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Three Legit Candidates and an 800-Pound Gorilla



Joseph Dolman

PITY the poor winners.

In the wee hours yesterday, as soon as it was clear he had made the Democratic runoff for mayor, Mark Green was scheduling a meet-and-greet deep within his heartland at 86th Street and Lexington.

His rival, Fernando Ferrer, was already planning to hit the pavement in the morning rush at 72nd and Broadway with Ruth Messinger in tow, the Upper West Side's patron saint of righteous causes.

Meanwhile, zillionaire Michael Bloomberg, the winner of Tuesday's Republican mayoral primary, was plotting press availability on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, one of New York's grandest vistas — now marred by the terrible absence of the silver spires of the World Trade Center.

If nothing else, this strenuous process ensures that New York will get a mayor who can operate for days on nervous energy alone. Unfortunately, there is nothing in the process to ensure that the city will wind up with the mayor it really wants.

This has suddenly emerged as a huge problem.

So the next mayor could be in for a terrible run of it. What might yesterday's winners win?

The answer is this: A whole lot of misery.

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Fact No. 1: It's still all about Rudy. An Edison Media Research exit poll on Tuesday found that 41 percent of Democrats who voted in the primary prefer Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to the candidate they had just voted for. Among Republicans, the figure was 80 percent — in all, a percentage large enough to hand Giuliani a third-term victory in the Nov. 6 general election. All reports yesterday said that Giuliani was interested in a third term.

Fact No. 2: Anything a Mayor Ferrer or a Mayor Green or a Mayor Bloomberg does will be judged against the almost-mythical achievements that are now ascribed to the Giuliani administration. This will be a growing problem as the next mayor tries to keep a crumbling school system in one piece, rebuild the Wall Street area and improve an inadequate public transportation system — right in the middle of an economic downturn.

Fact No. 3: Ferrer and Green will have to carry out their runoff campaign on tiptoes. This is an utter imperative. At the same time, Tuesday's vote comes with some stark racial implications. Ferrer — with the Rev. Al Sharpton at his side — pulled down just 6 percent of the white vote and 52 percent of the black vote. Green — who made an inclusive pitch — came out with 41 percent of the white vote and 35 percent of the black vote. In a city shell-shocked by the Twin Towers attacks, Ferrer must keep his minority core mobilized as he nudges Sharpton aside and goes for white votes. This is a job so delicate it is better suited for a magician than a politician.

But, as we said, it's still all about Rudy.

Even as the field narrows. Even as the race gets serious. Even as the city gets on with the job of healing its wounds. We now have a race for mayor with two Democrats, one Republican — and a phantom in glasses with black thinning hair.

Will Rudy really run for a verboten third term? He has repeatedly refused to rule it out.

It's an awful idea. For one thing, a Giuliani third term is illegal at the moment — and the city is scheduled to choose his successor Nov. 6. To squeeze Giuliani onto the general-election ballot — long after all deadlines have passed — would demand some heavy-duty legal legerdemain.

And if he won, could he serve? Only if the State Legislature or New York City Council — or maybe both — abruptly overturned term limits.

None of this is likely.

Yet, as this crazy scenario plays itself out, Giuliani blows all other actors off the stage. He's like John Wayne in a scene with Wally Cox or Don Knotts. Nevertheless, the city needs to focus now on Ferrer and Green and Bloomberg. In this context, Rudy's ambitions are a distraction.

The city's mayoral candidates — those running legally — may not be men of heroic stature. But they're the only legitimate candidates we have at the moment. Not only is Rudy's scenario dubious, it's a little hare-brained. If New York City wanted to keep Rudy around for four more years, or eight more years or forever for that matter — it should have thought about that issue earlier.

The city missed its chance. So if some guy comes up to you at a subway stop and says his name is Green or Ferrer or Bloomberg, listen to him. He could probably use an attentive audience.

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