

October 23, 2005

An Endorsement for Mayor

New Yorkers used to share with the rest of the nation a conviction that the city was, for all its good points, basically ungovernable. That seems quaint now -- like the idea that Broadway is populated by colorful Runyonesque guys and dolls, or that cab drivers are all wise guys from Brooklyn. The city has put the financial meltdown of the 1970's behind it, along with its legendary icons of dysfunctional government -- Fort Apache, subways as graffiti art, armies of homeless people sleeping in cardboard boxes. Three other mayors played a part in pulling New York out of its hole. But under Michael R. Bloomberg, everything came together.

Mr. Bloomberg, who is running for re-election on the Republican line against Fernando Ferrer, the Democratic candidate, has accomplished a great deal in four years. His greatest achievement has been to teach New Yorkers that good government is not a zero sum game; that even in a city where every neighborhood, block and building jealously guards some ancient prerogative, change can make things better for everybody.

Mr. Bloomberg has not been nearly as exciting, or entertaining, as Edward I. Koch or Rudolph W. Giuliani. But he has been better at running the city. If he continues his record of accomplishment over the next four years, he may be remembered as one of the greatest mayors in New York history.

Unfortunately, his chances of reaching that kind of status are reduced by one great flaw in his political résumé -- his out-of-control campaign spending. In 2001 Mr. Bloomberg spent \$75 million of his vast fortune to get elected. He argued at the time that as an unknown Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic city, he needed to introduce himself and his ideas.

This year, with all the advantages of an incumbent, he was still unwilling to take on the less well-known Mr. Ferrer in an even fight. He bypassed campaign spending limits and blanketed the airwaves with almost \$20 million in ads. His lavish purchase of TV time drove up the cost of advertising, making it even more difficult for any other voice to be heard.

Money cannot compensate for a terrible candidate; there are plenty of very rich men who could not spend their way into office. But it can undermine the election process. Mr. Bloomberg, safe in his self-financed campaign, has felt free to ignore the city's excellent campaign finance laws on every issue from spending limits to where and when he should debate Mr. Ferrer. The result has been a muffled, unsatisfactory race.

The obscene spending is particularly regrettable because it threatens to overshadow all the good the mayor has done. It would be tragic if Mr. Bloomberg were mainly remembered as the rich man who bought two elections, and paid far too much for the second one, when he has so many achievements.

New York policy wonks of a certain age can remember when Ed Koch was acclaimed for winning the

right to put only two men on sanitation trucks; Mr. Bloomberg quietly negotiated one-man trucks on some routes. Mr. Giuliani won plaudits for shutting down the unpopular landfill in Staten Island, but failed to come up with a workable plan to get rid of the displaced garbage; Mayor Bloomberg offered an environmentally sensible solution. From the popular 311 phone system for reporting complaints to its generally humane solutions for the homeless, the administration focused on getting things done, not on getting headlines.

Under Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly, the crime rate has fallen farther than even the wildest optimists imagined during the Giuliani crime-fighting years, and unlike Mr. Giuliani, Mr. Bloomberg seems to have no problem sharing the credit with Mr. Kelly. Perhaps most important, Mr. Bloomberg has managed to achieve all this in an atmosphere of racial harmony. He has shown that it's possible to fight crime without fighting the communities where most crime occurs.

Fernando Ferrer, the former Bronx borough president, has run a creditable race, but his major campaign point -- the existence of two New Yorks, rich and poor -- actually argues Mr. Bloomberg's case. No mayor has devoted more effort to improving the schools, the poor children's lifeline. The city's public hospitals have been transformed in many neighborhoods. And if Mr. Bloomberg stole a page from Mr. Ferrer's playbook in his recently announced plan for building more affordable housing, it was a good page to hijack.

New York may be governable, but getting things done in a place this complicated still requires an intense, and perhaps even irritating, self-assertiveness -- something Mr. Ferrer seems to lack. Mr. Bloomberg has no problems on that front, but he has not always managed to be in control without being dictatorial. To be fair, we've tended to appreciate his indifference to public opinion when we agreed with him -- for instance when he stuck to his guns on a smoking ban in bars. But we were downright alarmed by his stubbornness in pushing for a West Side stadium for the Jets when most of the city thought it was the wrong use for a critical piece of land. Mr. Bloomberg has a daunting agenda for a second term, including much more work on improving the schools and a serious attempt to help restore Lower Manhattan. Those goals can't be met if the mayor piles up bad feeling and resentment.

This page cares deeply about making elections fair and open, and if Mr. Bloomberg's administration had been anything less than distinguished, his insistence on undermining the campaign finance system would disqualify him from our support. As it is, with that one caveat in mind, we enthusiastically endorse Michael Bloomberg for mayor.