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Giuliani As 'New York's Churchill'

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When Rudolph Giuliani went to sleep on Monday night, he was drifting toward becoming a politician of the past, a controversial law-and-order figure who seemed to repel as many New Yorkers as he inspired.

It was the eve of the New York primary, when voters were to select candidates to run in November's mayoral election to succeed him.

Now, the world has been turned upside down, and Giuliani is experiencing his finest hour — rearranging his image and political prospects. When terrorists attacked the World Trade Center on Tuesday, Giuliani rose to the occasion and reclaimed a commanding leadership role.

He has, even to occasional critics, embodied the city's determination to emerge from the rubble of the assault. "He has demonstrated a magnetic quality: 'I'm at the center of this crisis, and we've got everything under control,' and he has been really magnificent," said Terry Gray, the Conservative Party candidate for mayor.

When the first hijacked plane hit the World Trade Center, Giuliani headed straight to the scene, and nearly became a casualty himself.

Hours later, he got together with city officials, said John Dyson, an adviser and former deputy mayor.

Dyson handed the mayor his large Rolodex, having carried it out of City Hall as the building was evacuated after the attack.

Giuliani was, from the start, resolved to make a difference, Dyson recalled.

"The mayor said 'OK, we got a big job to do. We all lost friends, some of us lost family members. We're just going to turn this around, and we're gonna lick it, and we all have our part to do,'" he said.

In the ensuing days, he has been a steady and reassuring presence — a chief operating officer, a preacher, a military commander.

"I think Rudy Giuliani has turned out to be New York's Winston Churchill," said Mitchell Moss, a professor of planning at New York University. "His capacity to steer this city through the crisis will make him the mayor of the millennium."

The mayor has stressed that his priority is the rescue and recovery effort. So it is too early to tell whether the boost in Giuliani's reputation will position him for a bid for higher political office.

He could run for mayor again — but only in four years, and political observers say it is probably too late for him to run for governor next year, with Gov. George Pataki likely to be the Republican candidate.

Giuliani missed his opportunity to become a U.S. senator last year by pulling out of the race against Hillary Rodham Clinton after he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and news of an an extramarital affair came out. He is mired in a bitter divorce case.

But given his handling of the Trade Center calamity, there is an growing sense of disappointment that the mayor soon will be out of office during the city's most-tested hour.

"We don't know what's going on with the world, much less with his political career," said Councilman John Sabini (D-Jackson Heights). "But certainly he has made New Yorkers feel good about themselves, and about him."

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