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AROUND CITY HALL

IN CHARGE

The best of Rudy Giuliani.

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

Shortly before nine o'clock on Tuesday morning last week, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was on Fifth Avenue, at Fiftieth Street, on his way to City Hall, when he got word that a plane had crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. He sped downtown and got there in time to witness what he subsequently described as "the most horrific scene I've ever seen in my whole life." The Mayor spoke to some of the fire commanders at the scene, including the chief of the department, Peter Ganci, who was killed moments later. In a gruesome irony, the city's new emergency command center was situated directly inside the World Trade Center—not in one of the two towers that were hit but in a third building, which also lay in ruins by the end of the day. Since that location was obviously unsafe, Giuliani went to a suite of city offices a block away, at 75 Barclay Street, where he and his aides intended to set up an alternative command post. When the first World Trade Center tower collapsed, debris started to rain down from the ceiling of 75 Barclay, and they had to evacuate that building as well. They had just finished an impromptu news conference at Chambers Street and West Broadway, and had begun walking north, when the second tower collapsed. It was at that point that the Mayor of the city of New York, along with everybody else in lower Manhattan, found himself running for his life.

Mayors always rush to the scene of disasters; this is as much a part of the job as submitting budgets and making sure the garbage gets picked up on time. No mayor, however, has ever had to react to a disaster of the magnitude of last week's, and few could have done so with more forcefulness, or steadiness of purpose, than Giuliani. On the day of the attack, the Mayor spoke publicly at least half a dozen times, the last around midnight, and then he went back to the scene to speak to the rescue teams working through the night. Each time he spoke, he managed to convey at once grief and resolve, and his presence offered the kind of reassurance so disconcertingly absent in Washington, where the President was, for much of the day, missing.



Each time he spoke, he conveyed at once grief and resolve—and reassurance.

"New York is still here," the Mayor said at one point. "We've undergone tremendous losses, and we're going to grieve for them horribly, but New York is going to be here tomorrow morning, and it's going to be here forever." He described speaking to Ganci, who had been a member of the Fire Department for thirty-three years, just before he died, and telling him, "God bless you." And he urged the people of the city to try to resume their normal lives without bitterness.

"Hatred, prejudice, and anger are what caused this terrible tragedy, and the people of the city of New York should act differently," he said. "We should act bravely. We should act in a tolerant way. We should go about our business, and we should show these people that they can't stop us." By all accounts, the command center the Mayor eventually did establish, at a location that reporters were asked not to divulge, functioned effectively. "It was magnificent, really," Representative Jerrold Nadler, a frequent critic of the Mayor, said after attending a meeting there.

Andrew Kirtzman, a political reporter for NY1, the city's cable news channel, was running alongside Giuliani on the morning of the tragedy. Kirtzman described the Mayor as entirely composed, even though, for nearly an hour, no one seemed to know where he should go. At one point, Kirtzman recalled, the Mayor bumped into a young black police officer: she said something to him, and, like a father, he touched her on the cheek. Eventually, he found a temporary office in a fire station, but since all the crews at the station had already left for the World Trade Center, someone had to jimmy the lock in order to let him in.

One of the mysteries of Giuliani's tenure has always been why, in moments of civic calm, he creates such havoc, and then, in genuine crises, behaves so calmly. This mystery will never entirely be solved; the attack occurred on the very day that the city's mayoral primary was to have taken place—it was postponed until September 25th—and there are now fewer than four months left in his term. But the role that the Mayor played last week was one that he, at least, had apparently foreseen for himself. Giuliani had pushed for the construction of the new emergency command center, widely derided at the time as his "bunker," and, even though he made a dreadful miscalculation in putting it inside the World Trade Center, his concerns about New York's vulnerability, and the need for sure leadership in case the worst occurred, were more than borne out. Too much of the past year had been given over to the Mayor's usual battles—with his estranged wife, with the city comptroller, with museums that he accused of offending decency. Now, in the context of last week's terrible events, something of Giuliani has been restored to him and, by extension, to the city. ♦

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