H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melvin G. Holli. *The American Mayor: The Best & The Worst Big-City Leaders.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. xi + 210 pp. $47.50 (cloth), ISBN 0-271-01876-3, $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-01877-5; $66.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01876-8.

Melvin G. Holli. *The American Mayor: The Best & The Worst Big-City Leaders.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. xi + 210 pp.

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Published on H-Urban (October, 1999)

We Americans love to rate things. We assess the safest cars; we determine the most dangerous intersections. We even have specialized magazines to tell us which breakfast cereal to eat, which tools to use in our workshops, and which diapers to put on our babies. We want only the best.

But this tendency to rate and to rank extends far beyond the consumer marketplace. For at least fifty years, some of our most eminent scholars and journalists have "identified" our best (and worst) Presidents – not so we can re-elect them (after all, the majority are long dead), but partly out of historical interest, partly to identify the qualities needed to ensure successful choices of national executives in the future, and, to be blunt about it, partly because we love to gossip about the rich and the notable. Now, historian Melvin G. Holli has attempted the same kind of ranking exercise for American mayors, trying to determine "the Best & Worst City Leaders" in a unique book that evaluates more than seven hundred mayors from at least fifteen cities. I think it is safe to say that no other historian has ever contemplated, much less attempted, such an ambitious undertaking.

But while the breadth of the undertaking is perhaps the greatest strength of the book, and the primary source of its unique character, it is also the primary source of some of its major flaws. None of them is unexpected, though, and many of the criticisms are the sort that might be made of any study with similar objectives and methodologies.

The American Mayor considers who the best and worst city leaders have been, why they succeeded or failed, and whether they experienced political success or political anonymity after their mayoralty. Although the book includes six chapters, falling into three sections, each focusing on different, though obviously related, topics. Chapter One describes the results of two polls Holli conducted of about one hundred urbanists to identify both the best and the worst mayors of large American cities; the second, third, and fourth chapters bundle the ten best into three chronological groupings and provide brief political biographies of each. The last two chapters are separate topics toward which the book is actually heading and which are its most thought-provoking and important aspects. Chapter Five analyzes what makes a successful mayor by applying leadership theory. Chapter Six, which examines the roads taken to and from mayoral power, comprises the third part of the book and concludes it except for a brief epilogue which succinctly summarizes what came before. Any evaluation of the book needs to recognize these three sections and also the differences among them, both in substance and their quality.

The methodology of the study was basically to compare more than seven hundred mayors by using polling techniques and then determining who among the seven hundred had governed his city most successfully (only one woman mayor is mentioned in the book, Jane Byrne of Chicago, and she is mentioned only on the list of worst mayors). The study provides clear and hard-to-refute insights into those mayors who have been regarded as successful or unsuccessful in office. But, while it is difficult to argue with the book's conclusions about this point, it is possible to ask questions about the study's methodology for reaching its conclusions and how that methodology might have unintentionally shaped the results. In short, all the same questions that could be asked about any similar "poll of experts" can be asked about this study. Who voted in the poll? On what basis did they vote? Did they have any noticeable biases or points of view? How were their votes tabulated and the results reported? And so on. Anyone who consults this book must remember that

all rankings of this kind are highly subjective, reflect the views of a select group of people at a particular moment, and are extremely problematic. The study is only as valuable as the participants, but it is hard to imagine any other way of conducting a study like this one.

In 1985 and 1993, Holli surveyed a group of "experts" and asked them to list in order the ten best and ten worst mayors of large American cities since 1820. He asked the opinions of about 160 experts and received responses from more than forty percent, almost all of them academics. To assist them, he provided a list of all the mayors of the fifteen largest American cities, and he asked the experts to list (up to) the ten best and worst mayors of them all.

The similarities between the 1985 and 1993 results are striking. Of the ten best mayors, nine individuals show up on both lists, and, with one exception, all nine appear in exactly the same order with Fiorello La Guardia leading the way on both lists. The two lists of the ten worst mayors also contain the same names although in somewhat different orders. In 1985, for example, Frank Hague of Jersey City was only considered tenth worst of all mayors on the list; by 1993, his reputation had fallen to second worst. In 1985, Philadelphia's Frank Rizzo was deemed the worst mayor of all; by 1993, his reputation had been slightly redeemed, and he was adjudged only fifth worst.

These evaluations, like all rankings not precisely quantifiable, contain idiosyncratic elements, are highly subjective with each of the participants, and cannot be supposed scientific. That is a given, and I doubt that Holli would strongly disagree. But even granted that, other questions about the methodology can be asked. Instead of leaving the choice of the potential best and worst mayors open to the voters and asking for evaluations without prompting them, Holli provided each judge with a list of all the mayors of America's fifteen largest cities since 1820, cities defined as those "with the longest duration in the top fifteen population class." (2)

This procedure may well have skewed the survey in several directions. For one thing, Holli was not entirely consistent in the way he chose mayors to put on the list he submitted to his panel. He himself added to the list "a few" (the precise number is not specified) mayors from smaller cities who have generally been considered among "the nation's most heralded reformers."(2) By doing this, and adding a select group of additional mayors to those from the largest cities, Holli may have increased the likelihood that a few mayors (Samuel "Golden Rule" Jones and Brand Whitlock of Toledo, Frank M. Hague of Jersey City) would be ranked "best" or "worst" by assigning them a special place and pointing out their excellence or dreadfulness.

I suspect that Holli almost certainly added the additional mayors for a complicated reason. There were certain mayors whom he felt had to be on the list because of their reputations and to ensure the list's legitimacy. Some judges might have wondered why they were absent. However, he could not include all the mayors of Toledo, Jersey City, and other smaller cities. Had he done so, the roster of mayors under consideration would have been even more overwhelming than it already was. It would have been even more tremendous if he had included all the mayors of all cities of the size of Toledo and Jersey City in order to guarantee another kind of legitimacy and avoid the question of why some cities were being considered, but not others. Second, there is the important point that in any blind survey, some judges simply forget about one or more subjects if they aren't brought to their attention, and Holli almost certainly wanted to avoid that possibility.

In all probability, Holli also confronted a potentially serious problem with his list of judges. Almost all of them have academic affiliations, and all but a few study cities, either as historians or political scientists. However, that alone does not necessarily enable them to evaluate accurately the comparative excellence of nearly seven hundred mayors of about twenty cities and their accomplishments in office. To at least some extent, the poll seems something like a beauty or popularity contest, or even an election in which the best-known person is victorious. At the very least, the polls measure the reputations of mayors more than their actual performance.

In a different way, the results of this survey can be said to reflect an inclination to value the past more than the present and a tendency to think about the decline and fall of contemporary cities and contemporary urban government. This suspicion is reinforced by examining the years of individual mayors' terms of office. Of those mayors esteemed "best," two held office entirely during the 1800s, one's service overlapped 1900, four served between 1900 and 1950, one overlapped 1950, and two served between 1950 and the present; in other words, only two of ten have held office since 1950. But of those considered the "worst" mayors, two held office during the 1800s, four between 1900 and 1950, and four since 1950, or, four in ten of the worst have held office during the last fifty years. According to these numbers, the worst mayors have held their posts more recently than have the best.

This inclination to value the past more highly than the recent is supported by changes in the rankings of the "worst" mayors. Although still accounted among the "worst" mayors, all four of those who served since 1950 actually improved their position in the second survey. In other words, as time went by, the "worst" mayors didn't seem as awful as they had before. While this is certainly not conclusive, it strongly suggests that relative evaluations are heavily influenced by contemporary views and that negative opinion softens as time passes.

Perhaps I'm responding too literally to Holli's exact choice of words in the book's subtitle and throughout the text; and I might be defining "best" and "worst" too rigidly rather than interpreting them loosely as Holli might well have meant, as synonyms for "excellent" and "terrible." Had he titled his study "The American Mayor, Terrific and Terrible," or "The American Mayor, Wonderful and Woeful," and had he asked the experts to rate the mayors on a scale of one to three, many of my previous comments would have no validity. But he did not. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge not only the faults in the book, but also obvious faults in my comments.

However, even putting aside questions about the participant experts and the lists from which they worked, another important question might be asked. Can mayors be judged in the same way as Presidents of the United States, as Holli intended? For one thing, most of the people who have participated in presidential polls know at least something about the large majority of presidents and are not expressing opinions about a subject about which they could be very much in the dark. More than that, there have only been forty-one presidents as opposed to about seven hundred mayors - a tremendous difference. Although the implications are similar, presidential ratings polls are usually phrased differently. Rather than asking about "best" and "worst," they ask for listings of the "great," "near-great," "mediocre," and "disastrous" presidents; the person conducting the polling is not seeking the same degree of precision and trying to rank subjects on a scale of one to ten, even though the number of subjects is only a fraction as large.

Perhaps this results from another question, that of comparability. Of all academics, historians (the largest number of those polled) are almost certainly more aware of contextual importance than members of any other discipline and are probably more uncomfortable making comparisons across time and place than anyone from another discipline. While comparative history has its devotees, some of them very eminent, it has not entered the center of the profession. To most historians, comparing George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt, even granted that both were "great," is analogous to comparing apples and oranges. Even so, all of the presidents have functioned within the same institutional framework. Certainly, institutions and circumstances have changed, but all presidents have had to confront and deal with the Congress, the Supreme Court, state governors, and foreign ambassadors, just to mention a few. And, even though all of these institutions have changed during the last two hundred and twenty-five years, there has been a somewhat constant institutional context within which all presidents have had to work and provide leadership. At the very least, even if it has been modified and re interpreted, the Constitution has shaped the behavior of every president.

The same cannot be said about seven hundred mayors of at least fifteen separate cities spread across a geographic expanse of around three thousand miles. At the very least, the problems of different cities have differed from each other, and although they all suffered during the Great Depression, Boston has never had to confront the same problems of water supply experienced by Los Angeles, and Philadelphia has never confronted the earthquake potential faced by San Francisco. At the same time, each of these cities has a distinct set of institutional arrangements. No two cities have identical city charters establishing identical governmental structures within the city or an identical set of relations between that city, the county within which it lies, and the state within which it is located. Particularly in the nineteenth century, these arrangements changed so often that mayors of the same city functioned within different institutional contexts even though their terms of office were separated by only a few years, sometimes only overnight. Ranking the mayors against each other, when each of them faced a unique set of institutional arrangements and urban issues, seems problematic.

It is in the second and third parts of the book (Chapters Five and Six) that Holli implicitly discloses his reasons for doing this research, his real concerns, the significance of the polls to him, and his deepest insights. In the second section (Chapter Five), Holli attempts to see if any relationship exists between being a successful mayor and the explanations posed by various theories of leadership. He looks at the question from both sides, wondering if any of the major explanations of leadership explain the great success of some mayors and the abysmal failures of others. But, at the same time, he is also asking if examining the careers of the best mayors reveals the traits necessary for success. Obviously, Holli feels that he could not ask this question without having some basis on which to

determine the best mayors; thus, the polls. I suspect that most historians would have accepted his assertion of who have been successful mayors and would have welcomed longer analyses of mayoral success and the relationship between success as a mayor and subsequent political success.

The chapter begins with an overview of the major leadership theories that have been developed during the last century (particularly those of Thomas Carlyle, Max Weber, James MacGregor Burns) and succinctly summarizes both the theories and also the major criticisms that have been leveled against each. The chapter then turns to a discussion of the most recent theory, "contingency theory," which argues that successful leadership depends on the "fit" between a leader and the larger context within which s/he functions. To quote Holli's paraphrase of Fred E. Fiedler, one of the first to advance contingency theory (Fred E. Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness* (New York, 1967), "the effective leader's style and skills had to match the problem or task for success." (134) Or, as Holli put it a few sentences later, "when the style [of the leader] matches the situation [within the context], effective leadership occurs; when it does not, there is less effective or failed leadership." (134)

Holli accepts this latter theory (though not uncritically) and explains why analyzing the success of elected officials requires certain modifications. He then turns to the meaning of that critical word "style" and the different kinds of style that leaders might possess. Basically, he formulates two kinds of style that seem mutually exclusive, one he calls "task-oriented" and the other "relationship-oriented." As he defines them, "the task-oriented leader is goal-driven and emphasizes and pushes for concrete or material achievements" and the relationship-oriented leader "tends to develop good interpersonal relations and prizes harmony and consensus." (135-36) Perhaps, to use contemporary jargon, these two types of leader correspond to what are frequently called "hard-nosed" and "touchy-feely."

The question then becomes whether mayors (or, leaders in general) who display each kind of style are facing tasks for which that style is appropriate. The no-nonsense, let's-get-to-work, all-business kind of mayor functions best if his essential tasks can be identified and solved with concrete policies and programs. The let's-get-together-and-all-be-friends kind of mayor functions best in a situation where overcoming divisions and conflicts within the city or having a "vision" of its future is the essential urban task and the mayor has the skills necessary to create the needed consensus and harmony.

Holli tests each of the ten best mayors using this construct and shows how each of them possessed and employed the right personal characteristics for the particular situations they confronted. He enriches this discussion by explaining the resources available for the mayor to bring to the problems and the policies or programs he developed. Holli makes his entire model even more persuasive by presenting cases in which a successful mayor became less effective and left office when the urban context changed, when a task-oriented mayor who had handled structured problems well suddenly came up against unstructured issues, or a touch-feely mayor's city unexpectedly met with concrete predicaments, most notably Samuel "Golden Rule" Jones of Cleveland and Tom Bradley of Los Angeles.

Although he does all of this in a single chapter, Holli makes his case strongly, and this kind of integration of an important social-science concept and historical cases and examples is far too uncommon. His analysis of why some mayors succeeded while others failed seems beyond question. In fact, it is deceptively simple, so convincing that it almost seems obvious and commonsensical. Holli makes his arguments so cogently and easily that one doesn't realize the conceptual effort involved until one suddenly realizes that historians have debated for decades since the time of Thomas Carlyle in the mid-nineteenth century about whether "men make the times" or "the times make men."

There is one question that I wish Holli had considered overtly in the book, although I suspect it must have entered his mind. Are task-oriented and relationship-oriented mutually exclusive? Or is it possible that there is a continuum extending from task-oriented at one end to relationship-oriented at the other? That different mayors (or leaders of any sort) have different blends and mixtures of each? Do some leaders, or mayors, sometimes confront both structured and unstructured problems simultaneously, in which case a city truly needs an extraordinary prince who can tackle both of those very different situations. One individual who leaps to mind as the prime example of this, in a larger context, is obviously Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose administration worked to solve a multitude of problems ranging from malfunctioning of the stock market to flooding in the Tennessee Valley (task-oriented and structured) but who also told the American people that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself" (relationship-oriented and unstructured). FDR has been described as a "paterfamilias" who treated the American people as children for whom he provided a safe home, but at the same time no president has ever tried more actively to solve real, tangible problems.

Or, more germane to cities, Fiorello LaGuardia, ranked "the best" of all mayors in both of Holli's polls. While Holli considers his style to have been "task-oriented" and points to his numerous specific accomplishments, the Little Flower also seems to have had clear relationship-oriented tendencies. When he read the funny papers over the radio, he was certainly responding to the specific, concrete problem of the newspaper strike - but his solution was not to resolve the economic issues, it was to reassure New Yorkers that could get along without their daily papers and he would make sure that they didn't miss the next installment of the Katzenjammer Kids. Or, his multi-ethnic, multi-religious background implicitly, without his doing anything overtly, seemed to say that "we New Yorkers" are one people and have no divisions among us. It seems of more than passing interest that two men who faced the most serious domestic problem in the nation's history can both be said to have been task-oriented and relationship-oriented at the same time.

And that, of course, raises the question of whether tasks can be quite so neatly categorized into some which are structured and some which are unstructured. How do you draw the lines between them? Or, is this really a matter of definition that depends on who is using the terms? Certainly, the center of this question has to do with clarity and opaqueness. How does a mayor, or any leader, interpret the issues s/he is confronting?- For example, taking once again the cases of LaGuardia, FDR, and the 1930s, one could say, as does Holli, that LaGuardia's tasks included the "Depression, crime, political corruption, Tammany" (148) and describe his tasks as structured and the mayor as task-oriented. But I wonder how many leaders would have perceived the Depression, crime, and political corruption as "structured" tasks. I suspect that trying to figure out how to end the Depression, or stop crime, or halt political corruption would have overwhelmed almost anyone who asked such sweeping questions; leaders who did might well have been immobilized by the enormity of what faced them. However, if they perceived that immense disorder and chaos not as a single monolithic mass but as a series of smaller, more manageable predicaments (how to get milk to babies, how to make sure that people have beds, how to provide food for the hungry), the problems seemed less monumental, more easily handled, and more amenable to solution. Perhaps, one way to modify Holli's insight would be to say that the very most successful leaders have the ability and temperament not just to resolve structured or unstructured problems, but to display both styles as needed and to extract structured elements from unstructured problems so that they are more subject to solutions.

>From this discussion of task-oriented/relationship-oriented mayors and structured/unstructured tasks, Holli turns, in the third part of the book (Chapter Seven), to another fascinating question, that of political mobility or climbing the political ladder. Have mayors moved on to higher elective office in state or national government? Has the mayoralty been a stepping-stone to higher elective office? Here, he broadens his analysis and looks at the careers of all 679 mayors whose biography appeared in the *Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors*. But by asking about all mayors who have, or have not, risen to higher office later, he has shifted his focus away from the best and worst mayors and onto specific cities themselves. Here, he seems more interested in which cities have produced mayors who attained high-ranking state or federal office after their terms than in the mayors. After examining several possible explanations for some cities' success in producing higher officeholders, and rejecting the most obvious of them such as size, age, and location of city, he concludes that "cities whose systems had been reformed or at least de-machinated, such as Detroit, San Francisco, and Cleveland" (173) provided a "somewhat better"(173) launching pad for higher political office whereas New York, Chicago, and Pittsburgh, cities that had powerful urban political machines "were not exactly catapults launching mayors into higher office."(173) Moreover, he discovers that more former mayors of Cleveland attained higher office than of any other city, seven in all, including cabinet members, United States senators, and governors of Ohio.

While Holli provides a reasoned and persuasive discussion of why some cities did, and others did not, produce mayors who held higher office subsequently, the discontinuity between this chapter and those preceding is frustrating. Given that the book is about the best and the worst of mayors, a related but quite different question might have been more appropriate. Have successful mayors gone on to higher office? Has being a successful mayor provided an entry to state or federal office? Is being a successful mayor any predictor of future electoral victories and successes? Holli alludes to this question at the beginning of Chapter Seven when he notes that three of the top ten mayors were elected to higher office – David Lawrence of Pittsburgh became governor of Pennsylvania; Hazen Pingree and Frank Murphy of Detroit were both elected governor of Michigan, and Murphy also became governor-general of the Philippine Islands, a United States attorney-general, and a justice of the United States Supreme Court.

All in all, despite my reservations about its methods of polling, and my wish that Holli had spent more time developing the ideas in the last two chapters, this is an important book that will need to be known by all students of urban politics. It is the first book to study all the mayors of large American cities, not just one or two. It is the first book to use leadership theory as an entree to understanding why some mayors succeed and why some fail. It is the first book to present a cogent analysis of how the relationship between a city and its mayor affects the city's well-being and the mayor's success - as both the chief executive of the city and (at least potentially) a future officeholder. In that light, perhaps this book would be worthwhile reading for all candidates between now and November 2000. They might well heed its insights into the relationship between a mayor's temperament, a city's needs, and the mayor's success in office. Those insights can almost certainly be generalized to apply to any elective office, and some of our current and prospective leaders might take a few lessons.

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Citation: Neil L. Shumsky. Review of Holli, Melvin G., *The American Mayor: The Best & The Worst Big-City Leaders* and Melvin G. Holli, *The American Mayor: The Best & The Worst Big-City Leaders.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3459

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