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In America

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First Person Singular

This year's mayoral race was Mark Green's to lose.

He's trying to lose it.

Mr. Green is a liberal whose campaign was based on his professed ability to unify New Yorkers. But somehow he has managed to become the candidate who can win the Democratic nomination only if he can draw the votes of moderate and conservative whites who dislike his liberal politics but are even more repelled by the Rev. Al Sharpton, who is backing Mr. Green's opponent, Fernando Ferrer.

In this weirdest of all mayoral campaigns, Mr. Green — the only candidate known to have double-dated with Mr. Sharpton (they went to see "Judgment at Nuremberg") — has been outmaneuvered and put on the defensive by Mr. Ferrer, who was not initially seen as a formidable candidate but has turned out to be surprisingly agile.

This has left the Green camp unnerved. "Freddie" Ferrer was supposed to have been a pushover.

On Sept. 11, when New Yorkers started voting in the election that was aborted by the terrorist attack, Mr. Green had reason to hope he might win the nomination outright by pulling more than 40 percent of the vote. And he believed that the winner of the Democratic primary this year was the "presumptive mayor."

To say that he was confident is an understatement. He was all but picking out the fabric for new drapes at Gracie Mansion.

But there were two things standing in the way. The surprising agility of Fernando Ferrer. And the hubris of Mark Green.

Mr. Green's strategy through most of the primary season, when he was leading in nearly all polls, was to keep a low profile. The past several days have shown the value of that strategy. The more attention Mr. Green draws to himself, the worse off he seems to get.

His biggest gaffe, of course, was immediately knuckling under to Rudolph Giuliani when the mayor demanded an extension of his term in office. That willingness to go along with the mayor (even as Mr. Ferrer was telling the mayor no) backfired. Mr. Green was widely seen as weak, if not unprincipled. And he worsened the damage by asserting on Monday that he would have done "as well or better" than Mayor Giuliani in guiding the city through the World Trade Center crisis.

It was not exactly a grace note,

and it angered many New Yorkers, including former Mayor Ed Koch, who endorsed Mr. Ferrer and bitterly attacked Mr. Green on Tuesday.

But Mark Green's problems are more complicated than one or two gaffes in the past couple of weeks. And Mr. Koch's opposition to the Green candidacy is instructive.

There are a lot of people in this town — public officials and, increasingly, voters — who simply don't like Mr. Green.

Until this week Mr. Koch had been harshly critical of the Ferrer cam-

Mark Green on the defensive.

paign. He recently told me that he believed Mr. Sharpton would be entitled to some of the "spoils" in the Ferrer administration. "I certainly wouldn't want him to have the right of a veto of the police commissioner," said Mr. Koch, "which I'm certain he will have."

So why endorse Mr. Ferrer? Mr. Koch said he did it because Mr. Green "folded" rather than stand up to Mr. Giuliani. But he also said of Mr. Green, "He's obnoxious — that's the heart of it."

If you speak privately with public officials who know Mr. Green you will hear that again and again. He's obnoxious, they'll say. He's arrogant. And that tendency of Mr. Green to strut, to speak and behave condescendingly, to turn off friend and foe alike with his compulsively self-serving comments and activity — in a profession notoriously tolerant of self-serving activity! — gets very close to the heart of the political difficulties Mr. Green is having now.

Mr. Green needs to regroup. And there's a model he can follow close at hand: Rudolph Giuliani. Mr. Giuliani has been praised to the hilt for his performance since Sept. 11 not primarily because of the managerial competence he has displayed, but because he has made New Yorkers feel that he genuinely cares about them and the city.

Mr. Green will enhance his chances of winning the mayoralty if he can somehow relinquish his obsession with the first person singular. He has time to do this. But not a lot of time.

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