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## Standing Up for Tompkins Square Park

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In the past few years, whenever I began to lose heart over Tompkins Square Park, I reminded myself that throughout its troubled history it has continually triumphed over strife and violence to survive as a haven for residents of the East Village.

For more than a century, the park has been a forum for public debate, and sometimes for violent confrontation. In January 1874, 7,000 people agitating for work relief clashed with the police. In 1877, railway workers supporting the nation's first railway strike convened in the park.

Tompkins Square stands for progressive politics, just as Union Square stands for public debate and Washington Square for bohemianism.

Yet there's another side to the park; few people realize that in 1894 one of the nation's first playgrounds was built there. In 1911, the city's first interpark athletic championship took place with more than 10,000 spectators. In a neighborhood with very limited open space, the park has long served as a treasured recreational resource for children.

In 1990, when I first toured Tompkins Square Park as Parks Commissioner, what I found wasn't a park, but an encampment for the homeless. For reasons I did not clearly understand, the city allowed a few hundred people to set up tents and usurp land set aside for use by all New Yorkers.

In good conscience I could not ask parents to bring their children into the place I saw that day. The park did not have adequate sanitation to support a population in the hundreds. Many of the squatters were drug abusers. Drug dealing and prostitution were routine. Yet some people believed that because of ever-increasing numbers of homeless in the city, it was our obligation to allow transients to live in the park.

I could not see the connection between the housing shortage and the abuse of the park. It is an outrage that anyone in this country should be homeless, but there is nothing progressive or kind about giving parkland to those unfortunate enough to be without homes.

Just over a year ago Mayor David Dinkins and I closed the park for renovation. Neither the Mayor nor I has enjoyed the abuse we have endured for this decision. My life has been threatened; I have been spit on and slandered. At the same time, I had come to know many of the homeless residents in the park, and it was painful to force them out of the place that had become their home.

On Monday, the Mayor dedicated a beautifully renovated Tompkins Square Park. He pledged to enforce a midnight curfew and do whatever else necessary to prevent the park from becoming an encampment. He was hooted at by foul-mouthed rabble who claimed to be speaking on behalf of the homeless.

As I stood in the middle of the fray, I hoped New Yorkers would understand that these hecklers are not the homeless and do not represent them. On the first night of the curfew, the homeless quietly left the park when we asked them to.

In coming weeks, there may be more violence by destructive individuals in Tompkins Square Park. Remember, they are not the homeless, merely people intent on making trouble, who tried and failed to give away a park.

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