

Ed Koch: The right-wing trajectory of a Democratic politician

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The death of Ed Koch, the three-term mayor of New York City, has provoked a predictable deluge of tributes from the political, economic and media establishments, culminating in a funeral on February 4 attended by Bill Clinton, the three living former New York mayors, several former governors and numerous other political figures.

Koch, who died on February 1 at the age of 88, has been called a historic figure, a man almost single-handedly responsible for the supposed “rebirth” and “rescue” of New York City.

Koch was no doubt a significant political figure, but not in the way that the editorialists, politicians and pundits pretend. He “rescued” New York much the same way Ronald Reagan “rescued” the US.

The many tributes to Koch don’t mention that his tenure at City Hall, from 1978 through 1989, coincided almost exactly with the so-called Reagan era. These two men, the grade B retired actor and the liberal turned loudmouth reactionary, had much in common. They both pretended to speak for the aggrieved middle class, while working at the behest of the ruling establishment to shift official politics sharply to the right and spearhead a social counterrevolution directed against the working class, especially its poorest and most vulnerable sections.

For Koch’s wealthy friends, including multimillionaire retired politicians and other members of the top 1 percent, New York City has undoubtedly become a happier place. They are expressing their gratitude for the services he rendered. For the many millions of struggling working people, however, the legacy of Koch is no cause for celebration.

Koch’s political trajectory reflected the sharp turn to the right of a broad social layer, beginning in the 1970s. Rupert Murdoch’s *Wall Street Journal* called attention to this in its editorial on the late mayor when it referred approvingly to Koch as “a liberal mugged by reality.”

This is a reference, not attributed by the editors, to Koch’s contemporary, Irving Kristol, the so-called godfather of neo-conservatism, who first coined the phrase. Kristol, who died in 2009, was a student radical in his youth who became a figure beloved in the most right-wing Republican circles for his hatred of socialism and his full-throated support for American

imperialism, up to and including the war crimes in Iraq.

When Kristol spoke of liberals mugged by reality he was referring to a social layer that prospered in the period after the Second World War, a selfish and thoroughly self-centered stratum that made it into the upper middle class and in some cases into even wealthier circles, and turned viciously against the great majority of the population beneath them.

Kristol fancied himself an intellectual, while Koch did not. Kristol became a leading advisor to top Republican circles, while Koch remained a Democrat, although a Democrat who often supported Republicans. Their trajectories were quite similar, however—that of the New York liberal or left-wing radical who traced his origins back to the more than two million Jewish immigrants who flocked to New York in the decades before Ed Koch was born in 1924, and who came to exemplify the somewhat simplistic adage that advancing age goes hand-in-hand with a turn to the right.

The future mayor was born in the Bronx. His father, a small businessman who went under in 1931, moved the family to nearby Newark, New Jersey and then to Brooklyn. Koch, who served in the Army in World War II, later got a law degree and became active in liberal circles. By the 1960s he was a well-known “reform Democrat,” who, as head of the Village Independent Democrats, became known for ousting the longtime Manhattan Democratic Party boss Carmine DeSapio. Koch was a prominent backer of anti-war Democratic presidential aspirant Eugene McCarthy in 1968.

After eight years in Congress representing the Manhattan East Side district previously held by former Mayor John Lindsay, a liberal Republican, Koch entered a crowded primary campaign for the Democratic nomination for mayor in 1977. Running as a law-and-order advocate in the immediate aftermath of New York’s brush with bankruptcy, Koch won the primary and then the mayoralty itself only weeks after the New York City blackout, which was accompanied by massive looting that reflected the city’s desperate state.

Koch parlayed his penchant for “straight-talking” demagoguery into three terms as mayor. He was adept at articulating the anger and frustration of more politically backward sections of the middle class. These layers were encouraged to see the social problems of the 1970s not as the consequence of the crisis of

the profit system, but as the fault of “lazy” welfare recipients, “overpaid” city employees, the unemployed and the young.

As mayor, Koch made a name for himself through his vicious denunciations of supposed welfare abuse and “softness” on crime. He made a racial appeal, addressing himself to those who feared “changing neighborhoods” and crime, while usually avoiding rhetoric that could be called overtly racist. He combined this with equally violent attacks on municipal workers and other sections of the working class.

When the school bus drivers went out on strike in early 1979—the same section of workers fighting to defend their job security today—Koch denounced them as “goons” and “bastards.” The next year, when New York’s powerful 35,000-strong subway and bus workforce defied the anti-strike Taylor Law in an eight-day walkout, Koch led a crowd across the Brooklyn Bridge, hysterically whipping up sections of the middle class.

In his third term, Koch began to outlive his usefulness for the ruling elite. Voters began to tire of his antics, especially as economic problems continued. The thinly-veiled appeals to racism found infamous expression in such incidents as the death of Michael Griffith in Howard Beach, Queens in 1986 and the killing of 16-year-old Yusuf Hawkins in Brooklyn in 1989. This was accompanied by a series of police shootings, including the shotgun killing of 66-year-old Eleanor Bumpurs in her own apartment in 1984.

The stock market crash of October 1987, towards the end of Koch’s years in office, deepened a crisis that had never disappeared. The city’s transit system and other public services were badly under-funded. The beginning of the crack epidemic testified to the hopelessness that was especially widespread among minority workers and youth. The drug crisis fueled street crime and a murder rate that reached an all time high in 1990, just after Koch left office.

Corruption scandals that erupted in Koch’s last years badly dented Koch’s public image. Although he was not personally implicated, the scandals involving Democratic leaders in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens were attributed to Koch’s negligence. Known for his crude narcissism, Koch was faulted for being more interested in his appearances in the press and on television than in the details of city government. When he ran in the Democratic primary in 1989 for an unprecedented fourth term, he was defeated.

Koch found life after his years in office to be quite rewarding. He secured a cushy position in the major law firm of Bryan Cave and kept busy with such ventures as writing movie reviews, public appearances at \$20,000 each, turning out murder mysteries, and becoming a judge on the tabloid television show “The People’s Court.” While continuing to live in a comfortable rental apartment in New York’s Greenwich Village, he became a millionaire many times over.

In 2004, Koch—nominally still a Democrat—endorsed George W. Bush for re-election and spoke at the Republican National

Convention. His right-wing views were bound up with his political identification with Zionism. He unconditionally backed the Iraq war and derided the Democrats for not having the “stomach to go after the terrorists” and for supposedly advancing “an anti-Israel philosophy.”

An examination of Koch’s legacy exposes the class reality behind the orchestrated praise for his accomplishments. The expansion of affordable housing is claimed as his greatest achievement, with a \$5 billion capital program in the mid-1980s allegedly leading in subsequent decades to more than 200,000 new apartments. In fact, the crisis of affordable housing has never been greater, with huge numbers of workers paying up to 50 percent of their income on housing costs, and with the official count of occupants of the city shelter system hitting new records every month.

The claim that Koch ushered in campaign finance reform is particularly laughable, considering the fact that for the past 12 years the mayor has been a multibillionaire who has spent hundreds of millions of dollars of his vast fortune to win the keys to Gracie Mansion.

As for inequality, even Koch’s most enthusiastic admirers are not talking about that, not five years after the financial collapse and amidst continuing mass unemployment coupled with massive Wall Street bonuses and daily revelations of the incestuous and corrupt relations between the financial parasites and every level of government.

Koch typified in his own brash way a shift to the right by the whole political establishment. The ruling class needed demagogues like Koch as its crisis not only made it impossible to provide reforms as in the past, but made it necessary to take those timid reforms back.

In mourning Koch, the financial oligarchy and its media are no doubt conscious that the extreme social polarization that prevails in New York City and around the country make it increasingly difficult to secure a popular base for the redoubled assault on social conditions of the broad mass of working people that is being driven by the crisis of capitalism.



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