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In America

BOB HERBERT

The Right Answer

He moves about the stricken city like a god. People want to be in his presence. They want to touch him. They want to praise him.

The governor defers to him. The president seems somehow inadequate beside him.

On Central Park West, a woman searching for just the right superlative for the man who is guiding New York through the greatest disaster ever to hit an American city finally said he's not like a god, "He is God."

And while that may be over the top, it is difficult for anyone to find a word or a phrase that comes close to describing the phenomenon that Rudolph Giuliani has become.

He has achieved what political observers would have told you two weeks ago is impossible. He is not only respected, but revered. And not only revered, but loved. This is not hyperbole. If he were running for reelection today, there would be no need for an actual vote. You could hand him his next term by acclamation.

Traumatized by the trade center attack, New Yorkers are grateful to Mr. Giuliani for leadership that has been not only steadfast but inspirational.

When David Letterman went back on the air Monday night, he told his audience, in a quivering voice:

"If you're like me and you're watching and you're confused and depressed and irritated and angry and full of grief and you don't know how to behave and you're not sure what to do, because we've never been through this before, all you had to do at any moment was watch the mayor. Watch how this guy behaved. Watch how this guy conducted himself. . . . Rudolph Giuliani is the personification of courage."

That sentiment is widespread. A Giuliani the city had never seen before surfaced at just the right time. He had the requisite air of command, but also the sensitivity and even gentleness that was so necessary for such a tragic and frightening sequence of events. There was, if such a thing is possible, a kind of awkward grace that he exhibited that was perfect for the moment.

Could a wide grin ever be appropriate in the midst of such horror? Mr. Giuliani found a way. Last month a firefighter named Michael Gorumba was killed fighting a blaze on Staten Island. The mayor promised the firefighter's sister, Diane — who had also lost a grandfather and her father in the past year — that he

would stand in for Michael and give her away at her wedding. On Sunday he kept that promise. With a broad grin that telegraphed to the city that life would, indeed, go on, he walked Ms. Gorumba down the aisle.

There is no doubt that a large majority of New Yorkers would like to hang onto this mayor, at least for a while. But despite calls for an extension of his term beyond Dec. 31 or the lifting of term limits so he can run again, a mayoral primary election is scheduled for Tuesday.

With the city still traumatized and Rudy-mania climbing to ever-higher levels, New Yorkers are, at best, ambivalent about this election. One wom-

Giuliani's triumph and beyond.

an, waxing poetic about Mr. Giuliani's handling of the crisis, said of the mayoral candidates, "They look so trivial, compared to our king."

But a mayoral election is not a trivial matter. And as terrific as Mr. Giuliani has been throughout this painful period, the city would not be well served by mischief-makers maneuvering behind the scenes to disrupt the democratic process.

When asked on Monday about the idea of extending his term in office, he said, "The law is the law. That's the way it is and I think we should assume that's the way it's going to remain."

But a day later, his view seemed to shift, at least somewhat. "If they could change the law," asked CNN's Larry King, "would you stay?"

Mr. Giuliani said he didn't know.

When Mr. King pressed the question, Mr. Giuliani replied, "I don't know the right answer to that at this point."

The right answer is that even in a grave crisis, this is a nation that will do all it can to preserve — and not disrupt — the democratic process.

When Franklin Roosevelt died with the world still at war, millions of Americans viewed the future with a sense of dread. But Harry Truman wasn't half bad, after all.

Mr. Giuliani has been magnificent in the city's darkest hour. It would be a shame if he followed that up by attempting to dim the light of the city's democratic process.

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