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New York: Yours, Mine and Theirs

By [MICHAEL POWELL](#)

IT was another of those apocalypse-could-be weekends in New York. [F.B.I.](#) agents and police officers nabbed a retired cargo handler allegedly pursuing his golden-years dream of blowing up J.F.K., not to mention half of Queens.

In Florida, [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) — who just might need a T-shirt emblazoned “Yes, I’m That 9/11 Mayor” — opined that the arrest of this aging jihadist shows why we need a war on terror and a war in Iraq and a war in Afghanistan. And he would know because he’s a New Yorker and he was there.

The next night in New Hampshire, [Hillary Clinton](#) advised her Democratic rival [John Edwards](#) to stuff his talk about the war on terror as a bumper sticker. It’s real, we’re safer, and she should know because she’s a New Yorker and she was almost there.

This is New York City as political trump card. Talk smack about terror or Iraq and you can pretty much bet that one of the New York politicians running for president will toss the city’s specialness — and the politician’s own — on the table.

The intriguing exception appears to be Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), who flirts oh-so-coyly with a presidential run. The mogul mayor rarely stands accused of possessing a populist musculature. But last week he just might have struck a collective nerve.

He passed on the Saturday news conference where law enforcement types spoke of unthinkable terror averted. And two days later he flipped the script. He was a New Yorker and he was there and, like, so what?

“There are a lot of threats to you in the world,” Mr. Bloomberg said, listing a few, like heart attacks and lightning strikes. “You can’t sit there and worry about everything. Get a life.”

So we are reminded again of the strange ambivalence that comes with being a New Yorker in a post-9/11 world. New York is survivor and victim and — in this campaign year — political touchstone. Two wars are being fought in its name, although polls show a decided majority of New Yorkers oppose the larger of those conflicts. Even for a place that can harbor an insufferable sense of its own uniqueness, the “America’s city” stuff might be getting to be a bit much.

Few New Yorkers have shaken their awareness of hideous possibility. We may chuckle at the perfunctory-to-the-point-of-ridiculousness security pat-downs at Shea Stadium. They are more likely to uncover a covert brew than a covert something nasty. Same goes for the drone of warnings to watch, look, listen for suspicious packages and/or odd people on the subway. Sort us out like that and who will be left to ride?

And yet. A beefy bouncer confesses he really doesn't care for subway tunnels anymore. A handyman tends to notice who pulls what kind of valise onto the bus. A mother pushing a baby carriage says she stays away from landmark buildings.

But what do you do with this knowledge that it could all get a lot worse very fast?

"Mayor Bloomberg is my man," says Michael Liburd, a cleaning man born in Nevis and raised in Flatbush, Brooklyn, where he was found loading mops into his car. "You have to be concerned because this city has many, many lunatics. But you can't lock yourself inside."

Unless or until there's another attack on American soil, New York City will represent America's vulnerability. Jose Velasquez, 27, a security guard who lost a cousin at the World Trade Center, understands that. And he understands that the threat doesn't go away just because the years pass. What he doesn't understand is the accused J.F.K. plotter, who as it happens frequented the Brooklyn diner he goes to himself. "That old guy was trying to blow up Queens?" He shook his head. "That doesn't seem so smart. I guess we just have to get used to this life, right?"

For New York's flock of presidential candidates, the calculus is more complicated. The "war on terror" becomes their claim to special expertise. Mr. Giuliani, as ever, is most muscular in asserting his proprietary claim. "When I lived through Sept. 11, and I don't just mean the day, I mean a period of time, I was at the center of it," he said the other day.

Mr. Giuliani does not add that he accrued additional experience watching his multimillion-dollar emergency management office collapse into rubble. Turns out he placed it too close to the trade center towers.

As for Mrs. Clinton, she wasn't dusted by the rubble of the towers, and her accent owes more to Chicago than Flatbush. But she fought for money to rebuild, and to protect those with respiratory ills, and no politician goes wrong for long by wielding 9/11 as a deflector shield.

"History tells us that fear is a potent weapon," said Eric Foner, a professor of history at [Columbia University](#) and, not incidentally, a born and bred New Yorker. "Fear trumps liberty every time."

It's not that Mr. Foner harbors no worry about an attack; his mind can wander unbeckoned to such horrors as a terrorist bomb exploding in the Lincoln Tunnel. But he remembers ducking-and-tucking beneath his desk in grade school during the cold war, not to mention the Cuban missile crisis, when the stomach tightened and genuine Armageddon beckoned. "Sept. 11 was horrible but it didn't pose a threat to the existence of the United States of America," Mr. Foner said. "I don't go about my life fearing everyone is going to die."

Mitchell L. Moss, a [New York University](#) professor and partisan for all things New York, tries to be understanding. Politicians will wrap themselves in 9/11 and far-flung states seem to need to feel our fear — and cube it. He says he can put up with endless off-key renditions of "God Bless America."

But someday, perhaps after a presidential campaign clotted with New York candidates, a New Yorker's best advice might be to put a sock in it.

"We have to live with it," Mr. Moss said. "But we don't want to be endlessly defined by it."