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NEW YORK POST, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2001

Mike's First Misstep

Rookie is sending signals that will haunt him later



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Just nine days into his mayoralty back in 1994, an incident let Rudy Giuliani send an important signal to New Yorkers about the direction his administration was headed.

Responding to an emergency call at the Nation of Islam's 125th Street march, police were met by local worshipers — who not only resisted, pummeling eight cops, but also managed to steal an injured officer's service revolver.

The usual suspects were quick to denounce the NYPD and the new mayor for their "fascist" behavior and demanded an immediate sit-down at City Hall.

Giuliani's reply: No dice.

His critics, Rudy said, "are going to learn how to discipline themselves in the way in which they speak."

Many of those critics never learned that demagogy and meaningful political discourse don't mix — so they found themselves on the outs at City Hall for the next eight years.

Giuliani was regularly excoriated for not reaching out to them. But he'd understood the symbolism of the incident, which many speculated was a set-up designed to force just such a public confrontation with Giuliani — in hopes of seeing him cave to their demands.

Last week, in his first public act as mayor-elect, Michael Bloomberg spent several days reaching out to many of those who'd been frozen out of City Hall for so long.

■ He made a point of being photographed shaking hands with Al Sharpton and announced that racial profiling — whether or not it's a real problem — has to be addressed and will be one of his top priorities.

■ He sat down with top union leaders who've been railing at Rudy for years.

■ And, in his first appointments, he's moved not to retain Giuliani staffers but reached back to the Dinkins administration.

Pretty strange behavior for someone who owes his election entirely to being Giuliani's hand-picked successor.

Not to mention someone who pledged, post-election, that he would "rely on Rudy Giuliani for virtually everything except my golf game."

Bloomberg's initial actions only serve to underscore how little New Yorkers know about him.

We don't really know what he stands for on specifically New York issues. (He's a left-wing Democrat on national social issues and says he'll "try to convince others of the error of their ways if they disagree.") We don't know, for the most part, his prescriptions for the financial ills soon to hit this city like an avalanche.

On "Meet the Press" on Sunday, Bloomberg said he generally wants to "find something in the middle that satisfied most and be as unobtrusive as possible to the extremes."

Makes sense — on Neptune, maybe. But this is the real world.

What's really distressing is the possibility that Bloomberg *himself* doesn't really know what he stands for and what he plans to do. You sometimes get the feeling that Bloomberg himself is as surprised as everyone else that he's now mayor-elect.

That may explain why he's reaching out to everyone imaginable. He comes into office with no identifiable base of political support — indeed, he's like the new corporate exec who was hired, with no careful look at his resume, simply because the current CEO said, "Hire that man."

But just like that new exec, he needs to be careful about the signals he's sending.



The mayor-elect with Al Sharpton last week. Robert Miller

Giuliani knew precisely what message he was sending with his reaction to the mosque incident. Does Bloomberg realize what reaching out to Al Sharpton — who's never shown any interest in real dialogue and problem-solving — means?

Hopefully, Bloomberg will eventually grow into the job he sought but probably never really thought he'd achieve. But time is a luxury he can't currently afford. For now, however, he sounds suspiciously like Robert Redford at the end of the movie "The Candidate": Having just won an election he was supposed to lose, Redford turns to his campaign manager and asks, "Now what do we do?"

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