A spectrum of contemporary political styles was expressed in the 2012 Republican Presidential primary run. Newt Gingrich came in fourth with his “Rome wasn’t burned in a day” 1990s nostalgia act. Madcap libertarian Ron Paul ranked third. Rick Santorum scored second with his Trump-prefiguring plea for blue-collar workers. And Mitt Romney, the eventual nominee, bubbled “I like data” when asked about his philosophy at a candidates’ forum. His passion deficit was addressed in the next software update, after which he started saying: “I love data.”

Data love is at the heart of the conventional wisdom in American politics, business, and philanthropy. Mike Bloomberg, who has left big footprints in all three of those sectors, professes that love daily. But what does it really mean to love data?

Eleanor Randolph answers that question, and many others, in her excellent new biography, The Many Lives of Michael Bloomberg. Practicing first-rate business journalism, Randolph shows us how numbers have animated Bloomberg as an executive, as a mayor, and as a philanthropist.

Bloomberg began his mayoral tenure by setting up a “Geek Squad”—officially the Mayor’s Office of Data Analytics. Its director, Michael Flowers, “surprised city insiders by going directly to Craigslist to find a group of mostly new college graduates he would soon call ‘the kids,’” Randolph writes. “They were techies, of course, and some had economics degrees. Flowers also looked for a creative side—one was a former music major. Another was a huge fantasy baseball expert. The key prerequisite for the job—never think first about what was impossible. There were plenty of people in government to do that.”

The kids found that the municipal agencies of New York City held tons and tons of data they were not exploiting. The Business Integrity Commission, for instance, had for years been researching the city’s garbage and waste-hauling industries, because they were dominated by organized crime. Who could have guessed their statistics would become ammo in the administration’s war on “fatbergs”—the giant accretions of restaurant grease that sometimes clog up New York City’s sewers?

The press magnifies failure, Bloomberg notes. They sensationalize it, and opponents exploit it. So politicians play it safe. That’s where philanthropy comes in.

Michael Bloomberg as a Fixer

Could he become as effective as a donor as he was as businessman and mayor?

By Kevin Williamson

The Many Lives of Michael Bloomberg

ELEANOR RANDOLPH

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Bloomberg’s involvement. And the bags of money he has given various anti-gun groups may as well have been tied around their necks like millstones. Beyond the politically tinted giving, there are the big-man gestures chronicled by Randolph. Hearing that a certain professor has a cardiac problem, Bloomberg dispatches his helicopter and whiskers her off to the Bloomberg-funded Johns Hopkins medical school. When an employee’s wife suffers leukemia, Bloomberg gets her into a special program. He looks in on the sick family members of colleagues and even reporters.

There are also some interesting details on Bloomberg’s philanthropy. He recognizes there are structural reasons that prevent government agencies from being innovative. “The press magnifies failure. They harp on it. They sensationalize it, and opponents exploit” it, he notes. So “politicians play it safe.” How to counter those disincentives and introduce some creative risk-taking into the way we attack social problems? “That’s where philanthropy comes in.”

Randolph insists that Bloomberg’s philanthropy is as strategically shrewd as his work in business and in government, but her case is not persuasive. Bloomberg, in her telling, acts as a kind of one-man, freelance Copenhagen Consensus—he calculates how many millions of lives he can save by taking on prominent killers: obesity, smoking, guns, then pours money into those parts of the social spreadsheet where the ink is reddest.

But of course those are not the most common causes of early death in this unhappy world. If Bloomberg was looking beyond Manhattan he’d see that diarrhea, pneumonia, and malaria are the kinds of things that most often truncate human lives across the globe. If Bloomberg were really following the data, his anti-gun philanthropy would be redirected to establishing rule of law or property rights in poor countries. There isn’t anything wrong with rich guys following their own interests with a gigantic wagon of money in tow. Self-professed rationalist data-lovers like Bloomberg, however, should recognize that they too have personal hobby-horses.

As a libertarian-leaning conservative, there is much about Bloomberg—his views and his style—that doesn’t exactly fill me with warmth. But while I’m not pro-Bloomberg, this book reminds me there are reasons to be anti-anti-Bloomberg. The nerdy omnigenous manager we meet in its pages did some profoundly useful things in New York City. And he could be powerfully helpful to his country in the future as a private fixer of public problems. If he can locate the right clogs in the system to focus on.