

# The Chief

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Editorial

July 30, 2010

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## The Goldsmith Standard

The Vulcans aren't the only ones unhappy with the Fire Department's personnel practices.

Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith last week told a Crain's New York breakfast that among the biggest problems the city has is that the darned civil-service system, including the use of exams to promote to virtually every uniformed position in the Fire Department, is "very, very, very counterproductive."

The last city public official to use "very" three times in one sentence was Rudy Giuliani, and so Mr. Goldsmith, a former Mayor of Indianapolis, may be styling himself in the mold of our former Mayor, who many remember for not only reinventing municipal government but also managing the Yankees to four World Championships while creating air and water.

Mr. Goldsmith, like Mr. Giuliani, is surely a quick study: his pronouncements on how to make the city more efficient came barely more than a month into his taking the job. It left us wondering whether he might just be the point man for Mayor Bloomberg's pet peeves after 8½ years in office.

It is not that all Mr. Goldsmith's complaints were glib or even off the mark. He is absolutely correct that Albany has too much control over the city's governance. But there is something a bit Orwellian about Mr. Goldsmith criticizing the civil-service system for preventing "merit promotions." His brief glimpse of city government appears to have convinced him that key positions in agencies are staffed by those who are good test-takers rather than good public servants. But those two categories are not mutually exclusive. And the civil-service system was created to prevent the kind of favoritism and patronage abuses that chief executives with unfettered discretion are likely to indulge. Rather than harking back to the bad old days of the Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall, we have more-recent cases to serve as cautionary tales, and Mr. Giuliani to thank for them.

In 1998 he appointed Russell Harding, the son of one of his chief political allies, as Housing Development Commissioner despite his lack of a college degree and any background in housing. Mr. Harding repaid Mr. Giuliani's confidence by stealing from literally his first day on the job and eventually went to prison.

Two years later, our esteemed Mayor gave us Bernie Kerik as Police Commissioner, a glitzier choice than Chief of Department Joe Dunne, who had worked his way up the ranks over 30 years in the NYPD. Mr. Dunne would have been the obvious choice under the civil-service system which Mr. Goldsmith believes is such a hindrance. Mr. Kerik did so well during Mr. Giuliani's tenure that the Mayor named a jail not far from City Hall after him.

We would suggest that Mr. Goldsmith ask his boss what happened to Mr. Kerik later on, and why he can't find the jail with his name on it.

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