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JOHN TIERNEY/The Big City

Is New York City Big Enough for Giuliani and a New Mayor?

SUPPOSE one of the mayoral candidates looked into the cameras this weekend and announced:

"If elected, I will not govern. Not during the first year. This is no time to be changing leaders. The term-limits law may prevent Rudy Giuliani from being reelected, but it doesn't prevent me from letting Rudy be the unofficial mayor during the first year of rebuilding New York City. I promise to delegate all authority to him during 2002. I will not even move into City Hall. I'll wait until January of 2003 to replace Rudy in the mayor's office."

It's quite possible that any candidate who said that would be elected the next mayor. So might a candidate who selflessly proposed another stratagem: "*If you elect me* as mayor and Mr. Giuliani — through a write-in campaign — as public advocate, I'll resign right after I'm sworn in, making him my legal successor."

Some have argued that it would be a mistake to give terrorists the satisfaction of interfering in our election process, but it seems unlikely that guerrillas in the mountains of Afghanistan take much interest in our term-limits law. To the extent that they cared about New York politics, they probably wouldn't be satisfied to see a tough law-and-order leader remain in power, especially if he enabled the city to rebuild more quickly.

You might even see Rudy Redux as a blow against terrorism: the one inadvertent gift that the hijackers gave New York. Even before their attack, much of the city was dismayed at the potential successors for Mr. Giuliani. Now these guys look scarier than ever.

Mr. Giuliani, meanwhile, is being hailed as the city's savior. But just because he performed magnificently during the city's worst moments doesn't mean that he's essential for rebuilding the city. New Yorkers' sudden affection for Mr. Giuliani is not entirely rational.

You could call it post-traumatic infatuation syndrome, a condition that Mr. Giuliani himself can recognize from his study of opera. The textbook case is in "Lucia di Lammermoor," the Donizetti opera set in 17th-century Scotland.

Lucia, grief-stricken by her mother's recent death, is walking to her mother's grave when a bull charges her. She's rescued by Edgardo, with whom she promptly falls in love. Lucia overlooks his flaws, the chief one being that his family and hers are sworn enemies. The results of her infatuation are not pretty. By the end of the opera, Lucia, Edgardo and a bystander are all dead.

MR. GIULIANI'S flaws are some of the same qualities that make him so attractive in a crisis: confidence, authority, intransigence. A control freak can seem essential when things are out of control, but he can get irritating when life returns to normal.

Mr. Giuliani's model, Fiorello La Guardia, was also convinced that he could run anything better than anyone else, and his arrogance became more destructive the longer he was in office. First elected in 1933, he was hailed as the city's savior during an economic crisis, and then he gradually became more willful and blind to his own mistakes. There were no term limits in his days, enabling him to serve three terms, and the last one gets the lowest marks from historians.

Mr. Giuliani has shown some of the same tendencies during his mayoralty, and the current adulation is likely to make him even more sure of himself. He would also have more authority than ever, thanks to the new powers being given to speed the rebuilding. That could be a dangerous combination.

Still, no matter how much you fear a newly empowered Giuliani, you have to compare him with the alternatives: conventional clubhouse politicians suddenly asked to deal with an unprecedented situation. They seemed timid and outdated even before the attack. The business executives now contemplating an exodus from New York cannot be reassured by the Democrats who were promising to raise taxes even before the expense of rebuilding downtown.

Mr. Giuliani would help keep businesses in town, and he might keep down the costs of rebuilding since he's not beholden to the traditional political establishment. With his zeal for fighting, he might take on some of the special interests anxious to turn the downtown reconstruction into the biggest pork-barrel project in the city's history.

The next mayor could appoint Mr. Giuliani simply to direct the reconstruction of downtown. There's no one better suited to manage the project or battle the city's bureaucratic obstacles, and there's no one whose presence would be so reassuring to the public.

But what politician would be brave enough to share power with him? New York is not big enough for two mayors. When Mr. Giuliani is involved, it's barely big enough for one.

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