

No "political core": the collapse of New York Mayor Giuliani's Senate race

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The withdrawal of Rudolph Giuliani from the New York Senate race is one of those events that, while having limited intrinsic significance, nonetheless says a great deal about the state of political life and the character of the principal actors in both major parties in the US today.

"I used to think the core of me was in politics, probably. It isn't.... When you feel your mortality and your humanity you realize... that the core of you is first of all being able to take care of your health."

With these words, Giuliani, New York City's right-wing mayor and standard-bearer of the Republican Party, bowed out of this year's most publicized electoral contest.

Being diagnosed with prostate cancer, the mayor told a packed press conference at City Hall, made you "confront your mortality." He continued: "You realize you're not a superman, and you're just a human being."

For the last month, New Yorkers have been a captive audience to Giuliani's discovery of his "humanity," as the mayor played shamelessly to a media frenzy driven by a soap opera-style combination of sexual indiscretion, disease and fame.

While the mayor insists he decided to drop out of the Senate contest with First Lady Hillary Clinton because of his health, some City Hall insiders claim the real reason is complications in his personal life, following his announcement to the press that he is seeking a legal separation from his wife (something that came as news to her) and his flaunting of a relationship with an Upper East Side Manhattan divorcee whom he describes as his "very good friend."

As one source close to the mayor put it, "He ended up as the Duke of Windsor, giving it all up for the woman he loves." Few have noted that Giuliani's withdrawal announcement came immediately after his wife retained one of the city's premier divorce lawyers.

Whatever his motives, the self-destruction of the Giuliani candidacy is an instructive episode. Here is a man who claims to have single-handedly created New York's "renaissance," while preventing the city from sliding back into moral decay. Stumping nationwide, he has raised close to \$20 million, portraying himself as the Republicans' last, best hope for thwarting the political ambitions of Ms. Clinton, whom they associate with a resurgence of "extreme left-wing politics."

Yet within a few weeks of the New York State Republican convention, he discovers that he is, after all, not political at his "core." Rather, the essence of his existence is taking care of his health!

It is not a question of minimizing the seriousness of prostate cancer, a disease that claimed the life of Giuliani's father. But, by all accounts, the mayor has discovered his ailment at an early stage; it is easily treatable and his chances for a full recovery are excellent.

There is something intensely self-absorbed and at the same time trivial about Giuliani's explanation of his decision. At one point, he

attributed it to the difficulty in choosing between different treatment options. He noted that at first he approached the question of treatment matter-of-factly. Just how blasé was the mayor? "I know it sounds silly," he said, "but I thought of it like a budget decision—or a legal decision."

This is a man whose budget decisions have deprived hundreds of thousands of New York's poorest of minimal welfare benefits. As a US Attorney, prior to becoming mayor, Giuliani's legal decisions included the deportation of Haitian refugees back to the Duvalier dictatorship. None of these decisions, which have cost the health and even the lives of many, caused him any sleepless nights, it would seem. Yet when it came to his own health, and the need to choose between surgery and radiation, he became unhinged.

In the immediate aftermath of getting his own PSA test that revealed cancer in his prostate, Giuliani put forward a budget that cut a \$750,000 Health Department program—out of a \$37 billion budget—that provided free screening for prostate cancer, as well as for breast and ovarian cancer. Since his diagnosis the mayor has repeatedly urged men in their 40s and 50s to get the test, but he has made no move to restore the funding, making clear that his advice is aimed only at those who have the money to pay for it.

What does Giuliani's self-revelation—that he is not in his inner-most being a political person—say about the social and political physiognomy of the mayor, and American bourgeois politicians more generally?

If one compares Giuliani, for example, to Franklin D. Roosevelt, who exercised power from a wheelchair and ran for a third term as his health rapidly deteriorated, one is forced to question whether it is a matter of the mayor not being political at his core, or there being little "core" substance to Giuliani's politics.

Roosevelt's resoluteness and ruthlessness as a politician flowed from the conviction that he had an essential role to play in rescuing American capitalism from social revolution, and then guiding it through a world war. He demonstrated an iron-willed capacity to stand up to fellow members of the US financial aristocracy and force them to accept policies that he knew to be in their best long-term interest, even though they encroached on their immediate prerogatives. At the same time, he was equipped with a political antenna that was finely attuned to social discontent and class conflict.

The media have rewarded Giuliani with the reputation of being a "tough guy" as mayor. He delights in quoting dialogue from the *Godfather* movies in explaining political decisions, much as Ronald Reagan would recall acts of heroism that he either portrayed or witnessed in Hollywood war movies.

He has earned nationwide notoriety by defending his police

department's fatal shooting of two unarmed and completely innocent men—Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond—as well as the routine rousting of young black and Hispanic males that takes place in working class and poor neighborhoods throughout the city on a daily basis.

Yet, in a real sense, Giuliani has never been tested politically. For the better part of seven years, his mayoralty has coincided with an uninterrupted Wall Street boom that has generated unprecedented budget surpluses for the city. With a municipal union movement that is as docile as it is corrupt, Giuliani has faced no labor resistance to a policy designed to channel the vast bulk of this wealth into the coffers of big business and the city's well-heeled, at the expense of the working class and the poor. He has faced neither the tumultuous labor struggles that confronted John Lindsay 30 years ago, nor the specter of economic bankruptcy and crisis weathered by Abe Beame and even Ed Koch in the 1970s and 1980s.

In this regard, the prosecutor-turned-mayor is not all that unique. One need only mention that other recent “titan” of American politics who has fallen off of the political map—Newt Gingrich. Giuliani is part of a generation of politicians peculiarly lacking in substance and conviction.

Democrats and Republicans alike, the personnel of the two parties are drawn almost exclusively from a more privileged middle-class milieu whose general political orientation has for some time been moving to the right. They are creatures of non-stop fundraising efforts requiring obsequiousness toward the wealthy, and Madison Avenue-generated advertising campaigns aimed at poisoning the collective consciousness of the American public.

Political experience for this layer takes place in a hothouse environment and is largely limited to their interaction with the press. Media and politician coexist in a symbiotic and corrupt relationship, wherein the media project a certain persona behind which the politician carries on his wheeling and dealing with corporate interests. The entire edifice of establishment politics takes on a stage-managed quality.

Giuliani's personal/political crisis and withdrawal from the Senate race also indicate the lack of any mass base for his right-wing social agenda, or for that matter, his opponent's. There is no broad constituency to whom he has to answer, or which looks to him as an agent of change. Nor, at this point, is there any conscious mass movement seeking his ouster. Like the rest of the nation's elected officials, his apparent power is largely a reflection of the alienation of broad masses from political life and the betrayal of the struggles of the working class by the trade union bureaucracy.

The principal concern of Giuliani's Republican allies is how they can lay hands on the nearly \$10 million in campaign funds that remains in his coffers. As for Ms. Clinton and the Democrats, Giuliani's political collapse is hardly an unqualified blessing. The First Lady's hopes for winning a Senate seat were pinned largely on hostility to the mayor, which has spread from the city's minority population to the suburbs, particularly in the wake of his repulsive attempt to vilify Patrick Dorismond, the Haitian-American security guard gunned down in March for rebuffing an undercover cop's demand that he sell him drugs.

With a little-known Long Island Republican Congressman, Rick Lazio, now taking the mayor's place, it will become increasingly difficult for Ms. Clinton to conceal the lack of any significant difference between her policies and those of the Republicans. Without hatred for Giuliani as motivation, it will also be far more of a

challenge to generate the votes from the city's working class and minority population that she will need to claim victory.

As part of his new “humanized” persona, Giuliani has acknowledged that a large section of the city's population has taken little pleasure in the “good times” enjoyed by Wall Street and New York's rich. “I'm going to dedicate myself to trying to figure out how we can get them to feel that too, including maybe changes I have to make in the way I approach it, the way I look at it,” he pledged.

Such promises carry little weight with those who remember Giuliani in 1997 when, in the wake of the stationhouse torture of Abner Louima, as he was seeking reelection, the mayor mouthed similar words in an attempt to deflect a wave of anger and protest. Once elected to a second term, the promises were quickly forgotten.

In what the media has hailed as a sign of a “new Rudy,” the mayor acknowledged that he might have made a mistake in the Dorismond case. He should have demonstrated more “compassion” for the slain young man's mother. At the same time, he continues to defend his illegal action in releasing Dorismond's sealed juvenile records, which was a crude attempt to portray minor, non-criminal offenses of a youth as the acts of a thug who ultimately got what he deserved.

In reality, the prosperity enjoyed by those at the pinnacle of New York society has been paid for through the destruction of social conditions and democratic rights for millions who live in the impoverished neighborhoods throughout the city, laboring for poverty wages, denied access to decent medical care, housing and schools and subjected to persistent police abuse.

Giuliani's politics, like those of Clinton's Democratic administration in Washington, are directed at maintaining that social chasm and the flow of wealth that it creates for the corporate and financial elite. Almost oblivious to the underlying class tensions that these policies are generating, politicians of both parties rest on tired political nostrums about “ending welfare as we know it,” anti-tax demagoguery and demands for law and order.

The hollowness of Democratic and Republican politics and the striking lack of substance that characterizes the leading candidates, from Al Gore and George Bush to Rudy Giuliani and Hillary Clinton, feed not merely political apathy, but also popular hostility to both parties. As this election develops, the need will become increasingly clear for working people to build their own political party in opposition to the parties of big business and the profit system which these parties defend.

Giuliani's withdrawal from the Senate race has a further significance. The Republican hero's revelation that he is not that interested in politics, and his collapse at his first brush with a serious crisis are symptomatic of the extreme fragility of the present political setup in the United States. The structure that defends the existing social system, characterized by greed, corruption and cowardice, confronts a serious crisis of personnel. With the development of serious economic and political upheavals in America, that crisis will help pave the way for the development of an independent political mobilization of the working class.



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