NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

We're Blessed to Have Leaders Like These



Ed Koch

"THESE ARE the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine in 1776. When catastrophe strikes, we learn to whom the Good Lord has given courage and leadership abilities. President Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 when the nation was nearly paralyzed because of the economic situation. At that time, Germany turned to Adolf Hitler, and even earlier Italy turned to Benito Mussolini and Russia to Joseph Stalin. There is no question that those three evil men, who would be responsible for the deaths of millions, had immense leadership abilities. But they also had the advantage that dictators have — the power of their office to enforce submission to their will. In democracies, our leaders must convince people they should be followed.

We in New York City are fortunate to have three leaders in city, state and national government who by their words and actions have inspired and calmed our citizens. They have exhibited sensitivity, warmth and comfort with an appropriate hug or kiss, and they have been willing to go wherever their presence would do the most good. Each has also demonstrated a steely resolve.

Let me start with Mayor Rudy Giuliani. In any city, the mayor is the right arm of the people, protecting them and making them proud of where they live. Self-deprecation on the part of a mayor, with a little humor, has always been helpful. A mayor has enormous power, sometimes resented and not always understood when exercised. It is necessary to explain without anger or pettiness the actions you are taking. Mayor Giuliani, prior to this catastrophe, has not always done that. Occasionally, he has refused to talk with those questioning his motives or judgment, and sometimes he has acted like a bully.

Since the tragedy at the World Trade Center, Giuliani has been sensitive, courageous and comforting. For most New Yorkers, he has eliminated his negative side, which turned off a lot of people, mostly blacks and Hispanics. The mayor is now praised to the heavens, as he should be, for his leadership of the city at this extraordinarily difficult time.

Mayor Giuliani invited David Dinkins, 30 ministers and me to participate in the planning of a memorial ceremony to be held this weekend at Yankee Stadium. At our meeting, we were asked to introduce ourselves. I used my moment to publicly acknowledge his brilliant leadership of the city under the current difficult times. The applause was thunderous. Whenever the mayor is introduced around the city, he receives enormous applause, all well merited. The mayor rose to the challenge and we, the people, are grateful.

The same is true for Gov. George E. Pataki. Although he is a tall man, towering at 6' 5", he always seems to be one of us and is totally approachable. He has a calming and low-key personality and is always polite. The governor could have commanded every press conference attended by the mayor, but he always deferred to the mayor because it is his city. The governor sent the National Guard and state police to the city to help with the rescue effort. Gov. Pataki is a treasure to have as a personal friend and as a friend of New York City.

Finally, there is President George W. Bush. I was deeply offended when some editorial writers and columnists denigrated his following security instructions to remain briefly at U.S. Air Force bases in Louisiana and Nebraska, instead of immediately returning to Washington. The security agencies had good reason to fear that he could be assassinated.

Nevertheless, the president returned to D.C. the afternoon of the tragedy and then came to New York's Ground Zero, where he was cheered by those at the location. His statements warning the terrorists and nations that harbor them that the United States will flush them out and punish them is exactly what Americans want to hear and see done. He has indomitable courage, and he is a decent man with the moral virtues Americans believe are necessary in our leaders. He may not be another John F. Kennedy in terms of rhetoric, but remember that when President Dwight Eisenhower was in office, his sentences were difficult to parse. But Ike was a great general and a fine president. George W. Bush is a fine commander in chief and president and has a great vice president in Dick Cheney at his side.

With men like these as our leaders, we shall not only persevere but we shall overcome.

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