

# Rudy's gift to the city: Freeing it of bad ideas

**W**hy was New York City in free fall a decade ago and believed to be ungovernable? "Because of ideas," Mayor Rudy Giuliani said in his farewell address. The city got itself tangled in "political philosophies and political creeds and ideologies."

Consider where the city was a decade ago. Social breakdown had reached the point where tourists stayed away and more than half the adults in the city, according to one poll, planned to leave.

An army of the homeless, a euphemism for alcoholics, addicts and released mental patients, camped out on sidewalks and in parks.

A second army, made up of do-good lawyers, fought to create the right to live, sleep and defecate on city streets. Nobody seemed to litigate the right to a livable city or to parks free of human waste.

Disorder seemed to be everywhere. Turnstile-jumping and other subway scams cost the Transit Authority an estimated \$60 million a year.

A million people were on welfare. Around 25 cabbies a year were murdered. In my neighborhood, two Korean grocers were savagely beaten by a gang of thugs.

So what were the bad ideas that brought about this disaster?

**Bad Idea 1.** Disorder and low-level victimless crimes are not worth bothering with. As Giuliani said of the city, "we were too busy" to do anything about prostitution, panhandling, graffiti and low-level drug-dealing on the street.

But these behaviors signal a loss of social control, demoralizing residents and setting the stage for serious crime and neighborhood decline.

**Bad Idea 2.** The crime rate can't be brought down without dealing first with the root causes of poverty and hopelessness. Not much is left of this theory. The crime rate and the murder rate have been cut by two-thirds. Last year, Chicago, with less than half the population, had more



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Giuliani heading up the aisle of St. Paul's Chapel to deliver his farewell address.

murders than New York. The fallback position of the anti-Giuliani people is that the drop would have occurred any way because of the 1990s economic boom. But the city's crime rate dropped 30% in Giuliani's first two years, before the economy improved, and the boom did not seem to reduce crime in Philadelphia, Chicago and Detroit. New York accounts for as much as a quarter of the national decline in crime.

Most other crime-cutting cities have had crime rises in the past few months. New York's rate is still falling.

**Bad Idea 3.** Living on the street is a right to be defended, given the economic pressures that cause it. Not so, Giuliani insisted.

**Bad Idea 4.** Policies promoting middle-class values are just attempts by the comfortable to impose their way of life on the

oppressed.

"New York politics is mostly about striking caring poses," writes Fred Siegel of Cooper Union, our best academic expert on New York and urban problems. "Liberals like John Lindsay and David Dinkins spoke endlessly of what the city owed the poor, but they delivered rising rates of crime and welfare. Giuliani spoke in the middle-class language of what the poor owe to the rest of society, and he delivered

more peaceful neighborhoods and a rising standard of living from Mott Haven to East New York."

Despite all his flaws, truth is that Giuliani saved us from becoming another Detroit. Whether the dead policies of the past will be imposed once again under Mayor Bloomberg is anybody's guess.

E-mail: [jleo@usnews.com](mailto:jleo@usnews.com)

**JOHN  
LEO**

