Urban Legends
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"The difference between my level of government and other levels of government," Michael Bloomberg has said, "is that action takes place at the city level." While the federal government remains polarized and paralyzed, "the mayors of this country still have to deal with the real world." In New York City, which has "every kind of people from every part of the world and every kind of problem," Bloomberg boasts, "I have my own army in the NYPD and my own State Department." Asked whether federal officials approve of this approach, he shoots back, "Well, I don't listen to Washington very much."

In *If Mayors Ruled The World*, Benjamin Barber, a senior research scholar at the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, founder and president of "Citizens Without Borders," and the author of *Strong Democracy* (1984), *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995) and *Consumed* (2007), makes the intriguing, provocative, and counter-intuitive argument that, despite their current financial woes, cities and the mayors who run them are the last best hope for a safer, more prosperous, and just future for the United States and the world.

Cities, Barber emphasizes, put a premium on pragmatism and efficiency in solving problems: "presidents pontificate principle; mayors pick up the garbage." While presidents and prime ministers are shackled to the ideologies of sovereignty, self-determination, and autonomy, mayors embrace communication, creativity, collaboration, compromise, and connectivity. Their cities "fly signage and advertising rather than flags. Their sacred hymns are songs of love, nostalgia, and place rather than anthems dedicated to war, heroism, and independence:" "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," "I Love Paris [in the Springtime]," "New York, New York, It's A Wonderful Town." Proud not only of their independence, but of their interdependence, and willing to rely on soft governance, and appeals to common interest and reciprocity rather than hard power and top-down commands, "they build not walls but ports and portals, guildhalls and bridges."

To make his case, Barber examines the policies of cities (and inter-city networks) around the world to address climate change, terrorism, inequality, civic empowerment, public health, immigration, drugs, guns and digital technology. And he profiles a dozen mayors - of New York, Palermo, London, Stuttgart, Singapore, Moscow, Lagos, Delhi, Jerusalem, Jenin, Bogota, and Seoul - who have demonstrated that the approach he advocates "is not waiting to be born but is already half-grown, waiting rather to be recognized, exploited and formalized."

*If Mayors Ruled The World* is informative and imaginative. Cities and mayors, in developed and developing countries, do, indeed, deserve a lot more attention. Barber's claims that municipal governments can solve, and have already begun solving, the urgent problems of the twenty-first century, however, are not persuasive. He acknowledges that unless constraints on them "can be overcome, the question will be whether a natural urban aptitude for piecemeal and episodic collaboration can be translated into a sustained strategy for achieving democratic global cooperation." If anything, especially in the United States, the constraints have grown, putting limits on the capacity of municipalities to mount new initiatives. Gun control, immigration, and income inequality are but three of many issues on which cities are hamstrung by actions (and inaction) by state and federal governments. As Barber notes, cities in the United States "are being effectively strangled" fiscally by the mandates, court decisions, tax policies, and redistribution of income imposed by "higher authorities." For cities with aging infrastructures and large pension obligations, "city limits' turns out to have a meaning more encompassing than topology or boundaries." Detroit has declared bankruptcy; many, many cities, large and small, may be next.

In this context, it should not be surprising that "urban-sourced bridging capital" has produced limited results. And that a scholar as thorough and thoroughly honorable as Barber should struggle with the evidence of recent accomplishments. After enumerating the initiatives of Ayodele Adewale of Lagos, Nigeria, for example, Barber admits that "lists like this...can represent little more than official propaganda" and traditional patronage, only to conclude, without furnishing data, that the "focus on real problems" represents "genuine improvement in a very difficult setting." Similarly, Barber understands that experiments with participatory budgeting, applied to miniscule fractions of city budgets, can be dismissed as window dressing, but insists that they constitute evidence "that participation is feasible even in decisions where the questions are fairly technical" and that the practice can produce enhanced citizen engagement and trust in government.

Those of us who are desperate to find ways to end political gridlock will be tempted to agree that "the best cure for democracy is more democracy." Nonetheless, Barber's thoughtful book leaves us wondering how a parliament of mayors could generate a
consensus on the fundamental challenges we face, powerful enough to take down "the flag of resistance" of obdurate nation-states.

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