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Prez in town for Sept. 11 memorial

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As New York emotionally marked two months since terror struck, Mayor Giuliani welcomed President Bush back yesterday by saying the Big Apple loves him — even if it sure didn't seem that way in the 2000 election.

"This city — that didn't vote for you — is in love with you, and we think you're doing an absolutely great job," Giuliani told Bush at a Veterans Day breakfast with Gov. Pataki and Mayor-elect Mike Bloomberg.

It was a day of shifting emotions for Bush — from smiles to vows of victory and then almost tears — as he went back to the scene of terror for a U.N. memorial service to honor the dead where acrid smoke still rises from the rubble of the Twin Towers.

It was Bush's fourth visit to New York since the tragedy but his first to ground zero since three days after the attacks, when he sent a message around the world, climbing atop a crushed firetruck to tell weary rescue workers: "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you — and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."

Since then he has been back to speak to schoolkids and eat pizza (he brought it) with Chinatown's Engine Co. 55, which lost four firefighters, and then again to throw a perfect strike for the opening pitch of Game 3 of the World Series at Yankee Stadium.

"You get the feeling that the more time [Bush] spends here, the more committed he is to New York," Bloomberg remarked.

Until the tragedy, the president all but ignored New York — it was the 31st state he visited after taking office. He made his first presidential trip here last June.

At breakfast yesterday, Bush hailed America's troops fighting the war against terror and vowed that they — like the veterans of past wars in attendance — are going into battle "not to conquer, but to liberate; not to terrorize but to help."

He pledged: "For however long it takes, I am determined that we will prevail. And prevail we must, because we fight for one thing — and that is the freedom of our people and the freedom of people everywhere."

And, on a lighter note, he quipped that "Rudy" is now a household word even in the tiny town of Crawford, Texas, where the president has his ranch.

At ground zero, Bush stood with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to listen as actor Ron Silver solemnly listed the 86 nations, from Antigua to Zimbabwe, that lost people in the attack while an honor guard carried each flag forward.

Bush, his eyes red and watery with tears or from the smoke, walked to a wall listing the names of the nations and, next to the United States, he wrote: "Good will triumph over evil. May God bless all of us. George W. Bush."

On the same wall, Annan dropped a word when he wrote: "Let's together against evil."

Three red cranes framed the scene, and one proudly flew an American flag discolored by soot from the tragedy.

When he spoke to the U.N. on Saturday, Bush warned that terrorists intend to use nuclear weapons "to turn their hatred into holocaust," reminded the world of the mass grave that once was the Twin Towers, and warned that any nation refusing to fight terror will pay a price.

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