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## Fire Department in the *Twilight Zone*

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I'm now firmly convinced that the New York City Fire Department is the center of the longest running episode of the TV series the *Twilight Zone*. It's got all the basic plot elements - a time warp - which keeps the department operating like it's still 1950 and the Civil Rights Act just never happened - and a mind altering ray gun, which convinces otherwise sane elected officials, like Mayor Bloomberg, that if we integrate the Fire Department with African American and Latino fireman (like every other major city in America) the city can't survive.

Just how wacky this is, is laid out in almost painful detail by U.S. District Court Judge Nicholas Garaufis in a 70-page opinion in [United States v. City of New York](#), which found that New York City has intentionally and unlawfully discriminated against black and Latino firefighter applicants for more than 30 years.

It was always weird, when I was growing up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn - an almost 100 percent black neighborhood of my childhood in the 1950's - to walk by the local firehouse on St. John's Place and see every last member of the company was white. Even as a 10-year-old, my friends and I all knew what was going on. This was just another blatant example of racism in New York. But those were the bad old days, before Brown, before the Voting Rights Act, and before the impossible election of a black president. That's what makes the resistance of New York's Fire Department in 2010 so very bizarre and clearly deserving of a science fiction explanation!

In the 1980's, when I was Mayor Ed Koch's Special Advisor, I saw how this Fire Department's "ray gun" worked first hand. I was approached by the highest ranking non-uniformed black administrator at the Fire Department, who asked to meet with me to discuss a confidential matter. At our meeting, he stated that he wanted to enlist the help of the mayor concerning his treatment at the Fire Department. At the request of high ranking uniformed members of the department, he had hired the daughter of one of the Battalion Chiefs as his assistant. After six months she was not only promoted, but made his direct superior! I immediately went to the mayor, who called in the fire commissioner, Joe Hynes, now the Brooklyn D.A., to see what could be done. The "ray gun" blasted everyone. The only

thing that could be done was a transfer to another city agency. No one touched the uniformed fire department's decisions, not even the mayor or fire commissioner.

Mayor Bloomberg seems to be falling in with a long line of elected and appointed officials who have failed to correct what Judge Garaufis described as "a persistent stain on the Fire Department's record."

This is a position that has significant costs to the mayor and his legacy. In one of the strongest worded sections of the opinion, the Court found "that the Mayor and Commissioner were deliberately indifferent to the exams' impact on blacks is circumstantial evidence that the City engaged in purposeful discrimination against black applicants."

The city is giving every indication that it intends to appeal, with the mayor saying on the John Gambling radio show that no discrimination occurs in the Fire Department. "The real problem in the Fire Department has always been who applies," Bloomberg said. "If you don't apply, you don't get in." This is almost too much even for a *Twilight Zone* episode. No one in his right mind could consciously ignore over 50 years of discrimination without at least blushing.