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Candidates get offer hard to refuse

By MAGGIE HABERMAN

ANALYSIS

For the three men who've spent months and millions of dollars jockeying to replace Mayor Giuliani, his let's-make-a-deal offer presents a serious dilemma.

Whatever Giuliani proposes to the candidates, Democrats Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer, and Republican Mike Bloomberg, holds something positive and something troubling.

On the plus side, if the candidates agree to the plan, said to be an extension of the mayor's term, they're answering the call of the now wildly popular mayor to "unify" the city in the wake of the World Trade Center horror.

The deal might be especially hard to turn down, since all three candidates have talked about the need to shelve "politics as usual."

At the same time, the mayor, who for now is set to leave at year's end, would impose conditions on the incoming leader, including delaying the crucial first weeks of a new administration, when agendas are set.

For Bloomberg, who's positioned himself closest to Giuliani and wants his support, the choice is probably easy.

But Green and Ferrer may weigh the decision more heavily.

Both have often criticized the mayor — and there's not much love lost on either side.

And while there may be a compelling reason for Giuliani to get an unprecedented reprieve — aside from the general chaos the trade center tragedy created — he hasn't said what it is yet.

Still, in a campaign that's been redefined by the terror attacks, "unity" might be hard to ignore. And taking the deal means candidates would be less likely to become targets of Giuliani's wrath during the remainder of the campaign.

That gives Giuliani leverage.

Still, the mayor didn't completely rule out seeking another term — meaning the looming question is what Giuliani will do if he's made the candidates an offer they can refuse.

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