

New York mayor exploits tragedy in bid to prolong his term

Bill Vann
4 October 2001

New York City's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's extra-legal bid to extend his term in office or override laws barring him from serving a third term are a particularly sinister expression of the ongoing attempts to exploit the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in order to curtail democratic rights.

Giuliani officially abandoned his drive for a third term on Wednesday, after failing to garner sufficient support in the New York state legislature. However, he reiterated his bid to extend his present term of office. Whatever the outcome of these maneuvers, the very fact that Giuliani has made such a blatantly undemocratic effort and been given substantial backing from sections of the media and the financial establishment has immense political significance.

While according to the city's constitution, Giuliani must leave office at the end of this year, on the eve of the September 25 primary he floated his proposal to hold onto power. The mayor, who exercised a jealous monopoly on public pronouncements in the wake of the September 11 disaster, deliberately downplayed the vote to select the Democratic and Republican candidates to replace him. While forcefully urging New Yorkers to go shopping, to the theater or to a movie to affirm the city's return to normalcy, he reluctantly acknowledged that they could vote for the candidate of their choice "if they want to."

Aides told faithful media flacks that their boss felt compelled to stay on because of a groundswell of popular support. Meanwhile, this former prosecutor and darling of Wall Street sought to cloak himself in the heroism of working class New Yorkers—firefighters, paramedics and construction workers—who sacrificed their lives by rushing into the burning and collapsing towers to save others.

As time wore on, however, those closest to the mayor increasingly put forward another argument for keeping Giuliani in office: security demands it, regardless what the law says.

According to media reports, Giuliani has expressed concerns that the city's police would not trust or work effectively with either of his possible Democratic successors, Bronx Borough President Ferdinand Ferrer and Public Advocate Mark Green. Both have in the past made statements criticizing the NYPD's handling of infamous police brutality cases, such as the fatal shootings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond.

Within the top brass of the Police Department, the attack on the Trade Towers has sparked a mood of impunity. Some chiefs have openly stated that the terrorist attack proved that the aggressive policing tactics that rode roughshod over democratic rights and resulted in the killing of unarmed and innocent people under Giuliani had been fully justified. In crude terms, this argument boils down to, why worry about one unarmed African immigrant shot to death by cops in The Bronx when you have 6,000 killed in downtown Manhattan?

Other reports have cited worries that Giuliani's successor would not enjoy the same rapport with the FBI and military intelligence as the former federal prosecutor.

The argument that Giuliani must stick around as the chief of a strong police state was made in explicit terms last week by Michael Kramer, a chief political columnist for the *Daily News*, a paper that has consistently defended the mayor and includes as its opinion editor one of Giuliani's former top deputies.

Calling the attack on the Trade Center "the first battle in a war unlike any we have ever known," Kramer argues that this conflict will require "the creation of a homeland vigilance we have never had to fashion before."

Warning that things "will get worse before they get better," he continued:

"When the U.S. finally strikes back, there is the real possibility that New York will again be a target—and even if it isn't, the fear we feel today will rise exponentially, a fear that could be at least partially tempered by the presence of a steady and firm hand at the helm. Anything that helps the city deal with these realities, both current and coming, should be embraced by everyone."

Similar arguments could be made—and, in Latin America and elsewhere, have been—to justify a military dictatorship. If things are going to get worse before they get better and if the US is embarking on an open-ended military campaign that could last for years, as the Bush administration has indicated, why should anyone believe that Giuliani would be more willing to turn over the reins of power in three months than he is now, or that the various police agencies will be any more disposed to accept the installation of his democratically elected successor?

The mayor is restricted to two four-year terms in office under term limits that were twice voted into law in referendums

sponsored by the multimillionaire Republican Ron Lauder and various reactionary politicians. Giuliani was among those supporting the right-wing populist demagoguery against “big government” that underlay the appeal for term limits.

Under the law, it is not only Giuliani who must go, but also two other citywide officials as well as 51 members of the City Council and most of the borough presidents. The mayor has made no mention, of course, about extending their terms as well.

The attempt by the mayor of New York to scuttle laws providing for democratic succession in order to hold on to power caps a political career that has repeatedly exhibited similar extra-legal interventions—from the attempt to cut off funding to a museum that exhibited art he viewed as blasphemous, to his release of the sealed juvenile records of Patrick Dorismond, in an effort to discredit the young man who was shot to death by undercover detectives after he took offense at their asking him for drugs. City Hall itself was turned into a fenced-in fortress, while the Giuliani administration built a \$30 million “bunker,” an emergency police command post, in one of the high-rise buildings in the World Trade Center that was the first to be destroyed after the collapse of the Twin Towers.

His administration has, above all, sought to transform the political landscape in New York City by slashing social services while simultaneously building up the police force to an unprecedented army of more than 40,000. Its orientation was to create the ideal conditions for profit making by the Wall Street investment houses and major corporations based in New York City, while suppressing and intimidating the masses of poor and oppressed sections of the working class with continuous police crackdowns on so-called “quality of life” offenses. The quality of life for the richest 5 percent of the population was raised to dizzying heights, while poor and minority youth faced a daily routine of police stops, frisks and worse.

Much has been made of Giuliani’s personality traits in the weeks since he floated his plan to remain in office—his megalomania and vindictiveness. What is certain, however, is that the attempt to circumvent the electoral process in New York City was not merely the product of one man’s idiosyncrasies.

Behind Giuliani stand substantial sections of the city’s economic elite of stock brokers, CEOs and corporate millionaires who are concerned that the economic downturn that has been intensified by the September 11 attack is creating a social powder keg in New York. Their fear is not so much of renewed terrorism as an explosive development in the class struggle when the sharp rise in joblessness meets up with a wholly inadequate social welfare system that has been slashed to the bone over the past decade. This is what underlies their desire for a “steady and firm hand at the helm.”

Giuliani’s two potential Democratic successors have no intention of challenging the interests of Wall Street. Mark

Green, until recently considered the clear front-runner, actually agreed to the mayor’s proposal to extend his term by three months, saying it was justified by the crisis over the World Trade Center attack. A former close acolyte of consumer advocate and recent Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, Green has been paddling furiously toward the right since launching his election campaign, announcing his support for abolishing parole and forming an alliance with former Police Commissioner William Bratton to prove himself “tough on crime.”

Ferdinand Ferrer, a political hack who was nurtured by the corrupt Bronx Democratic Party machine, campaigned on the theme of New York being “two cities,” one of wealth and the other of poverty, which propelled him—to the surprise of pollsters, pundits and himself—into first place in the first round of the primaries. He too is trying to tack right in advance of the October 11 runoff, but for his own political reasons rejected Giuliani’s proposal.

Giuliani’s proposal, at least in its initial form, is unlikely to achieve fruition. Extending his present term or overturning term limits would require measures by the State Legislature in Albany, which appears reluctant to act. Others, however, have proposed that he be given a new base of power as a reconstruction czar for lower Manhattan.

Whatever the immediate fate of the present mayor of New York, the political maneuvering since September 11 is the expression of insoluble social contradictions that have led to the ever deepening decay of the institutions of bourgeois democracy in New York City and nationally. Just as the Bush administration was brought to power through ballot fraud and the suppression of votes, so the forces behind Giuliani were prepared to keep him in office through blatant intimidation and appeals to police mutiny against his successor.

Underlying both these events is the recognition within the predominant sections of the ruling elite that economic and political events are spinning out of their control and that the defense of a system based on rampant social inequality cannot be carried out through traditional democratic forms.



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