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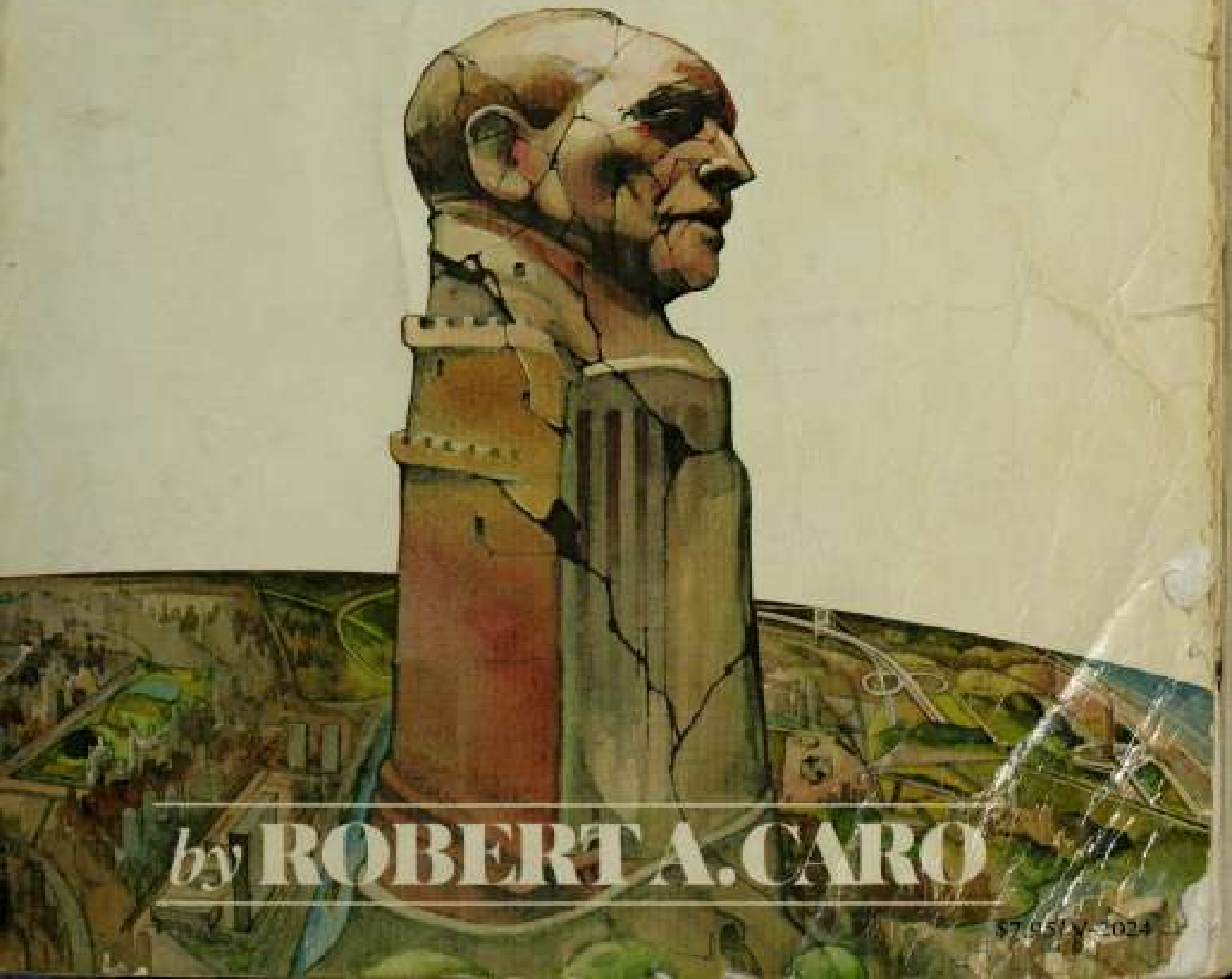
THE POWER BROKER

Robert Moses and the Fall of New York



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FOR INA

and for DR. JANET G. TRAVELL

was no money to replace the dank, low-ceilinged pool, which wasn't even the right length for intercollegiate swimming events. There was no allocation from the university for travel expenses or even for a coach. But Reid, who had been Yale's first great swimmer, not only paid the team's expenses but, week after week, traveled up to New Haven from New York to do the coaching himself. This year, after a long fight, Moses had succeeded in organizing the wrestling, fencing, hockey, basketball and swimming teams into a "Minor Sports Association" which would conduct a general fund-raising effort and divide the money among the teams, in the hope that the existence of such a formal organization would coax new contributions from alumni. The theory was good, Richards had thought at the time, but there was one hitch: any money contributed specifically to one of the teams also had to go into the general fund. Richards doubted that Reid, who was interested only in swimming, would want to contribute to a general fund and he wondered if the swimmers might not end up with even less money than before. But Moses had seemed to have no fears on that score. And now, standing beside the pool, Richards was beginning to understand why. Moses, dressed in suit, vest and a high collar that was wilting in the dampness, had just announced that he was skipping practice to go to New York and see Reid, and when Richards had expressed his doubts that the alumnus would contribute, Moses had smiled and said, "Oh, that's all right. I just won't tell him it's going to an association. He'll think it's the regular contribution to the swimming team."

Now Richards said slowly, "I think that's a little bit tricky, Bob. I think that's a little bit smooth. I don't like that at all."

With astonishing rapidity, the face over the high collar turned pale, almost white. Moses' fists came up for a moment before he lowered them. "Well, you've got nothing to say about it," he said.

"Yes, I do," Richards said. "I'm the captain. I'm responsible. And I'm telling you not to do it."

"Well, I'm going to do it anyway," Moses said.

"If you do," Richards said, "I'll go to Og and tell him that the money isn't going where he thinks it is."

Moses' voice suddenly dropped. His tone was threatening. "If you don't let me do it," he said, "I'm going to resign from the team."

He thought he was bluffing me, Richards would recall later. He thought I wouldn't let him resign. "Well, Bob," Richards said, "your resignation is accepted."

Bob Moses turned and walked out of the pool. He never swam for Yale again.

Forty-five years later, a new mayor of New York was being sworn in at City Hall. Under huge cut-glass chandeliers Robert F. Wagner, Jr., took the oath of office and then, before hundreds of spectators, personally administered the oath, and handed the coveted official appointment blanks, to his top appointees.

But to a handful of the spectators, the real significance of the ceremony

was in an oath not given. When Robert Moses came forward, Wagner swore him in as City Park Commissioner and as City Construction Coordinator—and then, with Moses still waiting expectantly, stopped and beckoned forward the next appointee.

To those spectators, Wagner's gesture signaled triumph. They were representatives of the so-called "Good Government" organizations of the city: the Citizens Union, the City Club, liberal elements of the labor

movement. They had long chafed at the power that Moses had held under previous mayors as Park Commissioner, Construction Coordinator and member of the City Planning Commission. They had determined to try to curb his sway under Wagner and they had decided to make the test of strength the Planning Commission membership. This, they had decided after long analysis and debate, was Moses' weak point: As Park Commissioner and Construction Coordinator he proposed public works projects, and the City Charter had surely never intended that an officeholder who proposed projects should sit on the Planning Commission, whose function was to pass on the merits of those projects. For nine weeks, ever since Wagner's election, they had been pressing him not to reappoint Moses to the commission. Although Wagner had told them he agreed fully with their views and had even hinted that, on Inauguration Day, there would be only two jobs waiting for Moses, they had been far from sure that he meant it. But now they realized that Wagner had in fact not given Moses the third oath—and the Planning Commission job. And, looking at Moses, they could see he realized it, too. His face, normally swarthy, was pale with rage.

The more observant among these spectators, however, noticed that after the ceremonies Moses followed Wagner into his inner office. They knew all too well what he would be saying to the new mayor; he had said it often enough, publicly and privately, orally and in writing, to Wagner's predecessors, Vincent R. Impellitteri and William O'Dwyer, and, even earlier, to the great La Guardia. "He's threatening to resign," they whispered to one another.

They were right. Behind the closed doors of the inner office, Moses was putting it to Wagner straight: If he didn't get the third post, he would quit the other two. And he'd do it right now.

Wagner tried frantically to stall. The Planning Commission oath? the Mayor said. There must have been an oversight. Some clerk must have forgotten to fill out the appointment blank. Nothing to worry about. He'd see to it in a few days. Moses walked out of the Mayor's office and into the little room down the hall where a deputy mayor and his assistant were filing the appointment blanks. Snatching an unused blank off a sheaf on a table, he sat

down at the table and filled it out himself. Then he walked back to Wagner's office and, without a word, laid the paper on the Mayor's desk.

Without a word, the Mayor pulled the paper toward him and signed it.

Robert Moses possessed at the time of his confrontation with Ed Richards an imagination that leaped unhesitatingly at problems insoluble to other men—the problem of financing minor sports had been tormenting Yale

deans for two decades—and that, seemingly in the very moment of the leap, conceived of solutions. He possessed an iron will that put behind his solutions and dreams a determination to let nothing stand in their way—to form the Minor Sports Association he, only an undergraduate, had faced up to, and had finally faced down, Walter Camp, who was implacably opposed to its formation. And he possessed an arrogance which made him conceive himself so indispensable that, in his view, his resignation was the most awful threat he could think of.

Robert Moses possessed the same qualities during his confrontation with Robert Wagner. But by then he also possessed something more. He possessed power.

Power is the backdrop against which both confrontation scenes should be played. For power was the reason for the contrast in their denouements.

The whole life of Robert Moses, in fact, has been a drama of the interplay of power and personality. For a time, standing between it and him was an interceding force, the passionate idealism he had expressed in the Yale bull sessions. Dedicating his life to public service, he remained, during the first years of that service, the idealist of those bull sessions, an idealist possessed, moreover, of a vision of such breadth that he was soon dreaming dreams of public works on a scale that would dwarf any yet built in the cities of America. He wandered tirelessly around New York, and a woman who occasionally wandered with him said he was "burning up with ideas, just burning up with them," ideas for great highways and parks circling the city's waterfront and for more modest projects that he thought would also improve the quality of life for the city's people—little shelters, for instance, in Central Park so that mothers could change their babies' diapers without

having to go all the way home. And when he argued for his ideas before the Good Government organization for which he worked and before the Board of Estimate, he was very careful always to have his facts ready, never to exaggerate them and always to draw from them logical conclusions, for he believed that Truth and Logic would prevail. When he decided to specialize, the area he chose—civil service reorganization—was one based on the same principle with which he had "awakened" "Five A" Johnson, the principle that jobs should be given and promotions based on merit rather than patronage. And he dedicated himself to that principle with the devotion of the acolyte. Brought into the administration of reforming Mayor John Purroy Mitchel in 1914, Moses devised, in a year of unremitting labor, a system that made every aspect of a city employee's performance—including facets of his personality—subject to a numerical grade. And for three additional years he fought for adoption of his system, battling a Board of Estimate dominated by one of the most corrupt political machines the United States had ever known, speaking night after night—a tall, very slim, very handsome young man with deep, burning eyes, dressed, often and appropriately, in a white suit, clutching a bulging briefcase and introduced to audiences as "Dr. Moses" in recognition of his Ph.D.—into hails of abuse from furious municipal employees who owed their jobs not to merit but to Tammany Hall, and observers said that the viciousness of the jeering crowds seemed to make no impression on him, so deeply did he believe that if only

they could be made to understand how good his system was, they would surely support it. In those pre-World War I years of optimism, of reform, of idealism, Robert Moses was the optimist of optimists, the reformer of reformers, the idealist of idealists.

So great a nuisance did he make of himself that in 1918 Tammany Hall decided it had to crush him. It did so with efficiency. At the age of thirty, with the grading papers for his system being used as scrap paper, the Central Park shelters and great highways unbuilt, Robert Moses, Phi Beta Kappa at Yale, honors man at Oxford, lover of the Good, the True and the Beautiful, was out of work and, with a wife and two small daughters to support, was standing on a line in the Cleveland, Ohio, City Hall, applying for a minor municipal job—a job which, incidentally, he didn't get.