

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, city politics revolves around mayor-centered coalitions. Within these coalitions, it is the mayor who commands the media attention, serves as the principal communication intermediary with a whole host of groups and individuals, and acts as a lightning rod for public dissatisfaction. As a high-profile spokesperson, New York City's mayor's responsibilities make possible opportunities for public success and failure. This book examines how David Dinkins, the first African American mayor of New York City (1990–1994), used this opportunity in hopes of problem solving, maintaining his electoral coalition of blacks, Latinos, and liberal whites; and satisfying the media's appetite for news. Each member of Dinkins' electoral coalition had different expectations of him. Not only would maintaining the loyalty of his supporters require nimble political skills, but also Dinkins had to ingratiate himself to the permanent governing elite who ran the city. The latter required being able to project a stylish image of the city. Considered a clubhouse politician, David Dinkins posed an image challenge for the business leaders who cherished New York's reputation as the center of urbane America. Concerned that Dinkins' highly localized political biography—as state legislator, city clerk, and Manhattan borough president—could hurt the city's image as a magnet for the transnational elite, media sought to inflate the attractive aspects of his personality. In order to make Dinkins look suave, reporters were assigned to write attention-getting stories about the new mayor. It is axiomatic that no mayor-centered coalition can function effectively and efficiently with a mayor with a less-than-attractive image. Mayors with negative images can distract from

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the overall image of the city. As the most visible member of the governing coalition, a mayor's reputation is essential to the success of the city's governing process. Accordingly, the entire governing coalition, particularly the business sector, endeavors to support a positive image for an incoming mayor.

At first glance, David Dinkins seemed to be a perfect case study for media analysis. Carefully trained and nurtured as consummate insider before he assumed office, Dinkins was cast as a deracialized leader and a transracial politician. A Harlem politician who was well liked among his peers and among reporters, he moved easily along the corridors of the city politics. Furthermore, he had done favors for several important politicians and activists. In effect, local politicians owed him. The mantra of New York City politicians is, if an officeholder helps them, they will reciprocate.

A closer examination of city politics revealed that several local politicians felt a reciprocal obligation to Dinkins. Many reporters, however, did not share this feeling of obligation. Since most of the reporters and readers were white, there was a strong tendency to treat a black mayor in a race-declarative manner. Often this race recognition relied on stereotypes that disparaged David Dinkins and flattered the reporter's white audience. This holds for most black politicians as they are rarely on an even playing field with reporters. Reporters have the advantage of being merchants of meaning and can adjust the product to suit the customer—the public. Every time Dinkins spoke publicly, to use a baseball analogy, he either hit a home run or struck out. There was little middle ground. Once the words were out of his mouth, the media was free to add their own meaning.

Political Life in a Media Age

We are told that we live in a media age. Blumler and Kavanaugh claim that we are now living in the third era of political communication.¹ The first was the pretelevision age when political parties and interest groups delivered the political messages. The second era was triggered by the rise of the mass media along with press strategists, pollsters, and performance coaches. The latter were increasingly employed by politicians and others with political

messages to be delivered. Although not household names, political consultants such as David Garth and John Martilla became important players in local municipal elections. The third era is marked by the rise of market research and the advent of new opinion-assessment technologies (such as focus groups and audience feedback). The selling of candidates and policies borrows much from the commercial world. This era, characterized by a proliferation of electronic channels, is hungry for new content. Not only is the media ubiquitous and avaricious, but it is also able to create the illusion that we are participating in the great events of our times. What is more important, it introduces us to people, events, and places we would not have ordinarily known.

New York City has fifty-one newspapers, fifty magazines, forty-six radio stations, and forty-three television stations. This is a community of professionals that reads and listens to each other. Members of this community live in a fluid environment in which changing employers and venues of presentation is not uncommon. Newspaper reporters appear on television and radio. Broadcasters write editorials in local dailies. They interact and affect each others' work and attitudes.

The *New York Times*, a powerful newspaper that is read nationally, is the standard for local coverage. This means that it has to compete with a variety of New York City tabloids, weeklies, and special niche papers. Although the *New York Times* has a national audience, its metro section is well written, and some of its best reporters are assigned to cover local news. It follows the mayor and city politics with regularity. What the *Times* reports or editorializes, matters. The *Times'* political clout comes from the fact that most opinion leaders read the paper, and reporters often use their comments to reinforce a theme within an article. The *New York Daily News* and *New York Post* are tabloids but are also widely read by the so-called working public. Their specialties are eye-catching headlines and photos. These three papers are clearly the attention getters in the reporting of city politics. Most other newspapers are weeklies, ethnic journals, alternative tabloids, or borough-centric. The one exception, the *Village Voice*, also a weekly, is less a player than it once was in politics. *New York Magazine* covers city hall with great enthusiasm. The *Irish Voice*, *El Diario*, *Amsterdam News*, and the *Jewish*

Press, considered ethnic papers, are read by city intellectuals, political pundits, and politicians, but they have a limited mass readership. This is not to say the ethnic-oriented or specialty-oriented newspapers and magazines are ignored; they simply do not have the impact of the major dailies. Indeed, mayoral candidates often grant interviews to such specialized outlets in the hopes of reaching their readers.

The broadcast or electronic media also covers politics. Television stations, in particular, are very competitive. Most network-affiliated stations have reporters and trucks on the street daily who cover most political events. The 6:00 news is a major part of a station's identity. Winning the top-rated newscast is highly prized among stations' owners. They use their anchors to advertise their stations. With the exception of so-called all-news stations, most radio restricts the news to the hour break. Yet broadcast media gets the advantage over its print competition when it covers breaking news with images and sound.

Interestingly, it is the print media that provides the news framework for the coverage of broadcast media. As the old saying goes, go into any radio or TV newsroom, and you will find anchor people reading newspapers. This is not to gainsay the role of TV reporters and talk show hosts. These interview shows and call-in programs can affect a mayor's image, but it is the print media coverage and its interpretation of a mayor's actions that reifies the image. Television reporters and talk show hosts glean most of their topics, quotes, and information from newspapers. As one television reporter explained when I asked him why he did not just look up the information he asked me for in the library, "You got us confused with newspapers. This station doesn't have a library."² Yet television, with its moving pictures, appears to be on top of a story. Although it can often air breaking stories as they happen, there is generally little, if any, follow through in local politics.

In our media age, we are deluged with a variety of messages. Sorting out these messages requires an inquiring and discerning mind. However, the media is not always rational or objective, nor are its viewers, listeners, or readers. The media world is made up of both fantasy (for example, Horatio Alger themes, good trumps evil endings, and the omnipresence of glamor) and reality. Separating the two becomes more difficult when the

media's version of life mimics real life. This is particularly true in politics. Politicians, and their celebrity auxiliaries, dominate media life, crowding out others in what Ferdinand Mount calls the "theater of politics."³

Most of us will never experience a media life since few of us will become politicians or celebrities. Accordingly, the media can safely ignore us. Although many of us are content to lead lives of relative anonymity, there are some who may experience *coverage deprivation*. This group may either envy the attention and visibility politicians receive or decide to seek it for themselves by making episodic forays into politics. Soon they discover that political visibility and media coverage are not without their perils. Sometimes the coverage is flattering, and at times it is not. In effect, nonpoliticians and noncelebrities function as aliens in the media world. Unlike ordinary citizens, politicians are expected to be denizens of the media world and demonstrate an expertise when "handling" the press. However, even for veteran public performers, the media can be either a tool or a pair of manacles.

"Managing the press" should be a part of the job description for an elected official. This is particularly true for big city mayors. Since intense coverage is inevitable, and the appetite for news is unrelenting, the challenge of a mayor is to maximize positive self-representation and offset negative ones. To do this, mayors must carefully construct images that they wish to project and campaign hard to sell that image to their constituency. It is not uncommon for campaign rhetoric to include undercurrents of altruism, self-confident promises, and crusading slogans. Subsequently, when the media covers city hall, it endeavors to create what it believes is an "ecological image" of the mayor and his or her administration. In other words, the media attempts to analyze incumbents as they react to the uncertain environment of city politics. For the media, politics is a game of rules and violations, winners and losers, bad calls and luck. This may or may not be commensurate with a mayor-projected image. When it is at variance, the potential for conflict exists. In their struggle to frame events and assign political meaning, the mayor and the media can find themselves at loggerheads. This conflict constitutes the essence of urban politics in a postmodern and media age.

Media and Mayors

Journalist Phyllis Kaniss claims that mayors employ six media styles—paranoid media avoiders, naïve professionals, ribbon cutters, dancing marionettes, colorful quotables, and liars.⁴ Obviously these styles are not mutually exclusive, yet the media may be inclined to incorporate one of these styles into the overall image of the mayor. Doris Graber asserts, “The images that the media create suggest which views and behaviors are acceptable and even praiseworthy in a given society and which are unacceptable or outside the mainstream.”⁵ Edward Rubin asserts, “The politicians are created in the reportorial image today. The reporters are created in the entertainment mold. Coverage increasingly relates to the politicians’ present success or political prospects as contestants in elections.”⁶ This is particularly true of high-profile city mayors, because their actions are closely linked with the city’s image. Therefore, the images of a mayor can be either an asset or a liability in the marketing of a city. Outside investors look to the mayor for project pitches, political support, and reassurances; members of the city council look to the mayor for the setting of city priorities; members of the governing coalition look to the mayor for articulating a motif; and the public looks to the mayor to exert influence and provide services. The media role is to monitor those expectations and alert the public as to whether the mayor is meeting them. The mayor’s image and media style are essential to telling this story. The media coverage of a mayor is crucial to a city’s image, to the work of a city, and to the public’s satisfaction with their city.⁷

Since urban residents have become media dependent, they glean from news coverage a construction of local political reality. They are routinely told that the local media strives for an independent and unbiased coverage of mayors and political events. Even when there is evidence to the contrary, the public wants to believe that the media is unbiased.⁸ Phyllis Kaniss observed that “while there is much in the news and editorial columns that is critical of local officials, this criticism is limited when compared with the amount of information that is taken directly and almost unquestioningly, from official bureaucratic sources.”⁹ To insure objectivity, the public expects mayors and reporters to create a degree of personal and political distance. Yet maintaining a free and impartial relationship is difficult,

because the media is forced to work closely with mayors. John Soloski asserts, "News sources, then, are drawn from the existing power structure; therefore news tends to support the status quo. Although journalists do not set out to consciously report the news so that the current politico-economic system is maintained. The selection of news events and news sources flows 'naturally' from news professionalism."¹⁰

If the public presumes news professionalism, then it will have to accept the view, as Solski does, that professional norms serve to create ethical guidelines for journalists. Nonetheless, there are hazards in a symbiotic relationship that as its primary goal attempts to facilitate the flow of information. There are three functions that differentiate the roles of the mayor, media, and public. A mayor's role is to provide leadership and govern, the media's role is to provide political information, and the public's role is to act in response to political stimuli. Unless it is well informed the public cannot perform its electoral and policy feedback roles. Since the media is closer to the "governing process," it can find itself deemphasizing certain issues that could seed public discontent, thereby leaving the public with less than the whole story. Conversely, overemphasizing some issues at the expense of more pressing but less attractive ones can be equally misinforming.

The relationship between reporters and mayors raises a series of questions. Are current journalistic norms and practices sufficient to protect the public from insufficient information? Are news stories simply a matter of negotiation? If so, what will happen if the mayor does not understand or disagree with the negotiation process? More important, can media coverage interfere with the normal business of governing and social accounting, that is, a mayor's ability to explain his or her behavior?

Despite academic writings that celebrate the professional autonomy of print journalists, reporters are not free agents. Rather they serve as extensions of their editors and publishers. One reporter put it bluntly: "The editors decide what gets published, therefore what is seen or heard. They are like directors. Reporters get the facts. Editor decided where to play the piece."¹¹ Paul Delaney, a former *New York Times* reporter agrees.

There is usually an informal story conference in which the editor lays out his ideas for the story. A reporter is free to debate or

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express his ideas. In most cases a reporter will win an argument, but you know what the editor is looking for. Editors are quite open about what they want as a story. They will say, "here is the story." Here is what to look for. You are being programmed. You know what will impress the editor.¹²

Reporters also understand that editors are the corporation representatives. Although some reporters did not like to think of themselves as working for a profit-oriented business, editors cannot afford this self-delusion. Editors have to walk the line between journalistic impulses and the bottom line. If sensationalizing the news sells papers, attracts viewers and listeners, or allows them to be the most popular, then editors will urge reporters to accept that challenge.

Editors provide the parameters for the media discourse, but reporters get bylines. Accordingly, mayors direct their attention to beat reporters. These are the people they see and know. The mayor and his aides try to negotiate with reporters to little or no avail because reporters can either seek refuge in journalistic professionalism or in protection from editors. An editor can remain relatively blame free and quasi-anonymous.

A reporter's job is to create readable and acceptable copy within a short time. Readability is pitching a story so it is available to target readers. Acceptable copy is that which is catchy, factual, and free of legal trip wires. Saltzman found that "after working on a newspaper or magazine for a while, every reporter soon came to understand what stories would get into print and which would not, or what stories would finally be printed under protest but buried inside and below the fold."¹³ Journalists are trained to work within acceptable boundaries.¹⁴ A journalist who strays from these parameters must make a cogent case for his or her wayward behavior. These boundaries also permit journalists to construct images.

The Political Construction of Mayoral Images

Political images are social constructions made necessary by Blumler and Kavanaugh's second era of political communication. Although seldom called "image consultants," these individuals

play a critical role in mayoral politics. Although these constructions are not fixed and often undergo quick and unanticipated changes, politics is delicately choreographed. Because unanticipated political events have the potential of altering images, many politicians feel obligated to expeditiously frame situations. City politicians continuously struggle with the local media over the construction of an accurate and appropriate image. The old axiom of Watzlawick and colleagues that “one cannot not communicate,”¹⁵ is certainly true for mayors. Every public statement, gesture, no comment, appearance, and premeditated silence sends a political message. Indeed images can send a message even though a mayor may not be personally involved in a policy.

During the mayoral campaigns, would-be mayors and their staff propose an image that will resonate with the public and one that will aid the election process. If their candidate is elected, staff will try to refine or reinforce the officeholder’s persona in the course of governing. The image offered by a successful candidate, and now an officeholder, may be called a “preferred self-image.” This is the officeholder’s ideal self. Much of what passes for political discourse is the media’s attempt at challenging a mayor’s political and personal image. The media will take the preferred self-image and revise and modify elements of it to make it fit into ongoing political discourse. This modified image may or may not be consistent with the mayor’s image of himself or herself. In order to govern effectively, mayors have to decide whether to embrace, refute, or ignore media-constructed images. Mayors often try to offset negative images by instituting direct and personal interaction with as many constituency groups as possible. This can be a time-consuming enterprise.

Over time a modified public image emerges that is the combination of a mayor’s *preferred self-image* and media revisions. This is usually the first image the public understands. Again, events serve to intersect, contradict, or overwhelm the public image. In that event, a public image is altered, and the officeholder is left with a *prevailing image*. Prevailing images are extremely difficult to change. If a mayor’s prevailing image is positive, then the public will be searching for evidence to reinforce that prevailing image. Conversely, if the prevailing image is negative, any mistakes or misjudgments serve to strengthen the image.

What is more important, a mayor's prevailing image plays a role in defining the public's understanding of political events. Standing alone events may have multiple meanings, but language defines which of these merits public consideration. Murray Edelman has related the understanding of political events to the construction of political language. "It is language about political events, not the event in any other sense, that people experience; even developments that are close by take their meaning from the language that depicts them. So political language is political reality; there is no other so far as the meaning of events to actors and spectators is concerned."¹⁶

Images are a part of the political language. The prevailing images of the mayor become a prism through which events are understood. Unfortunately, for some mayors, their prevailing images are beyond their control. They are not simply a matter of skill and personality, although both are important and affect responses to events. A mishandled crisis can seriously damage a mayor's prevailing image. This point will become clear when we discuss the impact of the Red Apple and Crown Heights crises on the prevailing images of Mayor Dinkins.

The challenge for the media is to create an alternative or more realistic media image to the one offered by the mayor and his consultants. Many journalists just look for a new tag line and stay with it, while others search for that critical and public political decision or statement as the defining moment for the administration. A few focus on stereotypes, some of which involve race.

Race, Ethnicity, and the Media

The relationship between race and the media resembles a series of dance steps. What is this metaphoric dance between white-owned media and black mayors? One must be careful not to miss required steps or to step on others, but as long as one is not obviously out of step, then one escapes notice. Making a racist remark or trafficking in racial stereotypes is, without question, a misstep. The question then is, are the steps different from those of the media and white mayors? Was the *Los Angeles Times* more critical of Tom Bradley than it was of Sam Yorty? Was the *Detroit News* less forgiving of Coleman Young than it

had been of Jerome Cavanaugh? Could an opinionated local television anchor such as Bill Bonds gain a reputation for toughness if Coleman Young had been white? Was the *Washington Post* pickier about Marion Barry's behavior than it is about that of Anthony Williams? Does a talk show host provide airtime for callers who repeat racial stereotypes in order to hype his rating and gain attention, or is it all a matter of perception?

There are no simple answers to these questions. Race images may be activated only if attention is called to them and if the audience has a history to bring to the characterization. Minorities might be more attentive to press criticisms when the mayor is a minority, and minority mayors might be more interesting than an average white mayor. What we see and hear is, in part, a function of our socialization. Reporters are not exempt from this socialization. Whether they admit it or not, much of a person's self-image is bound up in race and ethnic distinctions. Since the social construction of race and ethnicity has undergone years of clever evolution and subtle change, the meaning of actions and beliefs is not self-evident. Meaning is often created in social interaction, and sorting it out in terms of preconceptions and objective conditions can become more difficult. Nevertheless, race becomes a part of the silent ideology that characterizes how we define events. Peer and Ettema assert,

We look at urban politics as a terrain on which race is socially constructed. At a time when "all politics is local politics," the urban landscape is a battleground for different racially and ethnically-defined groups fighting to advance their interest. . . .

The construction of racial reality, or of race as a political reality, is an important example of news as ideology. As ideology, the news invoked a framework for understanding urban politics and provides a narrative which features race as the key to politics.¹⁷

The media reflects on the ideology of race to frame the discourse in its coverage of the election of a series of black mayors. In the history of racial constructions, a black mayor is a rather recent case: before the 1960s, the concept of a black mayor was unknown. In majority black cities such as Mound Bayou, Mississippi, black men were elected mayor for years, but without the racial construct. After Carl Stokes was elected mayor of

the majority white Cleveland, Ohio, he became the first “black mayor.” The racial construction took on serious political meaning. Two ways of construing mayors of African descent emerged. The first involved the election of a black mayor as a sign of race progress and racial maturity. The second construed the election of a black mayor as a symbol of white abandonment of cities (that is, a racial takeover). In either case it is a construction that takes on a different meaning for whites and blacks.

We learn to be comfortable with these constructions and resist rethinking them even in the light of new information. Entman and Rojecki call the tendency toward mental inertia a “joint product of cognitive economy and of cultural influence.” Accordingly, we use schemes and frames as mental shortcuts. They define schemes as “a set of related concepts that allow people to make inferences about new information based on already organized prior knowledge.”¹⁸ For example, many white Americans believe blacks are less able, intelligent, and responsible than whites. News items about wrongdoings and mistakes by a black officeholder might trigger a series of stereotypes or schema stored in the minds of the audience. Given our racial history, it is unlikely that most Americans can be truly race neutral. Entman and Rojecki assert,

This is where culture comes in. We define the mainstream culture as *the set of schemes most widely stored in the public’s minds and the core thematic frames that pervade media messages*. Lacking much opportunity for repeated close contact with a wide variety of Blacks, Whites depend heavily on cultural material, especially media images, for cataloging Blacks. The mediated communications help explain the tenacious survival of racial stereotypes despite a social norm that dampens public admission of prejudice. And they help explain pervasive White ambivalence that shrinks from open prejudice but harbors reactive fear, resentment, and denial that the prejudice itself widely exists.¹⁹

The social construction of race and managerial competence evolved in this way. Given over thirty years of electing black mayors in America, journalists now have enough stories to make this fallacious proposition: black mayors cannot manage cities as well as their white counterparts, and they are less

likely to protect white interests. Whites are more likely to believe this proposition than are blacks. It becomes a part of the constructed reality.

Neuman and others argued that journalists are a part of the process of constructing reality. The first construction takes place at the source of the story—politicians, spokespersons, public affairs people, and so on. These key people interpret the news for reporters in hope of having their views, characterizations, and frames included in the reporter's story. The reporter, in turn, continues the process of interpreting the news. Neuman and others conclude, "Journalists reconstruct reality for an audience, taking in account their organizational and modality constraints, professional judgments and certain expectations about the audience. Finally, the individual reader or viewer constructs a version of reality built from personal experience, interaction with peers and interpreted selection from the mass media."²⁰

One of Jeffrey Pressman's preconditions for an effective mayoral leadership is a supportive press.²¹ A hostile or second-guessing media can make leading constituents more difficult. As purveyors of these mayoral stories, reporters can be classified as theme setters and theme followers. Theme-setting reporters try to preempt or override the discourse about a mayor or his actions by framing events in their terms. If a reporter has a flare for colorful and memorable characterizations, he or she can set the tone for the political discourse. These reporters help focus the lens of history with words and images. They seem to know how to ask the right questions and how to churn the right story. Theme followers, however, are not as creative. They are content to anchor their work on existing social themes.

Race and politics are ongoing topics in all news outlets. Depending upon the nature of an event, news directors and editors of these outlets can cover any personality anywhere within hours of an event. The promise of technology is that no story will be left uncovered by the media. Furthermore, competition among media outlets insures that even minor events will get some coverage, which is particularly true with respect to racial incidents. Many black politicians believe that they are under the strict scrutiny of a racially biased national and local media. A common complaint among black officeholders is that the media concentrates on their racial backgrounds and ignores

other dimensions of their personalities and performances. Some of these officeholders claim that the media rarely asks them about issues such as citywide economic and cultural development. What are the problems inherent in attributing this one-dimensionality for black politicians? What effect does this practice have on the public's assessment about their competency? Why are black politicians so closely linked to the racial progress of their black constituency? To what extent does "racial progress ideology" influence the coverage of black mayors?

African American politicians are relatively new players in the highly competitive news market. Most are aware that as "targets" of both the national and local press, their policy decisions, as well as their lifestyles, will be heavily scrutinized. This may explain why some politicians are reluctant to talk to reporters and academic researchers.

Moreover, there are few black reporters and columnists.²² Minority-led cities do not have counterparts in the news business. For example, there are no black-owned dailies.²³ There are some black-owned weeklies (such as the *Amsterdam News*) with small readerships. They cannot match the opinion-making ability of the *New York Times*. Minority-owned television and radio stations tend toward small stations that concentrate on entertainment and cultural events. As a result, white-owned media may not treat minority politicians as legitimate city leaders, but rather as interlopers.

African American politicians claim that they receive a disproportionate amount of negative publicity and are portrayed as ineffective policy makers. Anju Chaudhary's study of nineteen newspapers showed that "the length of stories on black elected officials in newspapers is greater than those of white elected officials."²⁴ She also found that such stories were placed in less desirable positions and were more negative than those written about white-elected officials. Several black mayors have felt that the media was biased against them.²⁵ Recently former Cleveland mayor Michael White barred the largest city newspaper, the *Plain Dealer*, from his retirement news conference.²⁶ Ironically, the national media has featured him as the prototype of the new black politician.²⁷ These "new black politicians" are supposed to be race neutral and more mainstream in their approach to governing. Does this mean they are more competent than their pre-

decessors? Have they overcome the “antipower bias” that precludes them from exercising effective control of government operations?²⁸ Do they provide more leadership than their predecessors? What role does the structure of city government play? Is the role fragmented or centralized?

The issue of agency versus structure and the issue of accountability to followers are the heart of mayoral leadership. Bryan Jones is correct when he suggests that “creativity versus constraints”²⁹ is the key to understanding political leadership. The discourse about African American mayors has been biased toward issues of agency. Can they act independently? Will they be creative enough to overcome the structures of the office? The subtext of this discourse is whether the mayor is competent in a creative sense.

The Subtext of Competence

Was Mayor Dinkins competent? Spitzberg, who defines competence as ability, asserts, “It represents those capacities a person more or less possesses or acquires that enable the repeated enacting of goal-directed behavioral routines. The assumption is that possession of competence permits the optimizing of positive reinforcements while minimizing negative ones relative to effort and expenditure, and alternatives.”³⁰ A competent mayor would consistently perform tasks necessary to govern. Such individuals would improve their performance as they mastered the routines of governing. The competence question takes on racial overtones when directed toward a black mayor. The nation seems to be still debating the mental ability of black people, therefore, it remains both an implicit and an explicit part of this nation’s racial discourse. This may explain why editors allowed their reporters to use so much precious space accusing Dinkins of not paying enough attention to office obligations and routines. At the same time, he was charged with not providing enough visible leadership on the big issues. By raising the question of competence, reporters were trying to explain why nothing seemed to be happening.

Part of the race story is that blacks may be equal before the law, but it seems to be permissible for the public to hold reservations

about their intelligence and their work ethic. Powerful equalitarian norms preclude explicit messages touting the inferiority of blacks, but there is a lot of what Tali Mendelberg calls “implicit racial appeals.”³¹ On the role of politicians and parties, Mendelberg observed,

Politicians convey racial messages implicitly when two contradictory conditions hold: (1) they wish to avoid violating the norm of racial equality, and (2) they face incentives to mobilize racially resentful white voters. White voters respond to implicitly racial messages when two contradictory conditions hold: (1) they wish to adhere to the norm of racial equality, and (2) they resent blacks’ claims for public resources and hold negative racial stereotypes regarding work, violence and sexuality.³²

The same characterization could be made for some journalists. Not only are these messages implicit, but also the messenger is sometimes unaware that he or she is a part of a larger racial discourse, that he or she is a message deliverer. Journalists convey racial messages implicitly when they construct stories that reinforce white readers’ socialized beliefs of racial superiority and entitlement. Research suggests that some whites have been socialized to believe negative racial stereotypes regarding the intelligence and work ethics of blacks.³³ Some whites perceive a black demand for equal opportunity as a demand for preferential treatment.

The journalistic challenge is to cover a David Dinkins without the filter of racism. Many still regard an elected black officeholder’s insistence on deference as problematic. This is why covering a black politician is so disappointing and predictable. Presenting black politicians in term of their race usually goes unchallenged. Labeling can lock a journalist into a tunnel, which may preclude presenting the black officeholder in more three-dimensional terms.

This book analyzes subtle stereotypical messages, second guessing, and racial signaling contained in stories about politicians. Black politicians bring with them a whole set of prepackaged images that white politicians do not. These prepackaged images include negative stereotypes that blacks are less competent and less intelligent. Black politicians are also supposedly

more attracted to the perks of the office than to the substance of the job. These images are triggered either after something goes wrong or after black politicians complain. That means that if things get tough, as they did for Dinkins, the first reaction among the public was “Well, what do you expect? He is black.” The white public tends to allow extra slack for white mayors. Because they have more slack, it takes longer for misjudgments and mistakes to affect the prevailing image of white mayors. It is not uncommon for black and white politicians to receive different evaluations from the public for making the same decision.

Because of the white public’s stereotypes, if a black politician is called “incompetent” the label has a better chance of sticking than it does with a white politician. When an officeholder is labeled “incompetent” this characterization has to be documented and sustained by stories of mistakes, misjudgments, and mismanagement. Usually reporters solicit quotes from academics, businesspersons, or politicians that either imply or reinforce this label. These stories need to be referential to appeal to the public. In the case of mayoral competency, the public has a propensity to believe stories that resonate with their preconceived notions of the incumbent and their own personal value systems. In many ways, the labeling of mayors sends a variety of messages. In some cases it is simply a matter of using the right adjective. Political scientists Anne Schnieder and Helen Ingram list some of these positive or negative adjectives. For them, “Positive constructions include images such as ‘deserving,’ ‘intelligent,’ ‘honest,’ ‘public-spirited’ and so forth. Negative constructions include images such as ‘undeserving,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘dishonest,’ and ‘selfish.’”³⁴

For mayors, we might add positive words such as *savvy*, *even-handed*, *fair*, and *open-minded*. Negative words include *strong partisan*, *vindictive*, *thin-skinned*, and *combative*. These words or characterizations take on an entirely different meaning when applied to minority and women office holders. Being called a “vindictive mayor” is considered harsher when applied to a woman than to a man. Stating that a black mayor made a stupid decision may be interpreted differently than the same characterization applied to a white mayor. Because many readers carry stereotypes about the intelligence of black people, any message that reinforces these stereotypes will provoke a reaction. Because

it plays into racial stereotypes, an “inarticulate” black mayor is somehow more negative than an “inarticulate” white mayor.³⁵ Such characterizations reinforce stereotypes.³⁶ When I interviewed reporters, most seemed quite aware of their readers’ beliefs and used such references to develop their stories.

Framing Events to Fit the Overall Story

The media, particularly the print media, is often faced with a story that does not fit the overall narrative being nurtured. The story can be reshaped (consciously and unconsciously) to fit by stimulating or otherwise activating dormant social beliefs by framing political issues in constructed group terms. Journalists can do this by framing issues in zero-sum, racial, class, gender, or spatial terms. For example, if group X gets Y, then group Z is made to feel it got nothing. If blacks get more jobs, then whites will get fewer jobs. The advance of women can only come at the expense of men. When neighborhood A gets more municipal services, its property values will appreciate, and neighborhood B, receiving fewer services, depreciates. These characterizations create the impression that some groups are being left out, double-crossed, or even ignored. Conversely, some groups are made to believe they are at an advantage or privileged. Gamson and colleagues observe,

We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elite who operates and focuses it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible.³⁷

This elite supportive view has been criticized by a variety of media commentators.³⁸ It is not uncommon for the media to run photographs of business leaders with celebrities, especially on occasions when they are being philanthropic. However, leaders are rarely questioned about their role in decisions regarding the city’s economy. Although most reporters work for

large corporations, it is very important to them that they have credibility and are seen as independent of their corporate employers. Publishers and editors understand this need and allow some negative stories about leaders to reach the public. Therefore, some stories are critical of politicians and powerful business leaders. Reporters often will invent nicknames for politicians and criticize them in cartoons, which helps the reporters cultivate a skeptical image. Yet the images reporters create are not very helpful in organizing a meaningful public discourse, nor do they contain enough information to mount a response to elitist decisions.³⁹

Professional journalism espouses objectivity in reporting, but in practice, most journalists support the views of the existing politicoeconomic system. Political scientist Benjamin Page claims that newspapers use a series of techniques to slant the news, such as how a story is presented, selective reporting of facts, use of evaluative words, and framing.⁴⁰ This slanting permeates the entire paper, not just the editorial pages. As noted earlier, Soloski disagrees with this view. He believes that objectivity in journalism is not the same as in social science and resides in the behavior of the journalist. Reporters are not impartial observers of events, but rather “they seek out the facts and report them as fairly and in as balanced a way as possible.”⁴¹ Soloski makes an argument that professional norms serve to control the behavior of journalists. He cites a quote by E. B. Philips: “By definition, then, journalists are turned into copying machines who simply record the world rather than evaluate it.”⁴²

In other words, the crusading reporter is a myth. Reporters are primed to hear and see events in a particular way. Hence, their views support the status quo. Reporters make political judgments based on what Meryl Louis calls a “cognitive script.”⁴³ These scripts allow them to make sense out of various political situations. The scripts allow them to identify triumphs, mistakes, and inconsistencies, override official accounts and interpretations, and anticipate a reader’s interest. Jim Sleeper makes a similar observation.

We in the media do carry “scripts” in our heads, storytelling devices that help us make sense of conflicts into which we are thrown, on deadline, with only fragmentary evidence to guide us.

The more seasoned we become through diverse encounters with the people we write about, the more refined are our scripts. But they can also remain tainted by the private guilt, anger, cynicism, or hope we carry with us. Above all, we know that the greater the horror, the “better” the story; journalists, too, operate within a “pack” psychology.⁴⁴

One could argue that the more diverse the city, the more a journalist must tailor his or her stories to engage the audience. Equally important is the ability to incorporate one’s own personal script with the overall story of one host city.

The City as a Story

Cities attract people for a variety of reasons. High-profile cities such as New York now compete globally for resources, companies, residents, and tourists. Each city has formulated a central story that identifies why it should be the place to live and work. A city’s central story often takes years to formulate, revise, and refine. The story is more than civic jingoism or boosterism. Stories provide points of emotive references that explain why we invest in some cities and divest in others. New York is the grand American city because its political and economic stories are among the most compelling ones in the nation. The city draws upon history to make the case for uniqueness. The grand story locates people, inveigling them to buy into a common purpose of living and working there: “We are all New Yorkers.” This is not a shibboleth, as it is essential for mobilizing and governing in an increasingly disparate urban community. In a society that divides people into occupations, classes, races, ethnicity, and neighborhoods, a common element can hold everyone together. The telling of these stories is done through media outlets, but politicians act out the drama.

New York residents believe they live in an extraordinary city, in part, because the media flatters them. They are made to feel lucky because they live in New York. According to these positive messages, New Yorkers are a steady group blessed with resiliency and boundless coping mechanisms. They can arrive anywhere in the city by subway. Sure their apartments may be small,

but they live in the “City.” There are stories about the high cost of living in Manhattan, Fifth Avenue matrons, Broadway, Wall Street, and expensive restaurants. There are also stories about people (mainly movie stars, international financiers, and rich Europeans) who could afford to live anywhere but prefer living in New York. Paul Delaney observes, “The Bible of the *Times* is the idea that the city is sacred. The *Times* propagates the New York culture passionately. They live by it. The first thing they ask new reporters. How do you like New York? The paper is a true New Yorker.”⁴⁵

Overview of This Book

The introduction of this book provides an opportunity to examine the political communication literature as it relates to race and mayoral images. Indeed, I am trying to expose the media’s role in image construction and raise questions about its process and the role images play in politics. I am suggesting that David Dinkins represents different meanings to different audiences independent of the political events of his tenure. This is not to say that events shaped the construction of his mayoralty but rather to say that race complicated his image and politics. This analysis borrows much from the research of social psychologists, journalism theorists, sociologists, and literary theorists.⁴⁶

I interviewed former mayor David Dinkins, his principal staff members, and the reporters who covered him. In my interviews, I attempted to engage interviewees with respect to interpretations and conclusions drawn from media discourse. I also used the newspaper accounts of Dinkins’ tenure. The cases selected for review included mayoral appointments, race relations, public unions, employees’ unions, and school politics. Each of these provided a challenge to the mayor’s image.⁴⁷

Chapter 2 is an analysis of the social and political background of David Dinkins. Some New York City politicians are considered *greenhouse politicians*, because they are trained to be only local politicians. Greenhouse plants are grown under controlled conditions—the proper lighting, temperature, water, and fertilizer. Such plants are never exposed to the environmental vicissitudes of the outdoors, but once out of this controlled environment,

they cannot survive. 'Greenhouse politicians' refers to black politicians who were nurtured in the idiosyncratic white, liberal politics of New York City and became true believers in positive government. However, such politicians are provincial, and when in office they behave with a New Deal bent. They have a limited vision about what cities can do or be. Furthermore, New York City politicians do not believe that they can learn from other cities or non-New York politicians. Such politicians could not function outside the city. Could the greenhouse politician characterization be applied to mayor David Dinkins? Was he a victim of the backlash toward black males who assume agency?

Chapter 3 examines the proposition that Dinkins' election represents a regime change. It discusses the economic, social, and structural conditions that greeted him as he entered Gracie Mansion and city hall. The Dinkins era corresponds to the advent of a new city charter and a nationwide economic recession.

Chapter 4 examines the staff appointments of Mayor Dinkins. The first sets of high-profile appointments are critical to a mayor's public image. Dinkins' appointments reflected his notion of inclusion and ethnic representation. Potentially, the mayor's team can either facilitate or impede his or her goals. The internal dynamics of city hall reveal a great deal about Dinkins and how he assigned responsibilities.

Chapter 5 describes how Dinkins dealt with the racial crises in Queens and Crown Heights. The Crown Heights incident (a conflict between Jews and blacks in a Brooklyn neighborhood) was a critical marker for his administration. Although he had racial problems during the Korean store boycott (the boycott of a fruit store in Queens) and a series of interracial murders, Crown Heights stands out as the watershed of Dinkins' tenure.

Chapter 6 reviews the relationship between Dinkins and the employee unions. For a variety of reasons, public employee unions have emerged as some of the strongest interest groups in the city. They are the second most attentive public the mayor has, and their leaders play a major role in electoral politics. Politics in many ways has become a cycle of collective bargaining. Mayors are often judged by how they manage the demands of the unions. Mayors who alienate union leaders do so at their peril. The press is particularly attentive to the opinion of union leaders because work stoppage and job action can disturb city activities.

Street crime remains the top public issue in most industrial cities. This is especially the case in times of economic downturn. In the current crime-phobic society, mayoral candidates are forced to outline what type of *safety compact* they plan to impose if elected into office. The discourse about crime is that everyone is a potential victim. A commentary in the *New Yorker* expanded on this point by saying, "Crime is at the center of the issue of public safety, which also encompasses a range of other affections that give an air of menace to life in many parts of many cities, New York included: aggressive panhandlers, graffiti, and violence in and around public schools."⁴⁸

Mayors run on anticrime platforms and take every opportunity to be constructed as effective crime fighters. This image making includes soliciting the police union's support in campaigns and in appointing commissioners with crime-fighting reputations. A crime incident in the city can change the image of a mayor. Chapter 7 reviews street crimes and Dinkins' reactions to the demand for more safety in the streets.

Chapter 8 examines New York City school politics. Most mayors have to deal with public school politics. Although they can appoint members to the central board, mayors generally have very little control over school board policy. In an earlier work, I suggested that policy was controlled by a coalition of central board staff and union leaders, the public school cartel (PSC). Chapter 8 examines how Dinkins fared with this cartel. The last chapter brings together the findings from the case studies and outlines some implications for media and mayoral politics.