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Keep Rudy, Postpone the Mayoral Election

By Myron Magnet

Chants of "Four more years!" greet Rudolph Giuliani everywhere he goes these days, and New Yorkers, whenever their mayor's name comes up, ask each other, plaintively: "Can't we find some way to keep him?" But his term ends in 14 weeks, on Jan. 1, and the city's term limits law prevents him from running for a third consecutive term. The World Trade Center attack aborted the primary election scheduled to winnow down those vying to be his successor; the primary now will take place tomorrow, and Election Day is Nov. 6.

Certainly the idea of keeping Mr. Giuliani in office is compelling. New York is in the grip of an unprecedented emergency, as more than 6,000 people lie buried, presumably dead, in the rubble of what were once two 110-story buildings. Since the kamikaze planes struck the towers on Sept. 11, the mayor has seemed the very embodiment of his city: unruffled, energetic, decisive, fearless, tough, straight-talking and compassionate. He has been omnipresent, his reasonable and businesslike voice always striking the right note, whether of comfort or resolve or defiance. Tested by powerful adversity, he has proved—as even commentators who don't like him agree—heroic.

This extraordinary performance should surprise no one who has watched the mayor for the past eight years. He came to City Hall when New York was dying. A million residents had fled; businesses were crowding for the exits; jobs were evaporating. CEOs of four big companies that had no choice but to stay in New York called themselves the Lights Out Club and joked grimly about who would be the man to flick the switch when the city went dark.

Eight years later, Mr. Giuliani had cut the crime rate that was killing the city by nearly 60%—by far the greatest urban policy triumph in living memory. He had slashed the welfare rolls, which once included every seventh New Yorker, in half. He presided over an economic boom, with each one of the last three years breaking Gotham's previous record for job creation.



Rudy Giuliani

Thanks to Mr. Giuliani's policies, New York became once more a place where people wanted to live and work and visit. He was, truly, the man who saved the city.

And now the city needs saving again. With a 17-square-block crater at the heart of the financial district, with access to downtown constricted and part of the subway system amputated, little wonder that businesses are looking outside the city, all over the region, for office space, and little wonder that the confidence of the financial, high-tech and tourist industries housed in New York is shaken.

For the future of New York, local businessmen—before they resolve to decamp—need to be reassured that the city will quickly and competently rebuild the office space needed, and that New York will once again be a safe place to live and work. Tourists the world over need to know that New York is again safe to visit. Businessmen need to know, too, that Gotham's municipal finances and the expenditure of billions in federal aid continue to be in capable and scrupulous hands.

None of the front-runners in the mayoral race has the experience necessary to inspire that confidence, and no one would call them men of vision, whatever their virtues. None of them likes or understands business, except as a golden goose to tax, and everything they have said in the primary debates about the possibility of tax increases and their preference for costly, even profligate, public-sector solutions to urban problems is likely to fill the business community with dread.

What then to do? A write-in campaign for Rudy? However much it may relieve voters' feelings, it doesn't solve the term-limits problem. What's needed, instead, is an act of the state Legislature, postponing the mayoral election for one year, just as it postponed the primary election two weeks.

State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver has flatly refused to consider this measure, singlehandedly blocking the movement in Albany to accomplish it. "I don't think it's something we should bring to Albany, to overturn the will of the people," Mr. Silver has asserted.

But he has the case exactly backward: The will of the people is for Mr. Giuliani to stay at the city's helm, as the mayor's 91% approval rating testifies. If Mr. Giuliani ran on Election Day, can anyone doubt he would win in a landslide? In reality, Mr. Silver wishes to use the machinery of the political process against the will of the people for narrowly self-interested ends. This clubhouse-politician's mentality is the keynote of New York's corrupt and unreformed state Legislature, and it is the note Gothamites hope to keep from souring the rebuilding of their city.

Every New Yorker who wants Rudy Giuliani's experienced hand on the tiller for now should phone or e-mail his state senator and assemblyman (or log on to the KeepRudy.com Web site), to demand that the Legislature vote to postpone the mayoral election (and the vote for all other New York City officials) until November 2002. To keep election cycles synchronized, the legislature should make the next mayor's term three years, a move for which two precedents exist.

During the extra year, New Yorkers can consider whether they wish to pressure the City Council to repeal the term limits law. Maybe true wisdom lies not in junking politicians every eight years, to keep them from succumbing to corruption, but rather in encouraging gifted and public-spirited men and women—like Rudy Giuliani—to run for office.

Mr. Magnet is the editor of the Manhattan Institute's City Journal.

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