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Leaping off fence, Koch lands on Ferrer's side

Rips Green's stand on letting Rudy stay 3 mos.

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Former Mayor Ed Koch unexpectedly plunged into the Democratic runoff for mayor yesterday, unleashing a withering attack on Mark Green and — oh, by the way — endorsing Fernando Ferrer.

Koch had been perhaps the most important endorsement up for grabs in the runoff. Both sides aggressively lobbied him, viewing his seal of approval as a path to the moderate white Democrats who form the largest pool of undecided voters.

Just days ago Koch said he was "unlikely" to take sides. But Green's acceptance — and Ferrer's rejection — of Mayor Giuliani's proposal to stay in office an extra 90 days drove him to shed his neutrality, he said.

"Mark Green said yes. To me, this is unbelievable," Koch said in disdain, as Ferrer stood silently next to him in his campaign headquarters.

"Why Mark Green would be terrified and afraid to [oppose Giuliani] is beyond me. But on the other hand, sometimes people under pressure lose the ability to make a responsible, reasonable judgment."

Koch then lit into Green for saying that he would have been "as able, or better than, Mayor Giuliani" in managing the World Trade Center crisis.

"That is the most self-serving statement I have ever, ever heard," Koch said. "For Mark Green, who has never given any indication, by example that he could do that, to say he would have been better, that is unacceptable behavior."

Then it was time for questions. Mr. Mayor, a reporter asked, do you have any reasons why you are backing Ferrer?

"I know Freddy," Koch said of the Bronx borough president. "I think he is very decent, I think he has leadership skills and I think he knows how to run a city."

A Koch associate said Koch's strong relationship with Ferrer adviser and Bronx Democratic Party boss Roberto Ramirez and a belief he could play kingmaker by putting Ferrer in City Hall also were factors in the decision.

Whatever the reasons, the decision was a surprise to Ferrer, who received word in a call from Koch shortly after noon yesterday.

The decision sent spirits plummeting in the Green campaign, eclipsing its announcement 90 minutes earlier of an endorsement his advisers had considered a coup: Controller Alan Hevesi, a Queens moderate who finished out of the money in last week's mayoral primary.

Green aides tried yesterday to minimize Koch's decision, noting the two men have never had warm relations.

"This isn't the time for petty politics and personal grudges. I think all New Yorkers would agree the former mayor would better serve the city by engaging in substance rather than biased attacks. It is unbecoming of him," said Green spokesman Joseph DePlasco.

Rudy extension backfires

"Leadership is about courage, and Mark Green has the courage to unite the city to rebuild and go forward," DePlasco said.

For Green, Koch's decision was one more unwelcome reverberation from the decision to support a term extension for Giuliani.

Ferrer has trumpeted his "standing up" to Giuliani as proof of his toughness to be mayor. And by belittling Green's acceptance as a "capitulation," Ferrer — who captured only 7% of the white vote in the primary — is trying to peel away blacks and liberal whites from Green's bandwagon.

Green has said it was a "close call" but that supporting a term extension was the best option in the interest of unity and a "seamless" transfer of power.

Koch didn't buy Green's explanation, accusing him of being afraid that Giuliani would seek to overturn term limits and pursue reelection if he didn't get the extra 90 days. Koch mocked this position, saying Giuliani was "playing with an empty cartridge" because the Legislature never would have given the extra 90 days.

In supporting Ferrer, Koch glossed over his sometimes scathing criticism of Ferrer.

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"I'm just shocked at the race-conscious campaign of Freddy Ferrer," he said three weeks ago. "A campaign that is 'us against them,' that is racial, blatantly so."

In the Oct. 8 issue of New York magazine, Koch said, "I think Freddy owes his election to Al Sharpton, which means Sharpton will have the power to either appoint or veto commissioners, including the police commissioner."

But yesterday Koch said he had no qualms about Sharpton's support of Ferrer.

"Al Sharpton is a bona fide leader in the black community. . . . If I were running, I would seek his support." He said he hoped the next police commissioner "will be selected solely on the merits, without the involvement of Al Sharpton."

Ferrer withdraws offer

Earlier, Ferrer abandoned his offer last week to have Giuliani oversee an authority to oversee the rebuilding of the economy and infrastructure, an idea Green criticized. Instead, he suggested Giuliani head an authority overseeing the removal of debris and bodies.

He proposed that 10 million square feet of office space destroyed in the disaster be rebuilt in two years, in places like Long Island City, Queens and downtown Brooklyn rather than the Financial District. The plan lacked specifics on funding, but he called for reimposing a tax on commuters to pay for transportation improvements.

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