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Mr. Mayor, Go With Dignity

For two weeks now, I've been saying nice things about Rudy Giuliani. Obviously, they've gone to his head.

So let me put this as simply and as clearly as I know how to: Just because you've been great in the current troubles, Mr. Mayor, doesn't mean you should stay in office for life.

Rudy seemed confused by that distinction yesterday.

There he was taking questions late afternoon in his waterside command bunker, and there he was again on television last night. Both times he admitted he was hoping to hang around beyond the end of his term.

Is he open to remaining mayor after Dec. 31, Dan Rather asked straight-out in a "60 Minutes II" interview. "I am, I am open to the idea of doing it," Giuliani said without hesitation.



Ellis Henican

He didn't explain how he plans to get around a plain-as-day city term-limits law. But in a rambling discourse, he made the same argument that Third World strongmen have been making for years:

Forget the law. Unify around me.

"We can't have invested the kind of time and effort and love and then — not only of mine but of this whole team that's here — without having a great concern that this is — we have developed all of this expertise and this is the time the city needs it most," he said.

In other words . . . no one else can be the mayor.

Only me.

This whole egotistical concept is a tough sell in a democracy, even a democracy shaken by tragedy and outrage. Didn't America hold a presidential election during the Civil War? Didn't FDR stand for office — against real opponents — in World War II?

Osama bin Laden is going to make New York abandon its basic principles?

I don't think so.

Is Rudy talking about a whole new term for himself? Probably not.

Or does he envision some kind of extension of his current one? More likely.

He wouldn't say out loud yesterday.

But the first step, he told reporters in his late-afternoon Q&A, is to show his secret plan to Mark Green, Fernando Ferrer and Michael Bloomberg, the three current mayoral candidates, fresh from Tuesday's primary.

"I'm going to present them with a proposal as the current mayor, who has I think, the best interests of the city at heart that I think will help unify the city," Giuliani told reporters. "It has nothing to do with me. It has to do with the city."

Watch that word "unify."

It's not that the city is disunited, Rudy said. It's that we can't risk life in the city without him. "We have a very, very strong spirit of unity right now and I think it's my job to maintain it," he said. "I can't tell you what that is until I tell them, and I haven't met with all of them yet."

The politics of this keep-me maneuver won't be easy.

At some point, the speaker of the State Assembly will remember he's a lifelong Democrat. The three other mayoral candidates will wonder, "How can you change the rules of an election after the first vote has been taken?" And the members of the City Council will find it hard to see why they have to leave office on account of term limits — aren't they crucial unifiers too? — and the mayor does not.

Rudy didn't have answers for any of that yesterday. But no doubt he'll have some today or tomorrow. Ambition has a way of focusing the mind.

What's sad about all this is that Rudy Giuliani could still be a tremendously valuable asset to the rebuilding of New York. There are many crucial jobs besides mayor.

He's been a powerful symbol, a moving spokesman, a beacon through some dreary days.

See? I'm complimenting the mayor again. And he deserves it.

Why mess that up with a grubby power grab?

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