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News Analysis: A Mayor With Lofty Goals, and Better Than Average Odds of Reaching Them

By **JIM RUTENBERG**

With the pomp of his second inauguration now behind him, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg sets off to complete what he has painted as the ultimate philanthropic gesture of his billionaire's life: To set the city on a path to lasting fiscal health, to make permanent the relative safety of its streets, and to create a model school system that works for all its children.

Mr. Bloomberg has set a high bar for himself for the next four years. And second terms, which often cement mayoral legacies, have often proved perilous, as mayors fall victim to complacency, scandal or the perceived weaknesses of lame-duck status, or they shy from risky initiatives while focusing on achieving higher office.

But Mr. Bloomberg fancies himself a different kind of politician, one with no greater political ambitions, and a leader who is immune to corruptive influences because of the integrity and independence that he says come with his billions.

And his ambitious goals for a second term -- which were introduced yesterday thematically but without specifics -- are especially lofty when measured against those of 2002. Then, his podium faced the still-rising smoke at ground zero, and he was predicting grim days of austerity and shared pain while promising to deliver his city from some of the darkest days in its history.

Yesterday, a mere four years later, Mr. Bloomberg gave what was arguably the most optimistic inaugural speech in decades, a reflection of how far his city had come since Sept. 11. It was a far cry from John V. Lindsay's call in 1966 for an end to "the sickness and shame of our cities," or Abraham D. Beame's hope in 1974 that the citizenry would "once again be proud to call themselves New Yorkers," or Rudolph W. Giuliani's promise in 1994 to end what he called an "era of fear."

Mr. Bloomberg noted the strides the city had made in the last four years, but emphasized how it could do even better, implicitly raising the stakes for himself and his commissioners. "We have gone through tough times and come out stronger," Mr. Bloomberg said. "Our population is at an all-time high, crime is going down, student achievement is going up, jobs are being created, new homes and parks are strengthening and revitalizing our neighborhoods."

But the mayor presented all that as a template for more lasting progress, and promised that "over the next four years we will neither turn back nor hold back."

The public will hold him to that. With polls showing Mr. Bloomberg with an approval rating of more than 70 percent, he certainly has support for ambitious initiatives. Yet he also now faces high expectations from people who have made it clear that they want him to be more than just the good mayor they tell pollsters they believe him to be.

Representative Anthony D. Weiner, a Democratic primary contender and mayoral critic last fall, said in an interview on WCBS-TV yesterday he believed Mr. Bloomberg could go down in history as a great mayor.

"I think there are a lot of challenges he faces. If he confronts them properly, I think he could be one of the greatest mayors," he said. "The question is, will he seize this second four years as a real opportunity?"

Mr. Bloomberg is in some ways uniquely positioned to achieve great goals in his second term. He insists he has no political ambition beyond the next four years, presumably making him freer to act without fear of repercussions to a political career.

That, his aides and supporters would argue, gives him the personal freedom to try to push through an agenda he would perceive as having long-term benefits to the city: perhaps pushing through labor contracts that reduce future pension costs, or introducing still more stringent promotional standards for students or, as transportation activists dreamily suggest, so-called congestion pricing to reduce traffic.

But such things cannot be achieved by will alone. They take coalition-building, nuance and old-fashioned political deal-making.

In the past year, New Yorkers have seen two Michael Bloomborgs: the full-on politician who made the necessary deals to build a huge and winning election coalition, and the chief executive whose administration initially tried to make an end run around legislators in his failed pursuit of a new stadium.

He will have to meld the finesse of the former and the willfulness of the latter if he wants to leave a lasting legacy, his fellow elected officials said yesterday.

"He can't go it alone," said Scott Stringer, the new Manhattan borough president. "You've got to bring people to the table."

Mr. Stringer, however, said he saw ample signs in Mr. Bloomberg's speech that he wanted to do just that in his second term, a sentiment echoed by other elected officials there.

Yet whether Mr. Bloomberg can emerge in 2010 with the "great" designation is unclear, as many of his goals may not be realized for a decade or more: today's first graders will still be years away from their high school graduations when he is finished; the fruits of his huge rezoning initiatives along the Brooklyn waterfront and at the Atlantic Yards will not all be realized within four years, nor would the impact of all his fiscal policies.

And until now Mr. Bloomberg has seemed unwilling to partake in the chest-thumping acts that defined mayors like Edward I. Koch and Mr. Giuliani, winning them outsized reputations at the cost of alienating some voters.

"In order to do big things, in order to do great things, you have to anger people," said Vincent J. Cannato, author of "The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York." "And I'm not sure that this is the mayor who's really looking to anger a lot of people."

The recent transit strike signaled that Mr. Bloomberg feels emboldened by his victory and is more willing to assert himself in the public dialogue. And yesterday he won his most thunderous applause when he promised to do everything he could to cause Washington and Albany to pass more stringent gun laws.

But Mitchell L. Moss, a public policy professor at New York University and a mayoral associate, said Mr. Bloomberg does not have to mimic his predecessors. "In the post-9/11 world, the job of mayor has been redefined," he said. "We no longer want a mayor who believes that leadership is imposing his or her personality on a city of 8 million."

Mr. Bloomberg has made clear that his metamorphosis from businessman to politician has limits. Asked about his more understated personal style during his final press briefing of 2005 last week, he quoted that cartoon sage

of his youth, Popeye: "I am what I am."

For now, Mr. Bloomberg is a second-term mayor with a mandate. Who he will be remembered as in the future will solely depend upon how well he uses it.