

The Bringing Down of Liz Holtzman

di Murray N. Rothbard

Joy oh joy! Hosanna! It would be difficult to pick, out of an all-too-jammed field, the most repellent politician in American life, but surely Elizabeth Holtzman would run anyone a very close race for that honor. Tough, dour, butch, pencil-thin, and ultra-left, Liz Holtzman has been plaguing New Yorkers, and Americans in general, for many years. She has always played the scene as a brutal avenging angel – or devil. In the Watergate affair, Holtzman, as a member of the House Judiciary Committee from Brooklyn, was prominent on TV as the stern avenger, bringing and enforcing justice, helping to bring down the Nixon administration. And then, in her congressional stint, in the 1970s, she conceived and introduced the bill that has been tormenting the country ever since: creating the Office of Special Investigations as a virtually independent fiefdom in the Department of Justice where Alan Ryan, Neil Sher, the Anti-Defamation League and their minions can drag elderly-Eastern European immigrants out of their beds and get them deported and often executed abroad for allegedly “Nazi” activities engaged in half a century ago. John Demjanjuk is only one of the innocent victims of Holtzmaesque “justice.”

But now, hallelujah! Justice has at last triumphed; the stars are once again in their courses; the avenger has been on the receiving end of vengeance and how does she like it? For the famed Bringer Down and what a plop! Liz Holtzman has been cast into total ignominy. For all political purposes, she is finished, kaput, stone cold dead in the market. For she lost the September 28 run-off Democratic primary for re-nomination (and eventual re-election) as Comptroller of the City of New York to a previously unknown opponent by no less than two-to-one, 67 to 33 percent. Wow!

At the beginning of this year’s New York City political campaign, Liz Holtzman looked to be a shoo-in for renomination and reelection. She has been around a long time, had big name recognition, and was in solid with feminist, left-Jewish, and black voters.

But in the late spring and early summer, as the weather got warmer, and homeowners began to settle in their summer or weekend homes at Fire Island, a small but politically powerful bevy of homeowners in the community of Saltaire began to get together and plot and scheme for the downfall of Elizabeth Holtzman. For non-New Yorkers, Fire Island is a long and narrow strip of sand and beach south of the Long Island mainland. Contrary to myth, it is not solely a summer haven for homosexuals (as is the Fire Island community of Cherry Grove, for example). A unique feature of Fire Island is that, by design, there are no roads and automobiles allowed on the island. Each community is reached by separate ferries from the mainland. The result is very little interrelationship among the various communities, but lots of togetherness *within* each village. Saltaire is a community of middle-class politicians and assorted power-brokers from the borough of Queens, a borough whose political complexion is moderate-to-conservative Democratic.

A particular leading-light in Saltaire is former Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, and the charming and likable Ferraro was very, very ticked off. Mad as Hell. And the object of Geraldine’s total wrath was none other than La Holtzman. It all stemmed from the 1992 race for the U.S. Senate. Incumbent Republican Senator Alfonse D’Amato was vulnerable, he had “ethics” problems stemming from the activities of his beloved brother Armand (convicted after the election). It looked like a sure Democratic seat in a Democratic year, and several politicians vied for the right to oppose D’Amato in the Democrat primary. A supposed shoo-in was Geraldine Ferraro, making her comeback after declining from her peak as vice-presidential candidate in the ill-fated Mondale campaign of 1984. Her major opponent was the nerdy, colorless State Attorney General Robert Abrams, who felt that it was his turn for high office. Also running were City Comptroller Liz Holtzman, splitting the feminist vote to the tune of a lot of wailing and breast-beating from the Sisterhood, and clownish black agitator “the Reverend” Al Sharpton, who seemed to be in the race just to get some credibility for future scams.

It was late in the primary season in 1992, and Ferraro had a comfortable lead in the polls. While the hard-core feminists such as Bella Abzug preferred Holtzman, Ferraro's friendliness and – yes, let's say it, *femininity* – charmed far more voters. Ferraro seemed to have it in the bag. And then, in a last-minute blitz, La Holtzman put on her Darth Vader uniform and struck. Borrowing over \$400,000 from her buddies at the Fleet Bank, Holtzman flooded the airwaves with bitter negative spots against Ferraro – dredging up the old whispered rumors about “Mafia” and “Mafia pornographers” that had virtually ended Ferraro's Congressional career. The Mafia stuff had emerged during the spotlight of the presidential campaign, when Ferraro's husband John Zaccarro, a commercial real estate tycoon in New York, was revealed to have alleged Mafiosos and pornographers among his tenants.

So Gerry Ferraro was not allowed to have her comeback. Defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory, as Holtzman's savage attacks reopened old wounds, and Bob Abrams, who had mildly seconded the attacks on Ferraro, squeezed into victory. But oddly enough, Holtzman herself only succeeded in self-destructing. Only hard-core feminists were convinced by Holtzman's line that if *men* can be allowed to be tough and negative, why can't a woman? Everyone else was, well, repelled, and at the election Holtzman plummeted to single digits in percentage of votes, falling even below the clown Reverend Sharpton.

Ferraro was so upset that she refused to endorse Abrams after his primary victory. After lengthy negotiations between the two camps, Ferraro made a grudging TV spot endorsing Abrams, but as one wag put it, it had all the sincerity of Saddam's Western hostages praising their captor. D'Amato's brilliantly organized campaign led enough indignant Italo-Americans to shift to his camp and narrowly beat out Abrams.

After the election, Ferraro, of course, still burned for revenge against her tormentor. Hence, the plotting at Saltaire. The Saltaire group came up with a long shot to oppose Liz Holtzman's presumed breeze of a re-election campaign: they decided to put up against her the totally unknown product of the Queens Democrat machine, State Assemblyman Alan Hevesi.

The Saltarians started with a huge problem: no one in New York politics had ever heard of Hevesi, including his own constituents, who are scarcely alive to their local assemblyman. How could this unknown quantity topple the mighty Holtzman? Who even knew Hevesi's ethnic background, always a crucial factor in New York politics: Was he Italian, or Hispanic, or what?

The first vital step: the Saltarians put the Hevesi campaign in the hands of one of the great political managers of our epoch: Hank Morris, who had run a losing Hevesi campaign four years ago against Holtzman in the primary, and who went on from there to manage one of the best political campaigns of our day: Diane Feinstein's for U.S. Senate in California.

Since no one had ever heard of Hevesi, Morris began the campaign by making use of that very fact: by turning a liability into a near-asset. The TV spots featured: “Alan Who?” “Hevesi Who?” The next step was to show countless rounds of Hevesi greeting the masses. Hevesi turned out to be a tall, good-looking, and very amiable middle-aged gentleman, and by showing an affable Hevesi, the point was implicitly but effectively made in pointing up the contrast to La Holtzman, whose rare smile makes her look like a ghostly and ghostly wraith. Hevesi's ethnic background was cleared up by letting it be known that his grandfather had been one of the most distinguished rabbis in Hungary. The Jewish vote! And moderate Jews who were fed up with the leftist and pro-black Holtzman now knew they had somewhere to turn. Ferraro's visible and ardent support for Hevesi of course worked the Italian and moderate feminist voters.

The next Hank Morris line was a brilliant masterstroke. Everyone knew that Holtzman really wanted to be a senator, and was using the comptrollership as a base for her next move; by the summer, Herman Badillo, whose Democratic primary race for mayor had flopped totally, had decided to run instead for comptroller on Democrat, Liberal, and Republican tickets (this cross-filing can be done in New York), and he became part of the Giuliani-for-Mayor ticket. Badillo was bound to wrap up the Puerto Rican vote, which otherwise could have gone either way. So Hank Morris now came up with this great line: “Hevesi – the only candidate *who wants to be*

Comptroller!” Not Mayor, not Senator, but Comptroller, the spot for which all these people were vying.

The race was tightening, and now the final clinching blow was suddenly hammered home. It became known that the city’s Department of Investigation was investigating the curious circumstances of La Holtzman, Ms. Integrity, and her \$450,000 loan from Fleet Bank. Not only was this loan made on security of returns from a future Holtzman fund-raiser, a benefit that raised less than half the sum pledged and left Holtzman in a continuing financial hole. Even more intriguing was the fact that a few months after the election, Fleet Securities, a corporation closely connected with Fleet Bank, received a lucrative municipal bond contract from Holtzman’s comptroller office. Aha! Hanky-panky! Payoff?! The news of the inquiry hit the press in the last few weeks before the primary, and the report itself was finished shortly before the September primary. Not only that; it became known that the Department of Investigation report was highly critical of Ms. Integrity, La Holtzman. Now a bizarre situation exists in New York: Department of Investigation reports on someone cannot be made public unless the subject of the inquiry consents. The inquiry has to spend several months being sifted by the Conflict-of-Interest Bureau.

Hevesi and Badillo naturally demanded that Holtzman release the report; surely the people have the right to know about their servant! But astonishingly, at the last minute before the primary, La Holtzman refused – to the bitter denunciation of the press. Her flimsy claim was that the voting public wouldn’t have time to sift through the report before voting. An egregious blunder, since the public doesn’t sift anyway, and of course Holtzman’s rivals and the media made the most of her *gaffe*.

As a result, in the September primary, a walkaway for Holtzman was transmuted into a very tight three-way race. Each of the three rivals got approximately one-third of the vote, with Hevesi coming in a narrow first, and Holtzman edging out Badillo for runner-up spot, the top two then being plunged into a runoff two weeks later, in late September. Where would the Badillo vote go? It was likely to go more to Hevesi, since those who liked the incumbent Holtzman would probably vote for her from the beginning. One point was noted: Holtzman depended on the black vote, and blacks don’t vote in primaries, especially in a runoff when neither Mayor Dinkins nor any other black would be running.

As soon as the election was over, Holtzman surrendered on the report, and released it, now maintaining that the public would have a full two weeks to do the sifting. In the event, they didn’t need two weeks: the Investigation report was damning, demonstrating Holtzman’s lies about not knowing that the two Fleets were involved; the report actually accused La Holtzman of “gross negligence” in office. But if she was a tough and nasty, knuckle-wielding leftist, but was not Ms. Integrity, but a quasi-crook like all the rest and caught with her hand in the cookie jar to boot, why in the world vote for her?

And so in the two weeks remaining until the runoff, a massive shift took place: Hevesi was looking better and better: Mr. Affability, Mr. Wants-to-be-Comptroller; whereas La Holtzman suddenly began to look like someone who had no virtues to offset her glaring and irritating vices. And so, on September 28, Hevesi swamped Holtzman two-to-one. No one in New York is going to ask “Alan Who?” anymore. If anything, it will soon be “Liz Who?” Was the timing of the Investigation Department report a mere coincidence, or was it all brilliantly plotted by Hank Morris and the gang? Who knows, but you can bet your bottom dollar on this: Hank Morris will be able to write his own ticket in the next election campaign.