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Amidst Trauma, Democracy Needs to Go On

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AT ABOUT 12:40 p.m. yesterday, the doors to a freight elevator opened on a Hudson River pier, and into a cavernous hall filed maybe 40 U.S. senators.

Ted Kennedy was there, and so were Tom Daschle and Trent Lott and Joseph Biden and Olympia Snowe. They were accompanied by their hosts for the day — New York's Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer.

As the senators began to speak, U.S. Marines in full camouflage — with open rifles — patrolled the premises. Meanwhile, a rumor had just swept the place that British Prime Minister Tony Blair might drop by for a visit after he paid his respects to New York City's firefighters and police officers at stationhouses on the East Side of Manhattan.

I mention this only to point out that New York continues to live in a dreamlike state of perpetual motion, gnawing grief and chronic uncertainty.

We have more than 6,000 missing and confirmed dead to mourn. We have a large part of Lower Manhattan to rebuild — a part of town that accounts for as much as 20 percent of our total wages. And all the while we have powerful guests we must escort around — officials who need to see the twisted ruins of the World Trade Center for themselves so they may fully grasp the crime that was done to the very concept of American civilization itself.

Most come away awed and sickened. In the words of Senate Minority Leader Lott yesterday: "I've never seen anything comparable to what I've seen today — the magnitude of it."

Then — on top of it all — we have the New York City primary elections to worry about. Again.

They seem to be on for Tuesday — right in the middle of the worst crisis in the city's history.

Even though not a soul — except for maybe the candidates and their families — is focused on the races now. Even though in retrospect no one touched on issues that are crucial now. Even though the city Board of Elections, situated near ground zero, went reeling when the Twin Towers fell. Even though many New Yorkers would rather coronate Rudy Giuliani mayor for life.

'We may as well hold the primary Tuesday.'

All day yesterday, the primary date seemed to be an open question.

Some thought Gov. George Pataki might delay the primary for one week — until the Board of Elections could dust itself off and get its act more together. When I grabbed Pataki's elbow at the pier and asked him about this, he said he'd say something later in the day. He didn't. Instead, the governor apparently chose to exercise his right to remain silent.

Later — on a separate track — Federal Judge I. Leo Glasser denied a preliminary injunction to some city candidates who wanted to postpone the election. "The New York City election process is still in utter chaos," they'd said with some truth.

But let's be honest about this. I can't imagine a good time to hold the city's primaries in the near future. Two weeks ago last night, I was at the Queens Library in Flushing, listening to mayoral candidates haggle over the specifics of education plans and other stuff. That evening now seems like a lifetime ago. The big fuss that came over Fernando Ferrer's slyly divisive "two-cities" campaign suddenly seems irrelevant.

We may as well hold the primary on Tuesday. I am not saying this with a sigh and a shrug. There are good reasons to hang tough and plow ahead.

For one thing, experts as diverse as Board of Elections Commissioner Douglas Kellner and Gene Russianoff of the New York Public Interest Group believe the board — with a Herculean push — can make the logistics work. For example, the board has now designated new polling places for the displaced residents of Battery Park City. It has put cops on double shifts to watch the polls.

For another thing, it is important to choose a new city government as soon as possible. Thanks to term limits, most of our officials — especially on the City Council — will be novices. They must get up to speed instantly.

But most importantly, New York must show the terrorists what our style of democracy is all about. It is not something we postpone when our world goes mad. It is something we practice daily, and it is something we trust. It's our best anchor.

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