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JOYCE PURNICK
Metro Matters

Bloomberg: A Private Man In a Public Job

THIS should be interesting. Seems New York is about to have a mayor who insists on his privacy.

Would that Michael R. Bloomberg could have his way. Would that mayors just ran things, were diligent city managers instead of urban royalty.

Think of it. New Yorkers could ignore a mayor's foreign policy, let him fly off to the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Israel (Ireland, Haiti and Italy next?), without the dutiful press corps tagging along to record all those unavoidable photo ops.

New Yorkers could say sorry, not relevant, when mayors expound on baseball, the opera, the death penalty, exhibits at the Brooklyn Museum of Art or anything else that is not their direct responsibility. The public could say feel free to keep your opinions to yourself, your honor. Do, please, keep them private.

Sure. And the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree will go dark on Dec. 25 and no one will come to Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Mr. Bloomberg, welcome to reality, where mayors of New York are the center of attention, symbols of an absurdly large town that demands a focus, someone to bring and hold it together.

If that idea needed confirmation, it sure got it this fall. Imagine beleaguered New York after Sept. 11 without Mayor Giuliani's reassuring leadership. The role fit him, glovelike, because of his years of aggressive governance, his omnipresence at everything from Yankee games to official funerals, his assertion of provocative opinions that impelled more than a few prayers for silence.

Here, then, is the central question, Mr. Bloomberg:

If a mayor of New York conducts himself like a businessman by doing what he likes when he likes; if he flies off on his private jet without telling the public; if his spokesman tells reporters "We're not discussing his private schedule" when asked if the future mayor went to Bermuda for the weekend; and if the future mayor himself refuses to answer that question, what happens in the next crisis? How does the mayor establish the credibility to lead people

'As mayor, you are owned by the whole city,' one skeptic says.

through the dark days if they don't know his moods and tastes in normal times?

"We require oversized figures to govern an oversized city," said Fred Siegel, a history professor at Cooper Union. "If a mayor doesn't build up his standing by being a player in public life, when the crisis comes, he doesn't have a reserve to draw on."

MR. BLOOMBERG, not mayor yet, seems determined to shield himself after he is inaugurated, saying just this week, "My personal life is my personal life."

That it is. Mr. Bloomberg is fully entitled to keep aspects of his life off limits. But he will inevitably find that the lines between private and public blur, in part because of the standards his predecessors set.

In 1989 and 1993, David N. Dinkins and Rudolph W. Giuliani each took vacations in Puerto Rico as mayors-elect, reporters in tow. Mayor Edward I. Koch invited constant coverage and was so free with his opinions that a reporter once asked him in jest to name his favorite color. Blue.

Mr. Giuliani was misleading about weekend destinations when he was visiting with Judith Nathan, but once the relationship was known, he shared more than most reporters dared to ask about his life and health. It was a bit uncomfortable to listen, but his candor probably served him and the city well when he needed the public's trust after Sept. 11.

"The doings of a mayor, it's like glue, it puts some order into chaos," said Gene Russianoff, a senior lawyer with the New York Public Interest Research Group. "I have a tremendous amount of sympathy for a public official, especially one who appears to be a very social person. But as mayor, you are owned by the whole city. You are like the Brooklyn Bridge." Mr. Bloomberg is being unrealistic, he suggested: "I feel bad for him, but you know what? Then he shouldn't have run for mayor."

Which brings to mind *how* Mr. Bloomberg ran for office — behind a veil of $69 million. "He was shielded by a wall of money and advisers and 9/11 from the scrutiny that mayoral candidates ordinarily get," Mr. Siegel of Cooper Union said. "That leaves us utterly mystified as to how he will govern. It's not just his private life, but his public policy decisions."

The mayor-elect still lacks a public identity. He won't get one if, after his inauguration, he continues to place himself off limits, avoids daily encounters with reporters as he now contemplates, and nips off to Bermuda but refuses to fess up, even as he sports an unmistakable December tan.

Yes. This should be interesting.

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