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An Election In a Shadow

Attempting to Follow An Outsized Giuliani

By DAN BARRY

News Analysis

It was a mayoral election unlike any other, following a mayoralty unlike any other. Rising above the campaign's many extraordinary developments, from the race-tinted schism within the Democratic Party to the voters' acceptance of an expensive candidacy by a wealthy political neophyte, was the specter of the man who went before.

He is a daunting figure, so celebrated he is known everywhere by his first name alone: Rudy. Rudolph W. Giuliani practically willed a drop in crime, gloried in a surging economy, alienated minorities, struggled through public moments of personal drama — and seared himself into the collective memory of a metropolis.

But just when the city seemed ready to trust itself without him, the terrorist attack of Sept. 11 blew a deadly hole through Lower Manhattan. And Mr. Giuliani's reassuring calm in great crisis transformed him into a civic saint, his strengths magnified, his weaknesses forgotten.

These dynamics set the stage for yesterday's critical event in city history, leaving these central questions:

Will the new mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, wither in the considerable shadow cast by Mr. Giuliani? Or will he figure out a way to lead, to manage, to be judged on his own terms?

The question of leadership ended

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up looming over all other issues in the campaign, making otherwise well-qualified candidates appear diminished. "The election changed on Sept. 11, and suddenly the No. 1 issue became leadership," said Ross Sandler, the director of the Center for New York City Law at New York Law School. "We suddenly saw how critical a single leader was in a time of crisis."

The times of crisis that lie ahead will certainly provide a thorough test of Mr. Bloomberg's ability to lead. The problems that faced the city before the attack on the World Trade Center are now intermingled with the breathtaking challenges created by the terrorist attack that destroyed the World Trade Center: the problem-plagued school system; the anthrax scare; the lack of affordable housing; the delicate cleanup and rebuilding of the city's devastated financial center.

Mr. Bloomberg may well find himself dealing in the morning with the complications of a deficit in the city's $40 billion budget, and in the afternoon with the needs of a constituency still traumatized by the terrorist attack. All the while, there will be the ghost of Mr. Giuliani by his side, available for constant comparison.

Indeed, it was Mr. Giuliani's endorsement less than two weeks ago that gave Mr. Bloomberg, the Republican candidate, a well-timed boost over his Democratic opponent, Mark Green, who during the campaign had the gall to suggest that he would have handled things even better than the man called Rudy. It was as though Mr. Bloomberg had been named star pupil, and Mr. Green commanded to wash his mouth out with soap.

But some see the potential for Mr. Giuliani's successor to overcome that ghost, to out-Rudy Rudy. Elliott Sclar, a professor of urban planning at Columbia University, said that coalition building among the city's ethnic groups and grass-roots organizations — never one of Mr. Giuliani's strengths — was essential in addressing a budget deficit that could reach $5 billion by 2003.

"With a shrinking pie," he said, "everyone is going to have to sign onto the fairness of what happens."

Mr. Sclar also said that the next mayor should also see himself as the leader of a much larger region. Mr. Giuliani reveled in contentious quarrels with the elected leaders of New Jersey and New York State, he said. "But the mayor of New York can catalyze the concerns of regional development," he said.

It is a vital concern, Mr. Sclar said, given that the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey owns the World Trade Center site, whose redevelopment is one of the new mayor's foremost concerns. "Remember that old song?" he asked. "'How Do You Get Them Back to Lower Manhattan Once They've Seen Hoboken?'"

These challenges will unfold against backdrops that may seem familiar — from City Hall to Gracie Mansion — but that in truth have been transformed by term limits and the travails of the recent mayoral campaign. When he assumes office on Jan. 1, Mr. Bloomberg will quickly be reminded why his new job is often called the second-most difficult in the world. Beyond the immediate deadlines prescribed by the City Charter — offices to fill, budget reports to make — he will find that he is not the only freshman at the learning institution of City Hall.

Thanks to term limits, two-thirds of the City Council membership will be new, all wondering whom to back for the powerful position of speaker. The veteran at that job, Peter F. Vallone, will be gone, and with him the ability to deliver Council majorities on votes dear to the mayor's heart.

"Will it mean more freelancers?" asked Jerry Skurnik, a political consultant. "Will it mean more of a role for Democratic county leaders? Those are the interesting questions."

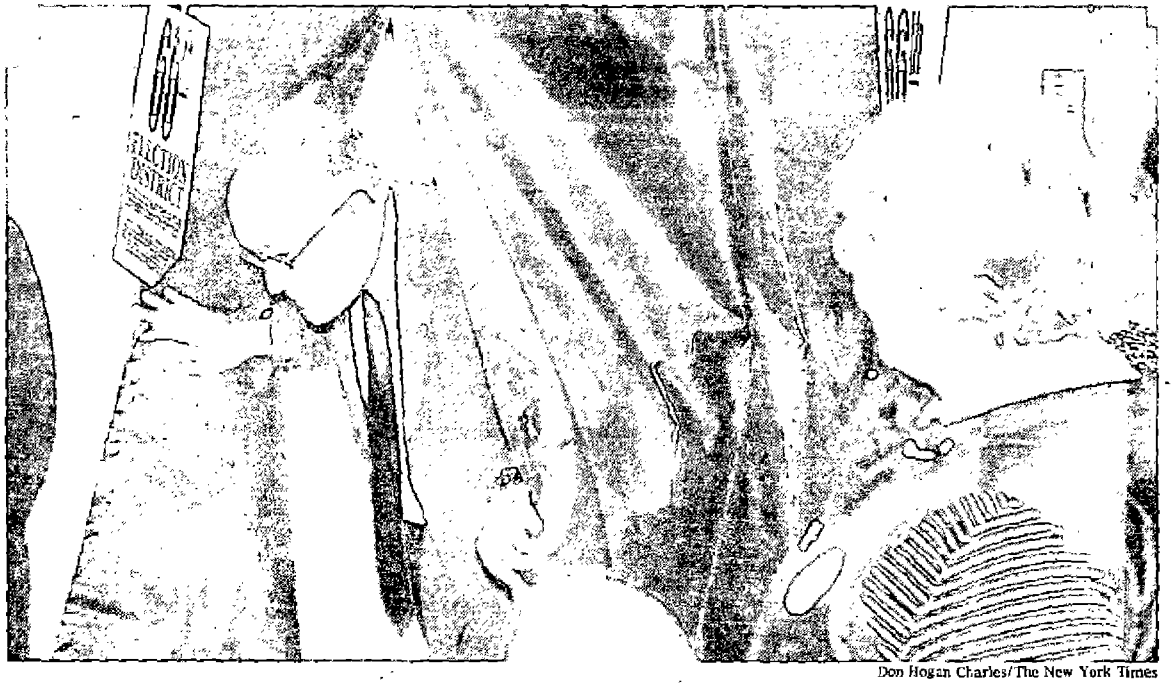
But there seems no end to the interesting questions raised by this campaign. For example, what does yesterday's election say about that city monolith, the Democratic Party?

With the notable exceptions of Fiorello H. LaGuardia, John V. Lindsay and Mr. Giuliani, the surest way to become mayor of New York was to win the Democratic nomination. But by the end of yesterday's contest, it appeared that another New York political truism had been proven false.

The city remains 5-to-1 Democratic by registration, and its voters seem as likely as ever to vote Democratic when choosing whom to send to the White House or to Congress. But when the election centers on the control of City Hall, the city's Democrats are clearly finding it easier to vote for Republicans than their parents did — assuming, of course, that their parents lived and voted in this demographic kaleidoscope of a city.

"This is the third straight election where partisanship hasn't meant very much," said David Axelrod, the Democratic consultant who worked for Fernando Ferrer, the Bronx Democrat who lost the nomination to Mr. Green. "One thing is clear: whatever the outcome is, a large number of Democrats are going to vote on another line."

Mr. Axelrod's prediction certainly proved to be prescient late last night. In a predominantly Democratic city,



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who backed Michael R. Bloomberg in the mayoral race, voted yesterday.

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a Republican candidate with no prior public service had blown the city's Democratic establishment away. Mr. Bloomberg's victory means at least three successive terms of a Republican City Hall.

Political analysts say that Mr. Green played it safe and smug for a dangerously long time. But they also say that the Democratic Party — the party of Tammany, of unions, of minorities — buckled under interfamilial squabbles that were colored by, of all things, race.

The efforts by some Green supporters to torpedo Mr. Ferrer's hopes of becoming the city's first Puerto Rican mayor by linking him to the Rev. Al Sharpton marked the final moments of the Democratic primary in late September. Resentment over the gambit, which Mr. Green adamantly disavowed, clearly still lingers.

Also eating into Mr. Green's once-substantial lead were the truckloads of money that Mr. Bloomberg dumped into in his own campaign — well in excess of $50 million, according to some estimates.

Beyond the resonance of Mr. Bloomberg's television commercials, his victory indicates a city where voters no longer dismiss a candidacy based at least in part on a candidate's wealth, as many of them did in the losing mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns of Ronald S. Lauder and Lewis E. Lehrman. In doing so, the voters of New York join a national trend, seen in New Jersey and California, among other states, of becoming inured to the unlimited use of personal fortunes to finance political campaigns.

In different times and circumstances, the next billionaire novice may not fare so well, and the Democratic Party may heal its wounds. But at this moment in the city's history, it seems that party affiliations matter less, and leadership abilities matter more. Mr. Bloomberg will be charged with the responsibility of nursing a wounded city back to health, and for that honor, has said he will decline the $195,000-a-year salary.

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