Fed up with the political boss of your town? Compare him with

NEW YORK'S WORST MAYOR

CALVIN COURTNEY

WHEN THE KEFAUVER people finally trundled out of New York last March, the cheers of the electorate ringing in their ears, it would have been hard to find many local patriots who were not entertaining the notion that William O'Dwyer was the biggest thief ever to hold office as mayor in the city. While the judgment reflected a commendable, albeit retroactive, concern over the cleanliness of municipal politics, it was far from accurate. Pending further blabbing by further bookmakers, we can only say that Mr. O'Dwyer has not been directly accused of anything more dishonest than accepting an envelope — whether red, brown, manila, or white is uncertain — from John P. Crane of the Uniformed Firemen's Association. And even this small matter is shrouded in uncertainty.

Actually, New York's worst mayor was not O'Dwyer. Nor was it the late James J. Walker. Nor was it Boss Murphy's epic triumph, John F. Hylan. Nor, in fact, was it the incomparable A. Oakey Hall, who served under Tweed. By any honest system of bookkeeping, the biggest forger, liar, embezzler, and hypocrite who ever sold a ward in Gotham was the Honorable Fernando Wood, who preceded Tweed by a few years but taught him plenty. The most commonly accepted evaluation of Wood is the one made by John Bigelow, an editor of the New York *Evening Post* during the mayor's

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three administrations. On a visit to City Hall years afterward, Bigelow came across a portrait of Wood in a corridor. He stared for a while at the fine classical features, the saintly blue eyes, and the high forehead of the subject, and remarked: "He was the handsomest man I ever saw, and the most corrupt man that ever sat in the mayor's chair."

FERNANDO WOOD was a rogue in the classic tradition. Elements of Falstaff, Iago, and Pecksniff are discernible in his makeup. In appearance, however, he suggested all of the Founding Fathers rolled into one; his grave, ministerial countenance bespoke integrity and humility in equal measure. He was undoubtedly one of the great demagogues of the nineteenth century. He had a throaty, resonant voice, a relaxed platform manner, a convincing air of sincerity. He could talk to a mob as a man of the people; he could also talk to a university audience as a man of quality and refinement, which, as a matter of fact, he was. He was close to six feet, slender, and enormously handsome. By all accounts, he was a charmer from the beginning.

Wood's real political beginning came in 1840, when he moved from the chairmanship of the Young Men's Committee of Tammany Hall into Congress at the tender age of twenty-eight. In subsequent years, he was elected mayor of the city three times — in 1854, 1856, and 1859 — beaten for the post twice, and finally returned for eight more terms to Congress. He was in Washington when the storm finally broke over the Tweed Ring and was completely unscathed by the general cleanup. He was never convicted of any crime, in fact, and was able to end his career faintly enveloped in the nimbus of an elder statesman. In his last four years in Congress, he was majority floor leader and chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.

What gives this career its chief interest is the fact that Wood never really fooled anyone; from 1840 onward he was conventionally spoken of in the local press as a fraud and a thief. His whole career was a jumble of contradictions and paradoxes. He came from a family of Quakers; yet he had a marked affinity for violence all his life. He was on the executive committee of the ferociously anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party; yet a large measure of his support always came from Catholics, to whom he had sold himself as a champion of minorities. He was a student of government and a fine administrator; yet during his administrations, the city touched some hitherto unsuspected depths of corruption. He posed as a drum-beating patriot; yet he once seriously tried to have New York City secede from the union. His extortions had the entire business com-

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munity of the city up in arms; yet at election time he was able to get the public support of John Jacob Astor and dozens of other commercial luminaries. He closed the saloons on Sundays when he first became mayor, thereby becoming the darling of the temperance fanatics; yet later, when New York state had a prohibition law, he allowed the saloons to operate seven days a week. He came from an old aristocratic family; yet from the moment he entered politics his chief supporters were the organized criminals, crooked saloon-keepers, and other assorted riff-raff of the city.

Wood's political operations appeared to be based on the assumption that the electorate had a severe case of amnesia, a proposition that was never satisfactorily disproved during his lifetime. Even if it had been, not much harm would have been done to him; his success was never based on popularity anyway. He won his nominations in the beginning largely by bribing the nominators. The first time he ran for mayor, this proved to be a simple enough job. The Democrats had planned that year to nominate a wealthy New York banker for mayor — a man of considerable ability who later became Assistant Secretary of the Treasury. Wood very simply bribed twenty-nine of the fifty-one delegates to the nominating convention, and the banker went back to his bank.

On another occasion, his job turned out to be somewhat more complicated. His entry into New York politics had split the local Democratic party into two bitterly opposed factions — the so-called "Softshells," whom Wood controlled, and the "Hardshells," who dearly detested him. In 1854, Wood procured his nomination from the Softshells easily enough. But he decided, reasonably enough, that with two Democratic candidates in the field the election might easily go to a Reform candidate. Accordingly, at the Hardshell convention, Wood's agents again bribed a majority of the delegates and got him a second nomination. A few remaining Hardshells, in a state bordering on apoplexy, held still another convention and finally succeeded in nominating a man other than Wood. This party, however, was by now so disillusioned with the ways of New York politics that he withdrew from the race altogether, leaving a more-or-less clear field for Wood, who won easily.

On none of the three occasions on which he was elected mayor did Wood have a real majority of the voters. He was helped, however, by the fact that the local electorate was badly fragmented during the Fifties. There were ordinarily four or five candidates in the field: the Democrats (who were themselves split), the Whigs (later Republi-

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cans), the Know-Nothings, and one or more Reform parties. From the moment that Wood appeared on the New York political scene, it became the primary object of every do-gooder east of the Alleghenies to make his enemies unite. This happened just once, in the election of 1857, when Wood was beaten.

However, his electoral success was based on more than a split opposition. A large share in Wood's good fortune at the polls must, in all fairness, be credited to his gorillas, who were never idle on election day. They put the fear of God into anti-Wood voters (there was no secret ballot), voted incessantly themselves, brained enemy election officials, and purloined ballot boxes in areas where Wood, somehow, was running behind. In one election, Wood introduced the novel practise of bringing scores of convicts out of city prisons, voting them, and then turning them free. In 1856, shortly before election day, he introduced several thousand immigrants to the American way of life by naturalizing them *en masse* and crediting their votes to his name. He also systematized the old practise of allowing grateful municipal employees to contribute to his campaign. The usual contribution from a policeman was twenty-five dollars; those who were more parsimonious could contemplate the prospect of more-or-less continuous duty. Saloon-keepers, gangsters, prostitutes, and abortionists were also permitted to get on the bandwagon for a reasonable price.

It is an interesting commentary on Wood's reputation that he was too much even for Tweed to take. Tweed was a thief, but he was not a hypocrite. And the spectacle of the saintly-looking mayor, who looked like a man of the cloth and compared himself to Jefferson while he was running the crookedest operation in New York's political history, made Tweed into an enemy of Wood's almost from the beginning. In the end — in 1862, to be exact — Tweed was able to retire Wood from local politics and send him back to Washington. He did this, and began his own remarkable rise to power, largely by imitating Wood's tactics.

Fernando Wood was born in Philadelphia on June 14, 1812, of an old American family which had first settled on this continent during the seventeenth century. Despite his given name, there was apparently no Spanish blood in him. His father was a modest man, an eminently respectable Quaker who was thought highly of in Philadelphia, in the West, and in New York. He sent Fernando to a fine private school in New York, and later got him a good job in a broker's office. Fernando, who was then thirteen, took his first week's salary and left home.

He was a clerk, auctioneer, ship

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chandler and wine salesman before he finally found his niche. His niche, as it happened, was a store on the waterfront in New York which sold liquor to seamen and longshoremen. In those days, an establishment of this nature was known politely as a groggery, and more realistically as a crimp-house. In effect, the chief profit from the operation was derived from shipping masters who were enabled to shanghai the establishment's heavy-spending customers for foreign voyages. When Wood later became famous, he always referred to this store as a grocery. Whatever he called it, it made money for him. After a few years, he had his own sailing ships, was engaging in a few profitable real-estate speculations, and was making political connections. By the time he was twenty-eight and running for Congress, he was a rich man.

After his congressional term was completed, Wood and his brother Benjamin organized a number of lotteries (i.e., policy rackets). They were not illegal then, as they are now, but Wood was smart enough not to do business too close to home. His lotteries were in the South, and with the assistance of a number of well paid Southern politicians they became a big business. On just one occasion, Wood had a close brush with the law. This occurred in 1848, when he was indicted for having swindled a partner of his in a business deal. Wood escaped prosecution when a district attorney, who was apparently bribed, delayed handing down the indictment until the statute of limitations had run out.

To any New Yorkers whose eyes were open, it was clear enough, then, that Wood was a thief some time before he took office. During his first administration, almost every newspaper in New York was violently against him. Wood nevertheless regarded the press as a mighty engine; and so he bought his own newspaper, the New York *Daily News*. After he had been mayor a year, two biographies of him made their appearance. The first was a rather terrible-tempered report on Wood's past; it was sub-titled "A History of the Forgeries, Perjuries, and Other Crimes of our 'Model' Mayor." To adjust the literary balance, Wood assigned a reasonably distinguished novelist, Donald MacLeod, to write a biography of a more heroic nature.

No one knows exactly how much money Wood made out of being mayor. Denis Tilden Lynch, one of the most careful historians of the period, estimates that he embezzled at least $250,000 from the city treasury. This, however, was the simplest of his operations. A possibly larger source of income lay in the purchase of land for the city at heavily inflated prices, with an appropriate pay-off to the mayor from the sellers. Brother Ben was frequently

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used. Once, Ben purchased some ballot boxes for $20,000 and sold them to the city for $60,000. Another time, Ben turned out to have a stiff interest in a company to which the mayor awarded a $279,000-a-year street-cleaning contract — even though another company had bid $84,000 less. And, of course, there was always a great deal of thick gravy in the sale of political offices; even to get a nomination on Wood's ticket cost, in some cases, as much as $5,000.

THE GENERAL LEVEL of New York politics during the Wood administrations might be indicated by a story which popped up in the memoirs of a lawyer who was practicing in the city then. It appears that an alderman named Harry Howard wanted Wood to appoint him to the extremely lucrative position of Receiver of Taxes. As it happened, Wood had already promised the job to one of his own minions. However, for various reasons, he was leery of offending Howard, and so he intimated that he was favorably disposed toward his candidacy. The only hitch, as Wood developed the situation, was that Howard couldn't possibly be confirmed for the job; his brother aldermen were already jealous of his popularity.

Howard pretended to be impressed with this reasoning. But he suggested that the mayor nominate him anyway, just as a token of their old and indissoluble friendship. "And then," Howard said, "if the aldermen won't have me, why, you will have shown your friendship to me, and I won't forget you later." Wood agreed to that, and formally nominated Howard to be Receiver of Taxes. He then called the Board of Aldermen into secret session, explained the situation, and exacted a promise from the Board that it would not confirm the nomination.

Unfortunately for Wood, Howard had a pipeline to the Board, and he found out about the proposed double-cross. He therefore countered with a triple-cross. This was not too difficult to arrange because the Board was on bad terms with the mayor at that particular point; he had recently welshed on a promise to let them split up one of his nominee's patronage if they confirmed the man. Howard got them steamed up over their unrewarded confirmation of this nominee, and they finally agreed to take their revenge by confirming him. At the Board's next regular meeting, Wood was stunned to learn that he had been maneuvered into keeping his promise to Howard. He was so stunned, in fact, that he signed the appointment without a murmur.

Wood's second administration, which began in 1857, was so corrupt that a small-scale "shooting war" finally descended on New York, with the supporters and enemies of

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the mayor both agreed that they could not live together peaceably. The civil war in miniature broke out on the issue of controlling the police force.

New York at that time had about 1,100 policemen, of whom about 800 could be identified as supporters of the mayor. There seems to be little doubt that Wood's policemen had played a large role in his 1856 electoral triumph; several hundred of them got election day off to campaign for the mayor, and several hundred more were engaged in the theft of votes by less subtle methods at the polls. Wood had won the election by about 9,000 votes after his strongarm men, including the police, had stolen at least 10,000.

The Republican-controlled state legislature decided, therefore, that before it did anything else about the problem of Wood, it had to take his police force away from him. Accordingly, a Metropolitan Police Bill was passed in Albany, which placed the police of New York City and Westchester County under a state commission to be appointed by the governor, who, coincidentally, was a Republican. The bill went through the state legislature like lightning. Wood countered by simply defying the new law. He announced grandly that it was unconstitutional, and he piously requested his police force to uphold the U. S. Constitution by not participating in the reorganization. Eight hundred of the police voted to stick with Wood.

An ugly situation, but one not without comic possibilities, was now developing. The State Board of Police Commissioners took the 300 officers who had voted against Wood, added 800 more Republicans to the force, and constituted this new aggregation of 1,100 as the official Metropolitan Police. Wood countered by taking his 800 loyal Democrats, bringing up 300 reinforcements, and calling *this* body the official Municipal Police. In other words, New York City now had two police forces, each of them 1,100 strong, and each of them claiming to be the only legal force. One of them was controlled by the state, one by the city; one was Republican, one Democratic. Under the circumstances, which may yet inspire a musical comedy, a civil war seemed highly probable.

The war might have been averted, at that, if Wood had been able to control his itchy fingers. However, a crisis developed when the Commissioner of Streets died. Wood refused to appoint the Deputy Commissioner to the post; the Deputy Commissioner was both poor and honest, a combination which the mayor found uninteresting. With the job still open, the Republican governor stepped into the picture by appointing a good Republican, an action of dubious legality. While the city was ponder-

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ing the implications of this move, Wood finally came up with his own appointment: a man named Devlin, who paid the mayor $50,000 for the privilege of being Street Commissioner. With a state and a city-appointed Commissioner both intending to take over the job, a clash between the two police forces loomed.

The crisis deepened when Wood threw the state-appointed Street Commissioner out of City Hall, and the latter obtained (from a Republican judge) a warrant for the arrest of the mayor. A member of the (Republican) Metropolitan Police then made a gallant attempt to arrest the mayor in City Hall, but he too was ejected from the premises by Wood's Municipal Police. A band of about fifty Metropolitans now came puffing indignantly to the mayor's office. Exactly what they intended to do when they got there is not clear now and probably wasn't then; in any case, all they succeeded in doing was getting badly mauled by at least 800 of Wood's Municipals. While a number of the Metropolitans were lying unconscious on the grounds outside of City Hall, a new attempt to arrest the mayor was instituted. This one was made by the previously unsuccessful member of the Metropolitan Police in conjunction with the Sheriff of New York County and a lawyer. Wood, now tightly barricaded inside his office, told them to go to hell.

Eventually, of course, Wood was arrested. It took the Seventh Regiment of the New York State Militia to do it, but it was done. A truce was finally arranged between the two police forces, and some time later the federal courts dissolved Wood's Municipal Police. The mayor was released from the clink, and returned to his desk in City Hall. And that was that.

After his second administration, Wood began to lose control of the local Democratic organization. He thereupon organized his own political machine from the ground up. It was called Mozart Hall, and of it the usually dispassionate *Dictionary of American Biography* says, "In obedience to a single will it surpassed any previous political organization in the city." With Mozart Hall backing him, Wood was able to return once more to the mayor's office, from 1859–61.

Oddly enough, one of the principal issues in Wood's 1859 campaign was slavery, which he defended ardently. Judging from Wood's record, it would seem fair to guess that his defense of slavery was less a matter of principle than of preserving his own personal Southern business interests, including his lotteries. In any event, Wood and his brother Ben, who was now running the *Daily News*, became the principal leaders of Copperhead opinion in New York as soon as secession

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became an issue. When Fort Sumter fell, the *Daily News* went after Lincoln so viciously that a federal grand jury seriously considered bringing the paper up for indictment. Its printed utterances, the jurors thought, were "calculated to aid and comfort the enemy." For a while, the newspaper was banned from the mails.

The climax of Wood's fight against Lincoln was his proposal, which was almost adopted, that New York City secede from the union and form an independent nation. This nation would include Manhattan Island, Staten Island, and Long Island, and Wood even had a name for it: Tri-Insula. "Why," he asked the city's Common Council, "should not New York City, instead of supporting by her contributions in revenue two thirds of the expenses of the United States, become also equally independent? As a free city, with but a nominal duty on imports, her local government could be supported without taxation upon her people. Thus we could live free from taxes, and have cheap goods nearly duty free."

The Common Council metaphorically leaped for joy at these pleasant prospects, and they arranged for Wood's "emancipation proclamation" to be printed in huge quantities. The councilmen were eventually brought back to their senses by pressure exerted from Wall Street over Wood's shoulder, and the proposal for New York to go into business for itself died a lingering death.

So did Wood's prospects in New York City. With the growth of a stronger war sentiment in the city, Wood was finally finished politically outside of his own district. He went to Congress in 1863, where he immediately distinguished himself by voting against Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. His extraordinary talent for finagling, and his slowly accumulating seniority, eventually made him a personage of some consequence in the House of Representatives. But his own party never really trusted him. Although he got to be majority floor leader in 1877, he was bypassed for speaker of the House at a time when he appeared to be in line for the job.

LIKE MOST ROGUES, Wood lived to a healthy old age (sixty-eight) and died a peaceful death. He was survived by his widow, eleven of his sixteen children, and a reputation which, though not the kind that inspires school children, at least never appeared to bother him while he was alive. It would be a pity if such flat and colorless characters as Jimmy Walker and Bill O'Dwyer were allowed to usurp his rightful position as New York's very worst mayor.

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The story of the puta — *and the "democracy of the lowest common denominator"*

SEX IN PUERTO RICO

Peter Minot

In the lurid annals of vice, the great port cities of the world — Port Said, Shanghai, Marseilles — have acquired international notoriety. Yet experts in illicit erotica rate Skid Row, San Juan, a unique and wonderful phenomenon. Perhaps this redlight section lacks the exotic qualities of those whorehouse capitals. But it has a kind of carefree abandon which makes up for the missing overtones of violence.

For one thing, this stretch of San Juan waterfront is no boil on the conscience of Puerto Rico. The present practical and efficient administration tolerates it without a tut-tut. For another, like the Old Ox Road, it is "not a place but just a proposition," part of that sex-steeped atmosphere which the tourist today, as he leaves the Isla Grande airport (or the GI as he stepped off the gangplank at Fort Buchanan in the war years), can almost breathe.

In cabarets among the warehouses and in the narrow streets of the old city, Skid Row and the Puerto Rican prostitute wear their rue with a difference. It stems from the subtropical effervescence of the island and from its social system. The climate is lush and impelling. The social system decrees that though there is rum and sun in plenty here, for women there is very little destiny. The island is under U. S. protection, but its surface culture is Latin and its real soul is a compound of Indian, Negro, and white. Industrialization, transplanted by Governor Luis Muñoz Marin, has begun to modernize the *mores*, but the woman still walks a oneway street. Whether on the shady or the respectable side, the outcome is sex, for propagation or profit.

Where the American girl can aim as high as her talent, her looks, and her cunning will take her, the Puerto Rican female of the species has no such luck. There are only a handful of jobs open to her — in the San Juan department stores, in the banks and business houses, to an even lesser extent in the Insular Government or its semi-official agencies.

If she has ideals, money enough

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