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# As Time Runs Low, Bloomberg Runs Rough

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

Hemmed in by an unusually brief campaign season and his own lack of experience in politics, Michael R. Bloomberg is encountering repeated difficulties as he moves into the final phase of his mayoral campaign, struggling to engage an increasingly confident and politically aloof Mark Green.

In the course of a week, Mr. Bloomberg has tried three separate attacks against his Democratic opponent, at a time when aides to both candidates say their private polls show Mr. Green with a substantial lead. Mr. Bloomberg's campaign has been diverted by distractions arguably of its own making, most recently when it struggled to reconcile conflicting explanations from the candidate and his aides about his business dealings in South Africa. And he continues to be less than sure-footed as he travels the city, in a way that has stirred concern among some fellow Republicans because media attention to his campaign has been increasing in recent days.

At a news conference yesterday in which Mr. Bloomberg was endorsed by Gov. George E. Pataki, Mr. Bloomberg first criticized Mr. Green for being too liberal, and then a moment later responded to a question by declaring, "I am a liberal, yes."

Mr. Pataki — a self-described doctrinaire conservative who defeated Mario M. Cuomo in 1993 by hammering him as a "liberal" — stared in astonishment into space.

The perception that Mr. Bloomberg is having trouble has encouraged Mr. Green to make his own strategic change over the past few days. He has returned to the unadventurous campaign course he followed for most of the primary season, offering either familiar or uncontroversial campaign proposals while trying to avoid the last-minute mistakes that might turn what he sees as the tide of an election breaking his way.

If there are any attacks to be made, they

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will be pressed mainly by surrogates, as when he dispatched William J. Bratton, the former police commissioner, to go after Mr. Bloomberg's public safety credentials. And after a primary campaign in which he boasted about the number of times he had shared a stage with his Democratic rivals, Mr. Green has agreed to only two debates with Mr. Bloomberg.

At a news conference at Union Square Park yesterday, Mr. Green listened patiently as reporters pressed him to respond to a charge by Mr. Bloomberg's senior aide that he was a Stalin apologist, and another by Mr. Bloomberg that Mr. Green had played the "race card" by raising the issue of apartheid.

"I don't really have to respond to him," Mr. Green said. "Today I am focused on the three large goals of rebuilding the economy, enhancing security and educating our children."

Mr. Bloomberg's advisers contend that he is presenting a strong case against Mr. Green, particularly in television advertisements, and that these episodes are not a meaningful distraction from his candidacy. A number of polls suggest that support for Mr. Green is not particularly deep, meaning that a hard-hitting week of TV ads could turn the tables.

Nonetheless, some Republicans expressed distress at the way Mr. Bloomberg's campaign has progressed recently. They said it underlined their concern that Mr. Bloomberg today, like Rudolph W. Giuliani the first time he ran for mayor, was not prepared for the peculiar difficulties that come with running for office in New York. And some Republicans said they were starting to worry about his prospects.

"It's the syndrome of a first-time candidate," said Nelson Warfield, a conservative Republican consultant with ties to New York, "and it's the syndrome of a candidate who before the race really didn't have any political beliefs. What he should do is stay inside the edit suite where the people are putting together the ads so they can change what he says before people hear him."

As it is, Mr. Bloomberg faces difficulty in trying to win an election in a city where Democrats outnumber Republicans by better than five to one. His task is complicated by the fact that he has less than three weeks to make his case against Mr. Green, in a general election season cut short because the Sept. 11 terrorist attack in New York forced a two-week delay in the primaries. And he is competing for attention with world events, not to mention the prospect of the Yankees' winning the World Series again.

The shorter campaign season means that Mr. Bloomberg has less time to turn public discussion away from unwelcome subjects — like apartheid and Stalin — to issues that seem more likely to hold sway with New York voters.

It also means that he has less time to find an effective message against Mr. Green. As a rule, in politics, candidates try to figure out their most effective line of attack and stick to it.

Mr. Bloomberg's initial argument against Mr. Green was that New York needed a business leader rather than a professional politician to guide it through the tough years ahead. Then he sought to undercut Mr. Green's support among black and Hispanic voters by contending that he had run a racially divisive primary campaign against Fernando Ferrer. Yesterday, he moved to attack Mr. Green as too liberal for New York.

Mr. Bloomberg has hired some of the most experienced political professionals in the country, led by David Garth, a longtime expert in New York politics. (Mr. Garth has not returned telephone calls in recent days seeking comment about the state of his client's campaign.)

But for all that expertise, he has encountered logistical difficulties that are typical of less experienced campaigns. And he has found himself overshadowed by his own senior adviser, William Cunningham.

At a breakfast of business and civic leaders sponsored by Crain's, where Mr. Green was speaking earlier this week, Mr. Cunningham showed up and paced back and forth along the wall, staring intensely at Mr. Green. When Mr. Green jocularly said he did not want to do anything that might make him "look arrogant," Mr. Cunningham said loudly from across the hall, "Too late."

And it was Mr. Cunningham who suggested, based on an academic and generally unremarkable passage Mr. Green wrote about 20 years ago regarding Stalin's rule, that the Democratic candidate was sympathetic to Stalin. While many of Mr. Bloomberg's other advisers dismissed Mr. Cunningham's remark as absurd, it was potentially problematic for Mr. Bloomberg because, given its hyperbole, the remark made it harder for him to get his point across: that Mr. Green was too liberal to be mayor of New York.



James Estrin/The New York Times

*Mark Green held a news conference in Union Square yesterday with Betsy Gotbaum and William Thompson.*

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