

Ave, Hizzoner by Dan Jacoby

During the several centuries of the Roman Republic, their constitution allowed for the occasional appointment of a Dictator, or *Magister Populi* ("Master of the People"). Dictators were appointed by one of two Consuls, who served together for a single one-year term. In times of emergency, when it was believed that a single person should be in charge, a Consul could appoint someone as Dictator for a single six-month term.

The first Dictator was Titus Larcus Flavus, appointed in 501 BCE. Over the next three centuries, dozens of Dictators were appointed, served their six-month terms, and then stepped down. After the Dictatorship of Gaius Servilius Geminus in 202 BCE, the practice fell out of favor for 120 years.

Then, in 82 BCE, Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix, known as Sulla, got himself appointed Dictator. This time, however, he didn't step down after six months, but extended his term. This marked the beginning of the end of the Roman Republic.

Today, we have a constitution that (theoretically) doesn't allow for dictators. Locally, we also have a City Charter that contains term limits. Those term limits were the result of a referendum – the voters of New York City overwhelmingly approved them in 1993, and then fought back an attempt to extend them in 1996. All three citywide officeholders, four borough presidents, and the overwhelming majority of the City Council owe their positions to term limits; their predecessors were term-limited out.

Now we are facing yet another in a long series of financial difficulties. Since the current major, who faces being term-limited out at the end of next year, is a successful businessman, many people (including Mayor Bloomberg himself) seem to believe that he should be allowed to stay in office past his term limit. Even some people who would prefer to see him replaced believe that term limits should be extended or abolished.

The problem is that instead of proposing to offer the voters an opportunity to decide whether to repeal the law we put in place, Mayor Bloomberg is trying to shove a bill through the City Council. He's trying to shove the bill through so quickly that people won't have time (he clearly hopes) to organize an opposition. What's worse, he's shoving this bill at us during the height of the election season, when the most politically active people and groups are at their busiest.

The American system was created, like the Roman Republic, based on the concept that no one person is indispensable. Mayor Bloomberg's belief, and the contention of his supporters, that he is the only one who can "rescue" the city from its current fiscal problems, goes against the grain of the American way. What would people say if President Bush, claiming that he rescued us from the post-9/11 economic and national security "crisis," announced that only he could save us from the combination of national economic meltdown and continuing troubles in Iraq?

Congress would sooner impeach Bush than grant him another term. The City Council should adopt a similar attitude toward Mayor Bloomberg.

The problem is that legislators rarely have the guts to stand up to a currently popular executive. Indeed, legislators often have trouble standing up to a weak, foolish executive, which is why George W. Bush is still in charge of policy on Iraq, any why his proposal for the "bailout" is essentially what became law.

Some City Council members have already spoken out against Mayor Bloomberg's Caesarian power grab. It's a good start, and refreshing to know that some of our elected legislators can show a spine when necessary.

Seven years ago, some people (then-Mayor Giuliani included, along with the eventual Democratic mayoral nominee) suggested that it might be a good idea for the mayor to remain in office past the end of his term, because he was the only one who could deal with the post-9/11 fallout. Fortunately, reason, and the American way, prevailed then.

Reason, and the American way, should prevail again. The City Council should repudiate this power grab, and show proper respect for the twice-expressed will of the people. Otherwise, it might not be long before we elect a "Mayor for Life."

You've served your time, Mayor Bloomberg; step aside.

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