

A FEW GREAT MEN
Or How to Get Things Done in New York City

JAMESON W. DOIG, *Empire on the Hudson: Entrepreneurial Vision and Political Power at the Port of New York Authority*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. xix, 620, illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, index, \$49.95 cloth.

KURT C. SCHLICHTING, *Grand Central Terminal: Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York City*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, pp. xiii, 244, illustrations, notes, index, \$26.50 cloth.

Many city dwellers look at urban landmarks—bridges, skyscrapers, and train stations—with a new awareness of their vulnerability. Since September 11, 2001, tall towers seem less sturdy, and bustling terminals give rise to anxiety. These two books published before 9/11 suggest that the great monuments of urban infrastructure have always been more fragile than they appear. Jameson W. Doig and Kurt C. Schlichting show the precarious nature of urban transformation by recounting the history of the Port of New York Authority and Grand Central Terminal, respectively. Both remind readers that great urban structures are products of will, vision, and cleverly orchestrated opportunity, constructed to serve the drives and ambitions of men, their realization less than certain. Built atop established neighborhoods and institutions—the World Trade Center disrupting the street grid of lower Manhattan and Grand Central Terminal displacing the more modest but vital Grand Central Depot—these impressive structures were hard won on nearly forgotten battlefields of politics, business, and technological innovation. Doig and Schlichting not only tap into the public's current preoccupation with the vulnerability of urban infrastructure but also offer advice for those seeking to meet the city's future needs. With uncanny prescience, they grapple with a question challenging contemporary urban practitioners: How does anything monumental get built? The answers provided are inspiring and cautionary.

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Despite differences in the scale and style of their books, both authors turn to biography to explain the complex process of “getting things done” in New York. This choice is especially noteworthy because neither scholar presents his work as a straightforward biography. Rather than using the arena of urban politics to prove the greatness of his subject as a traditional biographer might, Doig studies the lives of key individuals to suggest something larger about the nature of the urban playing field and its rules. He tells the story of the port authority by telling the stories of three men: Julius Henry Cohen, the Progressive lawyer who drafted the compact between New York and New Jersey that created the agency in 1921; Othmar H. Ammann, the authority’s first bridge engineer who designed, among others, the George Washington Bridge; and Austin Tobin, who served the port authority first as a third-tier real estate attorney and later as revered executive director. Doig uses the biographies of these men to trace the port authority’s evolution from a relatively impotent agency subject to bistate business and political interests into “the nation’s first multipurpose regional authority” (p. 3). Each man’s story reveals a key moment of change in the agency’s history and underscores the combination of will and opportunity that shaped every turn.

The port authority was born from the long-standing rivalry and interdependence of New Jersey and New York State; Julius Henry Cohen served as midwife. By 1915, almost half of the country’s international trade passed through the Port of New York. Imports traveled overseas to the docks of Manhattan and Brooklyn; exports traveled by rail to the New Jersey side of the Hudson River. Both imported and exported goods had to cross the river and make the link to rail or ship. A system of ferries and large barges moved goods from one side of the Hudson to the other, but this was costly and often inefficient. In 1916, in an attempt to attract shipping lines to its piers, New Jersey filed a formal complaint with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) claiming “rate discrimination.” The complaint argued that by charging exporters the same rate to ship goods from New York or New Jersey, railroads undermined the competitive advantage of New Jersey’s docks and guaranteed the ongoing supremacy of the New York piers. While many New York business leaders feared that a New Jersey victory would shift trade away from the city, Cohen, then legal counsel to the New York Chamber of Commerce, saw an opportunity to find a broader solution to, in Doig’s words, “grapple with the inefficiencies, congestion, and high cost which had long burdened the Port, and which were, in fact, accurately portrayed in the New Jersey challenge” (p. 30).

Cohen, a committed member of the anti-Tammany reform movement, seems to have followed the code of noted Tammany devotee George Washington Plunkitt: he saw his opportunities and he took them. Rather than seeking graft, Cohen sought ways to foster cooperation and eliminate political corruption. To defend New York in the *New York Harbor* case (as the New Jersey challenge came to be known), he coaxed the governors to create a bistate study commission to explore cooperative solutions to the port’s inefficiencies. He

then persuaded the ICC that lowering rates to New Jersey would fail to address the fundamental problems facing the port and undermine the new spirit of cooperation essential to a lasting and mutually beneficial resolution. When the ICC ruled in 1917, it followed Cohen's lead by refusing New Jersey's request but promising to reopen the case should the two states fail to work together to extend rail service from the Jersey shore to New York.

Cohen had cleverly used bistate cooperation to defeat New Jersey and now had the threat of the ICC to keep New York in a cooperative frame of mind. A year later, financed by the New York, New Jersey Port and Harbor Development Commission, Cohen drafted the proposal calling for a bistate "Port of New York Authority"—a new type of agency reflecting his Progressive faith. Cohen intended the port authority to serve as "an exemplar of the reformer's vision: insulated from intraregional jealousies and the many vagaries of politics" (p. 49). The agency would be staffed by experts, planners, and engineers, who would oversee the modernization of the port and coordinate the region's economic growth. It would act like a public utility, creating the necessary infrastructure that no private interests would or could provide.

At least that was Cohen's dream. The agency created on April 30, 1921, was less powerful than that envisioned in his proposal. Despite being empowered to issue bonds, modernize the port, and buy, build, and operate terminal and transport facilities, the new agency would struggle with its first official task: develop and implement a detailed plan for improving the rail freight system. Announced in December 1921, the Comprehensive Plan for the Development of the Port District called for the construction of new rail lines, the integration of existing lines, the digging of several tunnels linking New Jersey and New York, and the building of twelve freight terminals in Manhattan. The port authority spent the remainder of the 1920s trying to implement its plan in the face of New York City's machine politics, an unsympathetic ICC, and the protests of railroad companies with no interest in Cohen's cooperative vision. But as Cohen and the port authority fought hard throughout the decade to implement the Comprehensive Plan, new pressures demanded that the agency pay increased attention to the needs of motor vehicles. And so, without abandoning the plan and its commitment to rail transport, the port authority entered the automotive age by becoming the builder and operator of bridges and tunnels. These, rather than the Comprehensive Plan, would secure the port authority's early reputation as, in the words of Archibald Macleish, "one of the most interesting and potentially one of the most formidable political agencies America has yet produced" (p. 119).

Doig credits this new focus on motor vehicles to Othmar Ammann, and his "aspirations, distinctive engineering talents, and political skills of unexpected dimensions" animated this stage of the agency's development (p. 121). The Swiss-born engineer was a creative leader, able to shape circumstance to his will and turn defeat into victory. In 1921, when the port authority rejected his mentor Gustav Lindenthal's proposal for a great railroad and automobile

bridge crossing the Hudson River at 57th Street, Ammann seized the opportunity to reimagine the project. He decided on a smaller automobile bridge connecting Fort Lee, New Jersey, and 179th Street in Manhattan; he then set out to build political support to get his plan realized. Forging alliances with public officials and local groups, he created enough political momentum that both states passed legislation authorizing the construction of his bridge. On July 1, 1925, Ammann began work as the “bridge engineer on the Port Authority staff” (p. 142). He quickly proved a valued public servant, overseeing the George Washington Bridge and three crossings from Staten Island to the mainland. By completing all four bridges ahead of schedule and under budget, he gave Julius Henry Cohen some of the political leverage necessary to secure the transfer of the Holland Tunnel’s operation to the port authority. Thus, the agency completed its first decade and prepared to meet the Great Depression with its Comprehensive Plan embattled but four bridges and one tunnel in place.

The Depression took a considerable toll on the port agency. Despite the ongoing successes of its completed projects, Doig portrays the port authority as drifting through its second decade. Traffic revenues declined, the railroads continued to resist the Comprehensive Plan, and state and federal politics threatened the agency’s independence. Ammann left to work with Robert Moses, whose Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority managed to get new projects approved, and Cohen suffered a heart attack. In the midst of the agency’s seeming decline, a new man stepped forward: Austin Tobin. In the Port Authority Law Department, Tobin found the opportunities to think creatively and develop his leadership skills. One of his first accomplishments was defending the agency against the Roosevelt administration’s efforts to tax government bonds. Again, one man’s personal ambition, creative thinking, and political savvy saved the day for the port authority. Rather than simply seeking a legal strategy, Tobin masterminded a political plan of action. He defeated Roosevelt by building a national coalition of public authorities and state and local governments opposed to FDR’s plan. But perhaps more important, according to Doig, he honed his sense of “playful experimentation,” developed a critique of centralized power, and learned the importance of grassroots politics. All of these lessons shaped Tobin’s tenure as the port authority’s executive director from 1942 to 1972.

Doig’s study focuses mostly on the development of the port authority to 1950 (with an epilogue providing a condensed history of the agency through the 1990s), and Tobin’s biography nicely frames the final decade under consideration. Under Tobin’s leadership, the agency took on a new range of projects and responsibilities, including operation and modernization of the region’s three major airports, the construction of a bus terminal in midtown Manhattan, and the leasing and operating of the marine terminal at Port Newark. Achieving these goals required complex strategies and carefully waged campaigns. Tobin built alliances with experts and politicians, while his drive

and spirit gave the agency a new sense of mission and cohesion. He and his dedicated staff carefully orchestrated the world around them to realize their plans. Rather than expose its ambitions, the port authority undertook studies, heeded the advice of experts, and waited for state officials to request that the agency take charge. Tobin even outmaneuvered New York's most ambitious and ruthless powerbroker, Robert Moses, by securing control of Idlewild Airport and getting the Manhattan bus terminal built. With Moses as his foil, Tobin emerges from Doig's study as the embodiment of entrepreneurial leadership in public service—creative, joyful, driven, and fair.

Schlichting also tells his story by focusing on the daring and innovation of a few great men. He divides his study into four chapters, each offering a different point of view and focusing on a different cast of characters. The story begins with Cornelius Vanderbilt, known as "the Commodore," and his acquisition of the Harlem Railroad, the Hudson River Railroad, and the New York Central. In "The Commodore's Grand Central," Schlichting details the business smarts and competitive drive that enabled the Commodore to assemble this "railroad empire" between 1863 and 1869. The Commodore then decided to build a passenger terminal equal to his empire—"an appropriate passenger terminal in the heart of New York . . . a terminal with panache, proclaiming to all New York the power and might of his vast rail empire" (p. 30). Thus, Grand Central Depot at 42nd Street, the first Grand Central, was born. When it opened in 1871, "the juxtaposition of the classical and the machine age created a stark contrast" (p. 33). Its technologically advanced train shed of iron and glass and its classical station building of stone and brick embodied the contradictions of its age. The structure became a popular tourist attraction and a powerful symbol of the advantages offered by modern rail travel, but the depot and Vanderbilt's rail empire fell victim to the worst excesses of Gilded Age America. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Vanderbilt heirs were more interested in spending the family fortune than adding to it, and the once-grand depot was decried as "one of the most inconvenient and unpleasant railroad stations in the whole country" (p. 53).

Much as the first Grand Central reflected the ambition of the Commodore, the Grand Central Terminal that replaced it reflected the creativity and careful planning of William J. Wilgus, chief engineer of the New York Central. In many ways, Wilgus is the hero of Schlichting's story. In 1902, the chief engineer recognized that the depot was beyond remodeling and that a new larger terminal must be built. But how? "In a stroke of genius, Wilgus envisioned expanding not horizontally but vertically, and not up but down—building two terminals one over the other" (p. 57). This insight allowed for the construction of a modern terminal on the existing 42nd Street site. From this point forward, Wilgus seems to have anticipated every contingency that would arise in the new terminal's construction and operation. In addition to the two-story underground terminal, his plans called for the separation of activities and traffic within the terminal, the building of ramps to maximize flow of passengers, the

introduction of electric-powered trains, and the use of air rights to generate income. In other words, he pressed for innovations in design, technology, and business practices to make the new terminal not only possible but unprecedented. This spirit of experimentation and daring permitted Wilgus to coordinate the seemingly impossible task of building the new terminal on the site of the old depot without disrupting train service. (The volume of passenger traffic through Grand Central increased steadily during the construction of the new terminal.)

Wilgus often claimed that the original concept for Grand Central was his and that he deserved full credit for the project. Schlichting supports this view but shows that other men left their marks as well. In 1903, the board of the New York Central announced an architectural competition for the railroad's new terminal. Ultimately, as nepotistic concerns, unexpected death, and legal and corporate intrigue shaped the final selection, the firm of Warren and Wetmore outmaneuvered that of Reed and Stem. Over the protests of Wilgus, Whitney Warren emerged from the selection process (and from subsequent historical accounts) as the architect credited with the terminal building's design. Warren, whose plans ignored some of Wilgus's original vision, proposed a beaux arts-style, low-rise terminal building. He paid careful attention to the ornamental aspects of the great terminal—the arches, portals, statues, and classical detailing that would define the building's monumental facade. Perhaps more important to his legacy, he designed an interior worthy of such a facade. The majestic central concourse of Grand Central remains one of the greatest public spaces in New York, its arched ceiling and viewing galleries still distracting rushing commuters from the demands and inconveniences of urban travel. Yet important aspects of the Reed and Stem design (suggested and endorsed by Wilgus) were incorporated into the building as well—most notably the elevated roadway linking Park Avenue north and south of the terminal and a foundation strong enough to support the future construction of a high-rise building. While giving Wilgus his due, Schlichting's account emphasizes that Grand Central Terminal benefited from competing ambitions and creative agendas.

Doig and Schlichting convey their admiration for the men who animate their stories, and the heroic tone of these studies is difficult to resist. In this regard, they reveal the power of biography as a means for organizing broader historical studies. Their focus on individuals provides the reader with a clear path through dense and often meandering historical developments. In both books, the details of politics, business, engineering, and design are rendered not only manageable but compelling when tied to the ambitions of men. More important, the biographical perspective permits Doig and Schlichting to emphasize the contingency of the stories they tell. Urban landmarks that once seemed constant, even preordained, are revealed as the products of complex and uncertain histories. There is something reassuring about this insight, like discovering that one's parents did not always have all the answers. These studies readily inspire a belief that out of our current moment of uncertainty, men and

women of vision may create urban structures and institutions that capture contemporary values and will endure.

But the difficult question remains: How? Here, the books differ in their lessons. Schlichting, although not overtly interested in providing advice for the present, seems to emphasize the power of private capital to create lasting benefits for the city as a whole. He writes,

Despite the criticism of the conspicuous consumption of the Gilded Age and the extravagances of the Fifth Avenue and Newport mansions, the fact remains that American business in the period after the Civil War created the largest industrial system in the world. . . . Grand Central Terminal serves as a conspicuous example of the daring that characterized a remarkable age. (P. 66)

Celebrating the terminal's design and its technological accomplishments, Schlichting too often echoes the beliefs of the City Beautiful advocates he studies. More than two hundred buildings were demolished before work could begin on the new terminal. Schlichting mentions the demolition but does not ask the follow-up questions. Who lived or worked there? How were they remunerated? Were their lives improved by the completion of the great station? Throughout most of his study, he seems to imagine a unified and somewhat abstract urban community that uniformly reaped the benefits of the great station and its ambitious creators.

Doig, by contrast, focuses on the divided nature of urban interests and pays close attention to the ethical trade-offs involved in realizing one's ambitions within the city. Throughout the study, he emphasizes the role of values in the decision-making process. His protagonists grapple with the tensions between efficiency and public accountability, between democratic politics and the corrupting lure of patronage. There were 640 families displaced by the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and Doig carefully details Tobin's plans to relocate them. Unlike Moses with his ruthless eviction tactics, Tobin offered families \$150 and two months' rent to move. When only 6 families relocated, he negotiated with rental agents to help the displaced find new homes. The port authority even paid to redecorate new apartments. In the end, the agency bought and rehabilitated fourteen vacant apartment buildings to provide enough affordable housing for those displaced. Tobin was willing to delay the bus terminal to relocate all these families successfully. Treating people, even powerless ones, with respect seems to have been one of Tobin's ambitions, and he applied his creativity to the task. Tobin rejected Moses's version of efficiency in favor of his own sense of accountability.

The contrast between Tobin and Moses is crucial to Doig's study. To some degree, the focus on biography encourages this. Doig is partially concerned with establishing Tobin's credentials as a powerbroker in his own right, and it is hard to blame him for rejoicing in those moments when his guy gets the better of Moses. At several of these moments, he refers directly to Robert

Caro's biography of Moses and reinterprets incidents from Tobin's point of view.¹ The contrast between the two men serves the study's main argument by underscoring that government action can be ambitious and efficient without being cruel. If Schlichting's study implies that private capital can serve the public interest in daring ways, Doig seeks to make a similar claim for government. He writes,

As we enter the twenty-first century, the question of whether government programs can be efficient and effective, while being responsive to public needs and influence, is a matter of widespread debate. . . . Here we find evidence that rational planning, effective action, and a due sensitivity for public concerns and public involvement *can* coexist. (P. 23)

Doig intends to redeem the ideal of the governmental authority and to restore faith in bold leadership. To do so, he must reclaim government service from both mindless bureaucrats and heartless autocrats. The biographical perspective permits this; Cohen, Ammann, and Tobin embody Doig's hope that governmental leadership can be bold, creative, and ethical.

Biography, however, can get Schlichting and Doig only so far. In the epilogues of both books, a new presence emerges—something best described as activist public sentiment. In the 1960s, a group of prominent New Yorkers led efforts to preserve Grand Central over the protests of its owner, the newly formed Penn Central Transportation Company. Their actions reflected a growing sense of community empowerment countering the bold and daring acts of men in power. Doig similarly notes that by the 1960s, Tobin and the port authority were out of step with public values favoring environmentalism, small-scale development, and community control. The world beyond the agency had changed, and now ordinary citizens mobilized to make their opinions known and get their needs met. One man's vision, ambition, and skill were no longer enough. Ignoring public sentiment, Tobin continued to dream of a new airport in New Jersey's Great Swamp and pushed the World Trade Center project to greater heights.

The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center cast a shadow over the final section of Doig's analysis: not simply because they are now gone but because they were built in the first place. The World Trade Center marked a new direction for the port authority—a shift away from the projects of public infrastructure that made it the agency celebrated in the earlier pages of Doig's study. Embattled but unyielding, Tobin retired from the port authority in 1972 before the towers were completed. The passing of Austin Tobin and the saving of Grand Central mark the same break in the history of the city. Urban dwellers of varied classes, backgrounds, and interests now expressed and defended their own visions and ambitions for the urban landscape. The boundaries of contestation and contingency had somehow widened to include them. Although these two books reveal the enormous potential for daring action in public life, in the end

both suggest that for good and for bad, when it comes to getting things done, the age of great men may be over.

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NOTE

1. See Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1974).

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