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Green & Ferrer come out swinging during debates

Nice-guy race turns ugly as Thursday runoff nears

By MICHAEL SAUL and JOEL SIEGEL
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITERS

Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer engaged in a smackdown yesterday during two testy debates in which Green charged that Ferrer flip-flopped on issues and is not up to managing the city's crisis while Ferrer accused Green of breaking promises to run a positive race.

Battling for advantage in the final days of the deadlocked runoff for mayor, the Democrats repeatedly accused each other of distorting the truth as they duelled over issues from the Rev. Al Sharpton to their clashing views on a term extension for Mayor Giuliani.

It was by far the most combative day of what had been, until recently, a kid-gloves race. The runoff is Thursday.

The debates ended an hour before the United States unleashed air strikes on Afghanistan, launching a war that likely will overshadow the rest of the runoff if not the campaign. They later issued statements supporting the offensive.

Gloves come off

During the debates, the candidates often spoke with indignation and sarcasm.

"I need to respond to this: Who are you trying to kid, Mark?" Ferrer said at one point, when Green denied explicitly asking for the endorsement of Sharpton, who backs Ferrer.

"Stop acting, Freddy," Green shot back.

At another point, Green said, "If you can't take the heat, you shouldn't be in the debates."

Ferrer answered, "Oh, Mark. I can certainly take the heat, but I am not going to allow you to

stand there and distort."

"What have I said that's untrue?" Green fired back.

Swapping salvos

The jousting began with a free-wheeling 30 minutes on WNBC-TV and spilled over into an hour debate on WABC. In both forums, the candidates showed closing campaign themes.

Seeking to regain his former lead, Green was the aggressor, minimizing Ferrer's plans for managing the city through the World Trade Center crisis — a strategy aimed at implying Ferrer is not up to the job as mayor.

"To compare our ideas is fine. To denigrate ideas, and say, 'Mine's a big idea, yours is little,' is not only beside the point, it is apart from what there should be," Ferrer said.

Green shot back, "It is not beside the point, it is the point... How else should voters judge us, Freddy... except to how we respond to the greatest crisis in our history?"

And Green repeatedly portrayed Ferrer as shifting positions on two core liberal issues: support for abortion rights and opposition to the death penalty.

"You flip-flopped on death and choice. I never have. That's a fact," Green said.

"That's nonsense," Ferrer replied.

"Facts are facts," Green said.

At every opportunity, Ferrer invoked Green's backing of a 90-day term extension for Giuliani, a stand that has cost Green support of liberal voters. Ferrer opposed the extension.

The Rudy issue

Ferrer accused Green of telling him when the issue first came up that they should both oppose the mayor. "You want to talk about veracity and credibility, I'll go back again to the choice to stand with the mayor," Ferrer said.

Green denied such a conversation took place.

And Ferrer cast himself as a victim of negative campaigning. In the WABC debate, Ferrer went so far as to count each attack Green lobbed. "That's No. 4, Mark," Ferrer said stiffly.

Green countered that Ferrer "mocked me" in his campaign kickoff speech, and that Ferrer's surrogates attacked him. "I didn't whine, I didn't complain," Green said.

Ferrer acknowledged his goal of boosting teacher pay 30% — a promise made before the economic turmoil of the terrorist attacks — "is not realistic, it's not real world" now. Green answered a 30% hike was not only "unlikely, implausible and irresponsible now... I thought it was a year ago when he [proposed] it."

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