NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Bloomberg, as Third Choice, Was a Charm



Ed Koch

WHEN I first discussed Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg's candidacy with him over lunch at the Four Seasons in the early spring, I told him I didn't think he could win.

I said that New Yorkers elect a Republican once every 30 years — Fiorello LaGuardia, John Lindsay, Rudolph Giuliani — but never back to back. Months later, when Bloomberg and I again discussed his candidacy, I told him I thought he now had a chance. Why? Because of the probable Democratic opponents he would face in the general election.

At the time, I was supporting Council Speaker Peter Vallone in the Democratic primary. While the most knowledgeable candidate on city government, he had no charisma. I told him to find a store that sells charisma and buy some. When Vallone lost the primary, I planned to remain neutral in the runoff between Fernando Ferrer and Mark Green.

But then Mayor Giuliani demanded a three-month extension of his term to April 2002 — threatening that, if the candidates did not agree, he would seek legislation to repeal term limits and run for a full term against them. Green capitulated to his demand; Ferrer commendably did not. I decided I could not remain neutral and offered to help Ferrer.

Ferrer won the top spot in the Democratic primary, but lost the runoff to Green, whose supporters used racial innuendo in campaign posters, fliers and telephone calls, making the Rev. Al Sharpton's support of Ferrer the issue in order to scare white voters. Green supporters also used a vicious racist New York Post cartoon that can only be described as surpassing in vileness the Willie Horton ad used against Michael Dukakis.

When Green was asked to sever his ties with the four staff members present when the low blow was planned at a Brooklyn campaign strategy meeting, he declined. I thought he had made a terrible, irreversible error and indeed he had.

From that moment, Green lost the support of Ferrer, who represented the aspirations of Hispanics citywide; also that of Roberto Ramirez, Bronx County leader, who felt betrayed; and of Sharpton, who would have a major impact on black voters in the city.

When Ferrer lost, I decided that I would vote for Bloomberg. I concluded that his grasp of the formidable challenges facing the city and his private sector entrepreneurial philosophy would be far more beneficial than Green's governmental approach to our increasing economic problems. Bloomberg called and asked me to help. At the time of his call, he was down 15 points. I told him I did not plan on taking an active role in the campaign, but I also told him to stay in touch.

I was called about a week later and again asked to help. Now, it was clear that Green's campaign was hemorrhaging. Bloomberg was then down four points. I concluded he had a chance to win, and any efforts by me or others such as former Gov. Hugh Carey could make the difference, adding weight to the tremendous impact of Giuliani's endorsement of Bloomberg. And so I entered the campaign.

I knew last Saturday night that Bloomberg would win. A cab stopped at a red light next to my car. The driver yelled, "Mr. Mayor, you were right to support Bloomberg, and I'm voting for him." The passengers in his cab said, "And so are we."

My hope is Bloomberg will achieve for the city what he achieved for himself: a major economic miracle.

So what did Green in? The decisive factors include Bloomberg's success in establishing his many credentials through his commercials, mailings and electronic telephone messages, spending a fortune of his own money to accomplish that goal. Green's personality contributed enormously to his defeat. He came across to many as pompous, arrogant and, my word, "obnoxious." And his insensitivity to the feelings of Hispanics and blacks who were the backbone of his original support was a major factor.

An additional, last-minute reason for his defeat was his outrageous commercial in which he had Bloomberg — who expressly denied it — saying to a pregnant employee, "Kill it; kill it."

Friends and foes alike — some joshing, others not — sought to denigrate my endorsements by pointing out that, before the election was over, I had supported three different candidates. My reply is: "My mother always told me, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again.' " In baseball, .333 can get you into the Hall of Fame.

NEWSDAY, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2001

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