced at one moment too often fell victim to budget realities or a change of focus shortly afterward, creating confusion and damaging credibility. Dinkins's overly deliberate and detached management style—his unwillingness to commit to policies

and stick to them—prevented him from providing his administration with clear direction, which ensured inconsistent and confused communications with the press and the public.

David Dinkins's unyielding civility and graceful dignity often served as great sources of strength. Cautious language and polite manners had helped him to succeed in a world where angry African Americans tended to scare whites, and the traits had become an integral aspect of his personal style. But the man's highly self-conscious, fetish-like commitment to projecting a courtly demeanor and to personal elegance at times left the people he led feeling distant from their leader. It contributed to the impression that he was too aloof to govern effectively. His demeanor became more than just a matter of style. When the mayor declined to express outrage on behalf of a city frightened and furious about violent crime, he let the public down. He sometimes behaved as if he believed it beneath the dignity of a city's leader to busy himself with the tedious details of day-to-day operations in an often-messy metropolis. At critical moments, this trait left him detached from events too important to ignore. And the man could be unhelpfully stubborn, like when he refused to accelerate the release of his comprehensive crime program, even though the city's tabloids had launched a press riot in search of one. Stubborn pursuit of controversial policies at the Board of Education cost him control of the board. It is easy to imagine that a successful black man with a marine's steel in his spine, who grew up in a nation that bullied African Americans as a matter of law and custom, had learned to stand his ground. But Dinkins lacked the emotional agility to overcome this instinct when circumstances demanded.

David Dinkins's Tammany training, liberal political philosophy, and overly deliberate decision-making style are all apparent in his handling, and mishandling, of his budgets. The weak economy that endured for most of his term and the fiscal challenges that followed called for decisive management, a commitment to efficiency, and a willingness to impose austerity on city workers and programs. Dinkins's instincts were at odds with all three imperatives. As mayor, he delivered balanced budgets each year as required by law, and he prevented the surrender of the city's finances to the unelected Financial Control Board. Accomplishing these goals at a time when the city suffered from severe revenue shortfalls was worthy of praise. But the chaotic way the Dinkins administration achieved them left the mayor's reputation as the city's fiscal steward diminished. All in all, the outcomes of

David Dinkins's budget and financing decisions were unremarkable. They left the city in about the same condition as he found it, perhaps modestly worse off owing primarily to the weakness of the economy that prevailed during most of the time he governed. And like mayors before and since, Dinkins had to contend with highly irresponsible budget incompetence on the part of New York State, whose decisions play such an important role in city finances.

Spending grew a little over 4 percent per year from Dinkins's first budget to his last, modestly more than inflation. City headcount shrunk by nearly 5 percent, so some improvement in efficiency seems to have occurred. For all the rhetoric surrounding additional funding for police, the percent of the budget allocated to the NYPD changed little over four years, and the Board of Education budget also remained nearly the same proportion of the total. By filing a lawsuit against the state in 1993 to change the allocation formula used to apportion education money, Dinkins set in motion a long battle to fix a structural flaw in state financing that discriminated against New York City schoolchildren and cost them hundreds of millions of dollars a year in resources. Social services expenditures rose, driven by higher payments to impoverished New Yorkers suffering the effects of a hurting economy. Since recipients of social services money in New York are disproportionately black and Latino, this pattern suggests relatively greater economic support for Dinkins's political base. Property taxes rose from just over 40 percent of total tax revenue to close to 45 percent, and income taxes rose 2 percent, while sales tax receipts fell as a proportion of city financing. This shifted the burden of paying for city services from renters and poorer New Yorkers to coop and condominium owners, home owners, commercial real estate firms, and the businesses that rent from them. It also raised the burden on higher-income residents in general. The shift increased the responsibility of New Yorkers least supportive of the mayor to pay for services. Politically, this approach may have helped him maintain his base, but it did nothing to expand it.⁶

Total debt levels grew while David Dinkins governed, as they have for every modern mayor. General obligations and Municipal Assistance Corporation debt grew to over \$26 billion at the end of fiscal year 1993, nearly \$7.5 billion of additional borrowings, a rise of more than 35 percent during David Dinkins's four-year term. Debt constituted over 13 percent of the city's total personal income the year Dinkins left office, compared with less than 11.5 percent the year he won

election. Yet the levels were well within normal ranges for the city. Mayor Dinkins's election-year budget left his successor with a looming gap, similar to the one he received from his predecessor. Mayors seeking to hold onto their jobs offer rich election-year budgets, and damn the consequences.⁷

Public safety is a tangible event—murders occur or they do not, crime rates rise or fall, people and their property are secure or at risk—but safety is also an emotion. It is the absence of fear. The mayor must make clear he understands that the primordial purpose of government is to protect its citizens. David Dinkins fared poorly on this aspect of the job. His overly deliberate decision-making process and aloof management style damaged his credibility with a public desperate for decisive law-enforcement leadership. He projected discomfort with the police department's use of force, even when objective conditions demanded it. His mistakes in handling the Korean grocers boycott, the Crown Heights riot, and Washington Heights disturbances caused whites and Asians to believe the city's first African American mayor would not enforce the law fairly against blacks and Latinos, even when they engaged in or threatened violence. More than anything else, David Dinkins's decisions during these three crucial events destroyed his credibility as an honest broker among the races and prevented him from fulfilling his promise to restore harmony to the city. And his actions projected the image of a mayor soft on crime. As a consequence, other defensible policy positions, like the mayor's unwillingness to support increased police firepower, his desire for a civilian complaint review board, or the decision to name a commission to investigate corruption could be cast as part of a pattern that diminished confidence he would keep the city safe.

Mayor Dinkins's public safety decisions emanated from his liberal political outlook and experiences as an African American, and they took place against the backdrop of New York City's tense racial landscape in the early 1990s. Among his reference points was the long history of overly aggressive police behavior in poor black and Latino neighborhoods. He was determined to curtail that injustice while he governed, and in his mind his decisions on crucial events constituted efforts to reduce the risk of civil unrest. Yet he overcompensated, alienating large segments of the city in the process. His management style worked against him in the Korean grocers controversy and in Crown Heights. In both, he overdelegated responsibility and waited too long to act. He compensated for those errors during unrest in Washington

Heights by acting with uncharacteristic swiftness before all the facts were known. In all three instances, his timing was tragically off. The police riot that followed the Washington Heights disturbance was a particularly unsettling moment in modern New York City history. Ten thousand police officers stopped traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge, trampled over cars, yelled racial curses at the mayor, and ignored their superiors' orders to cease and desist. Blame for the ugly event rests squarely on the renegade cops and the leaders who incited them. But the riot makes clear that rank-and-file police confidence in Mayor Dinkins's leadership had collapsed.

David Dinkins's impressive success defusing the potential for racially charged violence during the trials of Yusuf Hawkins's killers and after the acquittal of the Los Angeles police who beat Rodney King stand in contrast to his failures in other instances. The evolution of the Hawkins and King cases afforded the chance to reach out to angry citizens before rising furor metastasized into serious civil unrest. Dinkins's heartfelt, rational arguments against antisocial behavior worked with people willing to listen to reason. When circumstances called for such an approach, the man's instincts for conciliation served him and the city well. When events called for more decisive or tougher action, his playbook often seemed empty. Despite serious mistakes, most people never doubted David Dinkins's decency or the sincerity of his desire to reduce friction between feuding races, even at the end of his term. What people questioned was his competence and the objectivity of his judgment.

While David Dinkins served as mayor, crime in New York City crested and began a long, steady descent. A table of the number of murders and major crimes that occurred in the four years before Dinkins took office, the four years he sat in City Hall, and the four years after strongly suggest that the spike on his watch constituted the deadly momentum of policies and events that preceded him. Murder and crime peaked between 1988, when Ed Koch ruled, and 1990, when Dinkins first governed. The crime wave coincided with the crack epidemic that came and went when it did, for reasons criminologists struggle to explain convincingly. New York crime numbers mirror national movements during the period, although they began to fall somewhat sooner and somewhat more intensely than elsewhere.⁸

How much of the decline in crime during Dinkins's term and afterward resulted from policing practices and how much came from complex social forces is a question that has spawned a cottage industry

Murder and Major Crimes during Mayor Koch's Final Four Years in Office	Murders	Major Crimes
1986	1,582	635,199
1987	1,672	656,505
1988	1,896	718,483
1989	1,905	712,419
Murder and Major Crimes during Mayor Dinkins's Four Years in Office	Murders	Major Crimes
1990	2,245	710,221
1991	2,154	678,855
1992	2,035	656,572
1993	1,970	609,124
Murder and Major Crimes during Mayor Giuliani's First Four Years in Office	Murders	Major Crimes
1994	1,561	530,121
1995	1,177	444,758
1996	983	382,555
1997	770	355,893

of academic study and political debate. Ray Kelly, who oversaw development of "Safe Streets, Safe City" as first deputy and its implementation as police commissioner declined to draw a direct link between the program and the diminishment of mayhem that began on his watch. The most convincing argument is that a broad range of factors, police policy among them, caused both the spike and the crash.⁹

"[E]very one of the causal factors known to affect crime rates moved in the desired manner" in 1990s New York, according to criminologist Andrew Karmen. "No force or condition was out of step." Recovery in the local economy toward the end of Dinkins's term in office provided employment alternatives to selling drugs. It also renewed the attractiveness of New York City as a destination for a stabilizing population of law-abiding, hard-working immigrants. The number of prison cells available in New York State expanded during the 1990s and filled with career criminals responsible for disproportionate numbers of violent assaults on citizens. Improved policing worked in stages. Enforcing the law in the most blatant, open-air drug bazaars chased the dealers inside. Illegal activity continued, but indoors, so the number of violent,

neighborhood-terrorizing turf wars and the unintended victims that accompanied them declined. The spread of AIDS among intravenous drug users had a cruelly effective Darwinian impact by killing off addicts prone to commit crimes to feed their habits. The city's demographics changed as the number of young men in the age range most prone to engage in criminal activity diminished. The cumulative effect of these trends, coupled with increased adult realization of the extraordinary danger drugs posed to their teenage children and the parental intervention that followed, caused the number of new recruits into the drug trade to decline.¹⁰

It seems safe to say that the increase in the number of police on patrol and the more effective deployment of them that the Dinkins administration initiated were significant factors in forcing down the upward arc of violent misery plaguing the city when David Dinkins took office. The meaningful success—a 14 percent drop in major crimes and a decline of more than 12 percent in the number of murders—came too little, too late for Dinkins to benefit politically from the thoughtful plan developed while he served as mayor. And the absolute levels of crime that endured throughout his term remained intolerable. Ultimately, however, New Yorkers would feel a real impact on their lives as a consequence of “Safe Streets, Safe City.” Mayor Giuliani's first police commissioner, William Bratton, reaped the benefits of the thousands of additional officers hired under the program and credits the surge in resources as one of the factors that contributed to his success during his early months in office.¹¹

Commissioner Bratton and Commissioner Kelly have both expressed the view that if Dinkins had accelerated implementation of “Safe Streets, Safe City” by just six months and sent a large, blue wave of freshly hired and trained police on patrol in the months leading up to the 1993 election, it would have changed the outcome of the close contest. It is an assertion impossible to prove, and not particularly convincing, but an interesting perspective from two highly respected NYPD chiefs attuned to the city's politics and the impact of crime on it.¹²

The work of the Mollen Commission revealed a police department that had lost the will to confront corruption. The seriousness of the crimes committed by multiple bands of rogue cops in the 1980s and 1990s, and the unwillingness of supervisors to shut them down, created a clear and present danger in some of New York's toughest, most disadvantaged neighborhoods. No civilized city could tolerate such a

condition. David Dinkins refused to retreat from the menace. When he set in motion steps to end the police corruption and to prevent its return, he demonstrated wisdom and courage, even as it intensified his very damaging conflict with the city's police.

Like other New York City mayors forced to manage the school system under the 1970 school-decentralization law, David Dinkins discovered himself in an untenable position. Parents held him responsible for the quality of the education their children received from New York's schools, even though he had limited authority over them. Control over the size of the school budget and partial control over the central board, coupled with other formal and informal powers of the mayor, were the tools at his disposal. They proved insufficient for Dinkins, just as they had for others before him and others who followed him.

Interpreting the statistical evidence regarding reading and math levels in New York's school system is an uncertain science. Changes in testing methods and inconsistencies across years make simple comparisons suspect. Still the available data suggest things remained more the same than not between 1990 and 1993. The percent of students performing at grade level on standardized math tests surged in 1991 and plummeted in 1993. Both swings are too large to be credible, but even the highest score showed only 60 percent of students achieving the goal. The low score fell short of half. The Dinkins/Fernandez term began with 47 percent of students reading at grade level and ended there as well. High school class sizes did not shrink, the money budgeted per student remained about the same, and pupil attendance persisted where it had been according to the *Mayors Management Reports 1990–1993*.

Mayor Dinkins's posture toward the community school boards and the way he managed his relationship with the central Board of Education proved feckless. The man's outlook on city government included deep respect for neighborhood involvement in decision making. Yet in the context of the empirical facts available in 1990 about New York City's community school boards, it is hard to see how anyone would not conclude that the structure had failed. With the education of a million schoolchildren at stake, the mayor, who in his inaugural address dedicated his administration to children, had an obligation to take bold action to repair the system or to replace it. Dinkins remained captive to his own aversion to radical change and to his deep ideological belief in community involvement in schools, noble in the abstract, but harming the city's schoolchildren every day as practiced

in the city he led. Dinkins's misguided support for the community-based structure is unsurprising. The racial venom injected into the controversy when the decentralization movement occurred and that so intensified the pain of the city's deepening racial wounds in the late 1960s left a lasting legacy. In the aftermath of the school strike, support for decentralization had become a litmus test for African American leaders in New York City, just as respect for workplace protections for teachers became something the city's white politicians, Jewish ones in particular, had to support.

At the central Board of Education, the mayor participated in policy and politics. Since the people held him responsible for the system the board manages, the mayor needed to manage the board—admittedly no easy task, but that was the job. With two appointments out of seven, to hold sway the mayor needed two allies at all times among the five members the borough presidents chose. Dinkins failed to maintain this crucial level of support on the all-important vote for renewal of Joseph Fernandez's contract and on other significant matters. He even struggled to maintain control over his own appointments. He did share in a few important victories, particularly when Fernandez, with Dinkins's support, succeeded in ending building tenure for principals and in eliminating the Board of Examiners. Yet these were tactical battles won while the educational war suffered neglect.

The polemical posturing pertaining to prophylactics and sex education, gay lifestyles, and the definition of tolerance distracted from the board's main task of setting educational standards to ensure adequate primary and secondary education. Dinkins played an active role in the controversial culture clashes that so tore apart the easily divided board. The acrimony contributed greatly to the decision not to renew Fernandez's contract as chancellor and to the mayor's loss of influence over the system, his compelling failure with respect to education.

Credit Mayor Dinkins with standing by his beliefs. He sought condoms for teens engaging in sex whether their parents liked it or not because the AIDS epidemic risked killing them if they copulated without protection. He sought to include acceptance of gay life in a program designed to teach the importance of tolerance, a position consistent with his lifelong commitment to promoting harmony amid human diversity. Whether the benefits of the battles exceeded the cost would seem to depend entirely on one's philosophical outlook. Even so, some of the tactics invite challenge. Introducing homosexuality as a topic of discussion to children as young as six caused sincere concern,

even among supporters of the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum. And the mayor's inability to introduce his policies and to maintain control of the board constituted a political failure of significant import. Whether his policies were right or wrong, a more effective leader would have pursued them with tactics that would have preserved his ability to influence management of the school system. The unhappy outcome caused Dinkins to renew his demand for authority to appoint a majority of school board members, but the posture meant little. The mayor had no strategy for securing the votes he would need from the state legislature, particularly the Republican-dominated state senate.

Mayor Dinkins modified Mayor Koch's far-reaching housing policy to suit his greater concern for poorer New Yorkers and saw it through to completion. His administration separated out from the Human Resources Administration the department responsible for managing the complex problem of homelessness, and created a new mayoral agency with a clear mission to respond to the compelling human needs of the deeply troubled homeless population. While he governed, the city also restructured, for the better, aspects of how it delivered and paid for medical services for impoverished New Yorkers.

Mayor Dinkins launched inspiring events. In 1991 New York City greeted the soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines who fought in Operation Desert Storm in an extraordinary celebration. In 1992 Dinkins brought the Democratic National Convention to New York, a demonstration of political clout that promoted the city to the country and boosted its tourist economy at a time of particular need. The convention left a lasting legacy of three cultural events that continue to this day—Broadway Show Week, Restaurant Week, and Fashion Week. The agreement Dinkins struck at the very end of his term with the United States Tennis Association to keep the US Open in New York has served the city and tennis fans everywhere to this day, bringing prestige, national television coverage, and tourist dollars to the city every fall.

Nelson Mandela toured New York City in triumph in 1990. His presence constituted a celebration of the power of a courageous man to conquer brutal, racially motivated oppression through the force of human dignity and an unshakeable commitment to freedom. Hundreds of thousands saw him personally, while millions of New Yorkers and Americans watched him on television. The symbolic significance for Dinkins—himself a leader who wielded dignity as a weapon against racism—cannot be overestimated. He hoped the event would inspire

a younger generation of African Americans and others to seek racial peace in years to come.

David Dinkins traveled an extraordinary personal journey. He was born in 1927 into an America that cruelly constrained choices for African Americans. In 1989, he won election to the highest office in the most important city in the most powerful nation in the world. His greatest legacy is the one he himself cited on the night of his victory. As the first African American to win the mayor's office in New York, he added another link to freedom's chain, and he brought the nation's premier metropolis, and therefore the country itself, one step closer to fulfilling the promise of American democracy.

Notes

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