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Green Ahead in Overshadowed Mayoral Race

Whoever Wins, 'Very Tough Time' Awaits Giuliani's Successor, New Yorkers Say

By Ben White
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Nov. 1—Five days from now, this city will elect its next mayor. Not that anyone would know it walking the streets. Campaign posters are few and residents have plenty of other things on their minds, from frightening anthrax cases and vague warnings of further terrorist mayhem to the Yankees' stirring World Series comeback.

So it appears Public Advocate Mark Green—who holds a solid, though perhaps narrowing, lead over Democrat-turned-Republican businessman Michael Bloomberg—will claim Gracie Mansion with little fanfare.

But while New Yorkers may be shrugging off the campaign finale, the outcome is far from insignificant: The next mayor will inherit the massive rebuilding effort in Lower Manhattan, a looming budget crisis and a school system that continues to struggle.

"Whoever gets the job," Manhattan resident Mary Imperato said one recent afternoon in Greenwich Village, "is going to have a very tough time."

Should Green, 56, maintain his lead and defeat Bloomberg, who has spent more than $40 million of his immense fortune saturating city airwaves with ads but has made a virtually commensurate number of verbal missteps, New York will wake up in January to find itself governed by a man who entered politics as the trusted, corporate-bashing sidekick of consumer advocate Ralph Nader and whose efforts to rally congressional interns against the Vietnam War got the intern program shut down for three years.

But those days are long gone. The brainy Harvard Law School graduate and onetime co-host of CNN's "Crossfire" ran to the right in the Democratic primary and even now occasionally winds up to the right of Bloomberg on city budget issues. Green has promised to keep taxes down to spur business growth, to hold bad teachers accountable and to maintain Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's approach to crime fighting (even though as public advocate he hounded the GOP mayor relentlessly over police brutality). Giuliani is barred by law from seeking a third consecutive term.

On social issues, Green hews tightly to the left, a necessity in New York politics. He supports gay marriage, for instance, and strongly backs abortion rights. But on most municipal matters, he has vowed to continue the Giuliani legacy. He secured the endorsement of William Bratton, Giuliani's former police commissioner, inoculating himself from charges of being soft on crime. He supports reforming welfare and abolishing parole. And today Green appeared side by side with former president Bill Clinton, whom he once advised.

"We were young men together in public service," Clinton said this afternoon, outside the Spoonbread Too restaurant in Harlem. (Clinton had chicken and ribs; Green a jerk chicken platter.) "He's got a good program on the economy, on security, and I especially like a lot of his proposals on education, particularly the expansion of after-school programs along with smaller classes for children in the early grades."

And to the extent they think of him at all—interviews around town suggest a basic familiarity with Green but little affection for him—members of corporate New York do not appear to fear that Green will take the city on a nightmare ride back to the bad old days of the 1970s by dramatically boosting public spending or radically raising taxes.



By Doug Mills—Agence France-Presse

Former president Bill Clinton campaigns in New York with Democratic mayoral candidate Mark Green, center. Green is running against Republican candidate Michael Bloomberg to succeed Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

"Obviously there is some sadness associated with Giuliani leaving," said Michael Lemberg, a 29-year-old telecom executive in Manhattan. "And we hope he'll be back in 2005. But Green certainly doesn't appear to be a real tree-hugging liberal."

Fred Siegel, a senior fellow at the Progressive Policy Institute, a moderate think tank, said many in New York's financial elite are, in fact, somewhat nervous about a Green mayoralty. Not because they fear the public advocate's policies, he said, but because they don't like his manner, which can suggest a smug self-satisfaction.

"People have long memories of Green as the perpetual smart [guy]," Siegel said. "What real estate and financial people are wondering is, 'Can I sit across the table from this guy? Can we talk?' . . . The trouble with Green is he always thinks he's smarter than you, and he lets you know it right away."

In addition to New York's tendency to elect Democrats, Green also appears to be getting something of a boost, if it can be called that, from the Sept. 11 attacks. The city faced diminishing tax revenues before the attacks and now has even bigger problems that will require a great deal of political skill to keep state and federal funds flowing into the city.

"You are going to have a heck of a lot less money coming in, and you're going to have to negotiate a great deal with Albany and Washington," said Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute. Carroll noted that Green scores far higher in polls than Bloomberg, 59, on political experience, a factor perhaps made more important by the attacks.

But while Green has held a steady lead over Bloomberg since defeating Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer in the Democratic primary runoff last month, there are indications that Bloomberg's campaign ads are taking a toll on Green.

Imperato, the Manhattan resident who suggested that whoever wins would have a hard time, said she decided to vote for the Republican because, as a businessman, he could create new jobs (a constant theme of Bloomberg's ads) and because Green was "arrogant" in saying that he could have done as good a job, or better, than Giuliani has in helping New York rebound—the subject of a stinging Bloomberg attack spot.

Still, voters here remain preoccupied with the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks. Brooklynite Tessy Eroa, a hotel and restaurant management student, summed up the collective consciousness. "There is just a lot of confusion right now," she said, taking a break from studying. "It's very difficult to concentrate on this race and make it any kind of a priority."

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