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LA Magazine's Failure: Irresponsible Journalism

Los Angeles magazine -- the slick monthly targeted to young affluent readers who need to keep up with which restaurants, neighborhoods, celebrities, and clothing boutiques are hip -- slapped the word "Failure" across a photo of LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa on the cover of its June issue. This was not only a cheap shot, meant to grab attention and sell magazines, but also a misleading assessment of Villaraigosa's track record after one term.

Reporter Ed Leibowitz says he's disappointed, even bitter, that Villaraigosa didn't accomplish all that he pledged to do during his 2005 campaign. In an "open letter" to the mayor, Leibowitz laments: "Your progressive platform, if enacted, would cleanse the city of its toxins: street crime and failing schools, the evaporation of affordable housing and the carcinogens in our skies."

The reality is that no city on its own -- even with the most progressive people in office -- can accomplish those goals. Cities lack the financial resources and the legal authority to end crime, adequately fund schools, protect and expand enough affordable housing to meet the needs of municipal residents, and end pollution.

So what standards should responsible journalists use to judge the success or failure of Villaraigosa or any other big city mayor?

Most mayors act like caretakers, content to oversee the routine "civic housekeeping" tasks that residents expect from municipal governments - fix the potholes, keep traffic flowing, maintain public safety, and (in some areas) remove the snow soon after a storm.

But Villaraigosa didn't run for mayor to be a caretaker. As a former union organizer, ACLU president, and Speaker of the state Assembly, he promised more. His landslide (59-41 percent) 2005 victory over incumbent Jim Hahn raised hopes, especially among liberals and progressives, about moving the city in a new direction.

Villaraigosa, the first Latino mayor in LA's modern history, inherited a city where the divide between the rich and everyone else was widening. (LA had more millionaires than any other city, but was also the nation's capital of the working poor). Housing costs were skyrocketing. Traffic congestion, inadequate public transit, and the Port made LA the most polluted metro area in the country. The schools were overcrowded and underfunded, with a huge drop-out rate.

He asked to be judged on whether he could address these issues, especially the plight of the poor and the struggling lower-middle class, as well manage basic municipal services. He wanted to promote what activists call a "growth with justice" agenda.

During his first four-year term, Villaraigosa has sought to be a new kind of progressive pro-business mayor - by redefining a "healthy business climate" to mean prosperity that is shared by working people, one that lifts the working poor into the middle class. He has tried to promote a more enlightened view of business's responsibility to the broader community. He has encouraged, even pushed, employers to support workers' rights to unionize. Building on the living wage model, his Community Redevelopment Agency and other departments have focused municipal subsidies on industries and firms that provide decent pay, benefits and a career path with upward mobility and create "green" jobs. He has advocated for a mixed-income housing law that requires developers to set aside units for working families.

On the basic matters of "civic housekeeping" LA has been well-served by Villaraigosa. Crime is down significantly. Traffic flows have improved and new rapid bus routes are in place. Villaraigosa led the campaign for Prop R, which voters approved, and which will provide \$40 billion for public transit. Despite the usual griping by some residents, potholes get fixed and the garbage gets collected with reasonable efficiency. In his four years in office, the number of summer jobs for youth has increased from 3,000 to 16,000.

On the question of public health and the environment, no big-city mayor has tackled the issue with bolder action than Villaraigosa. He took heat from business groups for supporting the "clean trucks" plan at the Los Angeles Port, the nation's busiest port and the largest source of pollution in Southern California from the idling ships and 12,000 trucks that line up daily to take cargo from the docks to area warehouses. Under the plan, all the older polluting trucks will be replaced by modern vehicles, improving the air quality and health conditions in the surrounding areas. The mayor's plan also requires the Port to limit the number of trucking firms at the port, a provision that could transform thousands of drivers from low-paid independent contractors into employees of larger firms, making them eligible to unionize, improve their pay, and negotiate for health insurance and other benefits. The plan is without doubt the most comprehensive of its kind and has already seen results, despite efforts by the Bush administration, as well as the trucking and shipping companies, to thwart it.

Villaraigosa has also pushed the Department of Water and Power, the nation's largest municipal utility, to become the engine for a green jobs and clean energy plan. But last March, voters narrowly rejected Measure B, Villaraigosa's plan to create jobs

and reduce energy use by requiring the installation of solar panels across the city to generate 400 megawatts of energy, enough to power 240,000 homes at a cost of at least \$1 billion - part of the mayor's plan to meet 10 percent of the city's energy needs with solar sources by 2020.

On housing, Villaraigosa has funded the \$100 million Housing Trust Fund to create more affordable units, strengthened tenants' rights, improved code inspection to fix slum buildings, and partnered with nonprofit community groups like ACORN, One LA, and Neighborhood Housing Services to help homeowners facing foreclosure.

Housing advocates have been pushing for a mixed-income housing law in LA for a decade, one that (like those in 170 other California cities) would require developers to include units for nurses, secretaries, security guards, garment workers, school teachers and other low- and moderate-income people. Villaraigosa has been an ally in that effort -- a cautious one initially, but increasingly bold as the grassroots campaign by Housing LA (a coalition of unions, community groups, and responsible developers) picked up steam. During the last several months he has pushed hard - against the opposition of the powerful development lobby (led by the Central City Association) and some NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) homeowner groups, both of which have considerable influence with key City Council members -- for a mixed-income housing ordinance. It now appears likely that we'll have such an ordinance in the next few months. Once it is adopted, LA will be the largest city in the U.S. with an "inclusionary zoning" law.

No big-city mayor in the entire U.S. has been as fervent a champion for the working poor - and for the rights of workers -- as Villaraigosa. He played a central role in helping the city's low-wage security guards win a union campaign by getting major office building owners to the bargaining table. He utilized the leverage of the Community Redevelopment Agency to create a pipeline of young people prepared for jobs in the construction trades. Against the strong opposition of the city's business community, he supported a dramatic expansion of the city's "living wage" law to lift several thousands of workers who work at a dozen hotels near the LAX airport out of poverty. He has shown up at union picket lines and been a key behind-the-scenes mediator in several labor disputes.

Some agenda items - like the rewriting of the city's comprehensive zoning plan (needed to combat sprawl), the expansion of the regional subway (which will require substantial state and federal funds), the reform of public schools (ditto), and the planting of a promised one million trees (behind schedule) - are still works in progress, projects that will take many years to complete. The jury is still out on how, or whether, they will succeed.

No mayor of a city of over four million people - balkanized by a City Council comprised of 15 powerful fiefdoms and a separate school board -- can please everyone. Juggling so many issues, with so many demands, and so few resources, Mayor Villaraigosa, who was elected in March to a second term, has certainly made mistakes or frustrated some constituencies who expected more. For example, the mayor has faced reasonable criticism from some housing activists over the LA Police Department's effort to "clean up" Skid Row, often by harassing homeless people.

But any objective assessment of Villaraigosa's first term has to put his accomplishments and his challenges in perspective - something that the *Los Angeles* magazine story failed to do.

Indeed, what does it mean to be a progressive mayor when so many powerful forces -- a city whose financial needs far exceed its revenue-raising capacity, a President (Bush) and governor (Schwarzenegger) hostile to the plight of cities and the poor, a national and state economy in the dumps, and a business and development community dominated by shortsighted executives resistant to taxes, living wages and regulation - are arrayed against reform?

Not surprisingly, many political scientists believe that America's big cities are almost ungovernable. We elect mayors, city councils, and school boards to try their best at managing cities and addressing the problems facing its residents and institutions. But without full partners in Washington and state capitals, cities are hostage to forces beyond their control.

So the appropriate way to evaluate Villaraigosa's first term is whether he used the tools at his disposal to make significant progress in these and other areas, and how LA compares to other comparable big cities on these measures.

On that score, Villaraigosa deserves praise for raising expectations, squeezing the city's limited funding to address long-standing problems, and using the city's leverage to make LA a more livable city.

In truth, no other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution that we have in the United States, especially in our cities. We accept as "normal" levels of poverty, hunger, crime and homelessness that would cause national alarm in Canada, Western Europe or Australia. Elsewhere, national governments take responsibility for addressing these and other issues. In the U.S., in contrast, we expect local governments to deal with the problems of poverty, homelessness, crime, and underfunded schools, as well as the impacts of rising gas prices, traffic congestion and pollution, accelerating foreclosures and abandoned homes, crumbling infrastructure, widening wage inequality, escalating health care and food costs, and the export of jobs to China and Mexico. These are national problems that are disproportionately located in cities, but they aren't caused by the actions or inactions of municipal governments.

Moreover, Villaraigosa took office in the middle of the Bush administration - the most anti-city administration in recent memory. Across the country, city officials, reeling from the loss of federal and state aid, have had no choice but to cut essential services, including public safety, libraries, road repair and public schools. Bush's priorities--cutting taxes for the rich, weakening regulations on business that protect consumers, workers and the environment, and reducing spending for domestic social programs--came at the expense of cities and the people who live in them. Bush imposed many new mandates on cities--such as increased homeland security and No Child Left Behind requirements for schools--without providing the funds necessary for the cities to comply. Let's call it fend-for-yourself federalism.

Under Bush, federal funding for housing, public transit, and other urban programs was cut, while needs escalated across the country, not just in LA. Even before the current economic meltdown, the Bush administration presided over what economists call a "jobless recovery" that primarily benefitted the very wealthy. Poverty increased dramatically across the country during the Bush years, while the number of Americans with health insurance fell significantly. It was the Bush administration that tried to stop LA from imposing strict environmental standards on trucks and shippers at the Port. It was the Bush administration that

pushed the policies that led to the current mortgage meltdown, the epidemic of foreclosures, and the hemorrhaging of jobs, in LA and other cities.

And let's not forget the 500-pound Republican elephant in the room - that the U.S. has spent more money destroying Baghdad than rebuilding American cities.

We cannot significantly solve our nation's urban problems without federal reforms - from universal health insurance to more funding for housing and public transit. Obama will surely be a pro-urban president. His stimulus plan will help cities, but it can't compensate for the dramatic decline in municipal revenues. Once Obama's plan to revitalize the economy begins to turn things around, he'll be able to pay more attention to an urban agenda, and cities like LA will get some relief. But right now, LA, like every other big city, is trapped in a fiscal straitjacket..

Compounding that problem, the state government under Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has been in fiscal chaos since before Villaraigosa became mayor. On most critical issues, the state government has been missing in action, leaving cities to deal with the problems located within their borders but caused by economic and social forces outside the city limits. For example, it is the state government - not local school boards -- that is responsible for funding public education. And California ranks 46th in the nation in per-student spending. Villaraigosa had tried to gain mayoral control of LA's public schools, but managed only to take over a small number of schools. But even if he had succeeded in gaining full control of the LA Unified School District, it is unlikely he could have significantly overhauled the troubled schools without a major increase in state funding - a difficult prospect given the Republican stranglehold on any reform of state finances.

In his first four years, Villaraigosa has accomplished a great deal, made some mistakes, and erected a foundation for further progress in his second term.

A reasonable assessment of Villaraigosa's term would balance his significant successes with his shortcomings. By that standard, *Los Angeles* magazine failed.

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Regardless of what LA's mayor has done for LA, Ca is broke. That means that the State of Ca can't pay for the services Ca provides to LA or the rest of CA. When Ca stops providing the services it had provided to LA the services will end or LA will have to provide these services to itself & pay for these services. The State of Ca will be bankrupt soon. If LA's Mayor V prevents LA from being... [Read More](#)

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