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THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2001

Political Memo

Heated Race Revisited, Amid Claims Of Racism

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

Four days after the polls closed for the final time on the extended Democratic mayoral primary in New York, relations between Mark Green and Fernando Ferrer were more antagonistic yesterday than during the campaign itself, in a lingering and perhaps, for Mr. Green, debilitating dispute over racial politics in the city.

Mr. Ferrer's chief adviser, Roberto Ramirez, yesterday lodged a complaint with the Democratic national chairman, Terry McAuliffe, about his contention that Mr. Green had run a racially charged and unfairly harsh campaign.

Another Ferrer adviser, Representative Charles Rangel, met conspicuously with the Republican mayoral candidate, Michael R. Bloomberg, and then held a news conference to offer warm words for Mr. Bloomberg, while lamenting the "the racist calls that were made, the racist cartoons that were sent."

As of yesterday evening, Mr. Ferrer had still not returned the call Mr. Green had placed to him the day after last Thursday's vote. By Sunday, Mr. Ferrer had withdrawn the concession he had made on Thursday, releasing a statement that criticized Mr. Green's campaign tactics and took note of confusion about the vote tally.

To buttress his complaint about Mr. Green, Mr. Ramirez yesterday pointed to leaflets distributed and telephone calls made in white neighborhoods that warned, in ominous and pejorative terms, that Mr. Ferrer would be a tool of one of his key supporters, the Rev. Al Sharpton. And he suggested that a harshly negative advertisement that Mr. Green ran questioning Mr. Ferrer's competency, and asking, "Can we afford to take a chance?" was a coded racial appeal.

"The use of race is the issue here: the issue of race when the state and city are going through a crisis," Mr. Ramirez said yesterday after his meeting with Mr. McAuliffe. "The issue is not per se negative campaigning."

"It is wrong and it should not be tolerated," he said. "And I don't think that anybody in this city — citywide elected officials — understands the level of anger and annoyance that exists."

Mr. Green's advisers strongly denied that the Green campaign was behind either the literature or the telephone calls, though such last-minute, under-the-radar-screen campaign communications are notoriously difficulty to track. They defended the advertisement that Mr. Ferrer objected to by saying it was simply a comparison of the two candidates' qualifications. And they noted that Mr. Ferrer and his supporters had explicitly appealed for black and Latino votes during the course of the campaign.

"I don't know how many times we have to say we had nothing to do with these things," said Joe DePlasco, Mr. Green's campaign spokesman, when questioned about the telephone calls and leaflets. "We ran a campaign of contrasts. Mark went to every community and focused on the most critical issues that are before this city."

In truth, race has been a constant pres-

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Charges of Racism as Election Is Revisited

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ence in this campaign, a force that has been used by both sides, sometimes gently and sometimes not.

If Mr. Green took steps in these final days to in effect drive out white voters who had not been excited about his campaign — "when Green was flagging, they made a very conscious effort to pump up turnout in white ethnic areas for Green," said Mr. Ferrer's consultant, David Axelrod — it was in part because of Mr. Ferrer's success, with Mr. Sharpton's help, in nailing down the support of so many black and Latino Democrats.

"Both sides played the race card," said one of Mr. Ferrer's most prominent supporters, adding: "Freddy played it first."

It is often difficult to draw a line between what might be viewed as racially exploitive and the more acceptable appeal by a candidate for support from his own ethnic group, be it Mr. Ferrer with Hispanics today or Abraham Beame with Jewish voters 30 years ago.

For example, Mr. Ramirez objected to a poster that supporters of Mr. Green distributed in Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn describing Mr. Green as "the only candidate that will look out for our interests." But earlier this year, Mr. Rangel made a radio advertisement on behalf of Mr. Ferrer in which he said the candidate understands "our problems."

The television advertisement that upset Mr. Ferrer was an example of something that inspired vastly different interpretations. Mr. Axelrod, a former newspaper reporter, described it as a casebook example of how a white candidate undercuts a black opponent among white voters.

"I've covered and I've participated in over 20 urban political campaigns in which minority races were running — invariably, in the end, somebody says, 'Can we afford to take a chance?' " Mr. Axelrod said.

But Mr. Green's advisers responded that the ad used newspaper clippings and Mr. Ferrer's statements to raise questions about his competence to lead New York through the difficult years ahead — and even some of Mr. Ferrer's supporters declined to criticize the advertisement.

"I think that ad is defensible," said Edward I. Koch, one of Mr. Ferrer's most prominent supporters. By contrast, Mr. Koch said the last-minute flood of leaflets and telephone calls represented "a racist campaign."

For example, a Ferrer supporter reported getting a telephone call in which a woman said: "Stop Al Sharpton. Sharpton cannot be given the keys to City Hall." A leaflet, that included a demeaning New York Post cartoon of Mr. Ferrer and Mr. Sharpton, urged voters to turn out or "Al Sharpton will be our next mayor."

Telephone banks are expensive to run, and Mr. Ferrer's advisers expressed skepticism at the Green camp's contention that it had nothing to do with the calls. Other Democrats suggested that if it were not the Green camp, it was a Democratic club with ties to the Green campaign.

Finally, the central point of dispute is, as always, Mr. Sharpton. Ferrer's advisers recognized the risk of aligning the candidate too closely to Mr. Sharpton: both because he is a racially polarizing figure, but also because of his identification with a series of high-profile incidents that hurt his standing with white voters.

It is hardly unusual for a candidate to try to discredit an opponent by attacking a supporter. Mr. Ferrer harshly attacked William J. Bratton, the former police commissioner who is one of Mr. Green's top supporters, for supporting policing policies that were unpopular in some minority neighborhoods.

Mr. Ferrer's advisers stopped short of saying that Mr. Sharpton was not fair game. But they argued that the Bratton and Sharpton cases were different, and that the attack on Mr. Sharpton was racially motivated, because it was made only to a white audience. Mr. Ferrer made his attack on Mr. Bratton in an interview with citywide newspapers and televisions — launched, as it turned out, as he marched in the West Indian American Day Carnival Parade, the largest gathering of the year of black New Yorkers.

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