

THE NEW YORKER

The Untouchable

Can a good mayor amass too much power?

by [Ben McGrath](#) August 24, 2009



Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York: ambitious younger mayors around the country call him Papa Smurf. Photograph by Platon.

Michael Bloomberg has never been the sort of public speaker who makes people faint in his presence. He talks too quickly, mispronounces words, and has a weakness for self-referential jokes, at which he smirks readily, like a boy who knows that his mother approves. He is the richest man in New York, and that inspires a certain amount of awe, but there are, even now, a great many rich men in the city, and the people who find Bloomberg's particular level of wealth most impressive are not the type to stand in line to gaze upon their idol. Instead, they dine with him at his town house, on East Seventy-ninth Street, or clink glasses at charity functions in the garden at the Museum of Modern Art; they see, in this mayor, a better version of themselves—a tycoon so wise and generous he could be President, couldn't he? Still, when a college student collapsed near the Mayor's feet, at an appearance in the Bronx, in March, Bloomberg knew exactly what to do. He dropped to his knees and checked the kid's pulse.

"Call 911," Bloomberg said, and calmly unbuttoned his patient's shirt. "What's your name?" he asked. "Where do you live?"

By the time the paramedics arrived, the Mayor appeared to have come up with a diagnosis: no breakfast, stuffy room. Hours later, back at City Hall, Bloomberg cited his Eagle Scout training and reminded reporters that one of his deputies had recently tackled a mugger in midtown and rescued a commuter's BlackBerry; heroism runs in the administration. The following morning's *Daily News* featured the headline "MAYOR BLOOMBERG SAVES TEEN WITH CPR"—a tabloid exaggeration to fit the legend of a man on whose watch New Yorkers' average life expectancy has increased by fifteen months.

After seven and a half years in office, Bloomberg, who is now sixty-seven, has amassed so much power and respect that he seems more a Medici than a mayor. Liberals of both the Upper West Side and the Park Slope generations, not inclined to recognize "businessman" as a compliment, refer to him, with some pride, as "the only Republican I've ever voted for." Yet some of Bloomberg's friends still can't bring themselves to call him a politician, no matter how expertly he broadens his electoral base. "You know, it just doesn't feel right," Tom Secunda, a co-founder of Bloomberg L.P., the financial-software-and-media company from which the Mayor derives his billions, said recently, after running through some of his old colleague's former identities: entrepreneur, C.E.O., philanthropist. To the business elite, who have done extraordinarily well under Bloomberg's stewardship, New York's remarkable rebound after September 11th is a credit less to good government than to management. The attitude, reinforced at galas on the Upper East Side, seeps downtown with some of Bloomberg's appointees, who, years after trading their upper-floor offices for

cubicles in the famed City Hall bullpen, have been known to bristle when colleagues use the word “politician,” asking, “Is that how you see yourself?”

Bloomberg is largely above the snobbery. He genuinely likes to shake hands, for instance, and has instructed his security detail to allow him more contact with dishevelled subway riders—inevitably, in his canned anecdotes, “big, hulking guys”—than they might otherwise be comfortable with. (“If you kill me,” he said, “you won’t get away, but you’ll get pretty close to me, and could probably do it.”) During the early days of the swine-flu outbreak, the Mayor even mocked politicians who carry Purell with them on their daily rounds. “I’ve always found that you’re in the wrong business if that’s what you do,” he said. He also told me that he has consistently found the quality of government employees to be higher than businesspeople generally allow. He singled out the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, a much maligned institution, which had been threatening another fare hike to postpone bankruptcy, and mentioned that he could recall being stuck on the train only once in the past few years. “The problem is, if you never give an agency credit for doing a good job, you’re not going to have good people there and they’re not going to stay motivated,” he said.

Nevertheless, unconditional magnanimity often eludes Bloomberg. Not long ago, he stood on a rooftop above Fifth Avenue with the City Council Speaker, Christine Quinn, and other officials and labor leaders, to announce a new initiative dedicated to reducing the city’s carbon footprint, and said, “This is a City Council that’s actually trying to make our city better rather than just talk about it.” The “actually” gave it away—a reminder that we might assume otherwise. (Bloomberg’s relationship with Quinn’s predecessor, Gifford Miller, was fraught; a developer friend of the Mayor’s once asked me, “Did you ever hear about the city councilman who married the streetwalker, and within six months he had her down to his level?”)

To people who aspire to become mayor of New York City in the traditional way, by suffering countless fund-raisers in apartments far larger than their own and attending interminable Democratic club meetings with the same cast of hangers-on, year after year, Bloomberg presents a conundrum. Many in the city’s political class believe that he’s been a good, if overrated, executive, and acknowledge that his ability to forgo the shaming hat-in-hand routine has proved far more valuable in warding off corruption than they would have liked to admit. When dealing individually with the more promising among these wannabes, Bloomberg is affable and plainspoken, in the way that a self-made man can be. He dispenses advice, tinged with just enough humor so that the condescension is not immediately apparent. (“You know what you should do is, go out and make a billion dollars first, and *then* run for office.”) Or he chides, gently, “Why are you wasting your time doing this? You could be doing something really meaningful.” They are flattered—who wouldn’t be?—by the attention. Only in retrospect does it begin to rankle. It’s not as though they haven’t privately nursed fantasies of ditching the numbing routines and indignities associated with a legislative life and exploiting their connections in the service of making millions (though maybe not billions) of dollars. They are not fools. They understand that the political game is rigged in favor of hackery. They know it because the hack businessmen come calling every day on the steps of City Hall.

But the political class always viewed Bloomberg’s mayoralty as an anomaly rather than as a paradigm shift, and looked forward to 2009 and, thanks to term limits, the end of his reign. For much of the second term, they endured the chatter, from the kinds of people whom they sometimes grudgingly court as their donors, about who could possibly succeed Mayor Mike, now that the bar had been raised: Dick Parsons, the Time Warner C.E.O. (since installed at Citigroup)? Jonathan Tisch, the Loews chairman? Joel Klein, the schools chancellor? One well-regarded politician recalled a breakfast last year at the Regency Hotel at which Tisch and Parsons joked about splitting the job in a tandem arrangement: alternating days, with both off on Sunday. Perhaps it was just a good-natured attempt at deflecting all the wishful speculation, but to the politician, after six-plus years of Mike Bloomberg’s booming New York, it sounded like self-satisfied dilettantism. It drove him mad. More insulting still was the proto-candidacy of John Catsimatidis, whose résumé seemed a too literal re-creation of the Mayor’s—billionaire entrepreneur, amateur pilot, and lifelong Democrat who had recently discovered the conveniences of Republicanism—but who seemed to lack any of Bloomberg’s obvious gifts. Catsimatidis owns Gristedes, a second-rate grocery-store chain, not a revered technology company that revolutionized global finance. But at least he was beatable. Then Bloomberg decided that he didn’t want to surrender his seat.

Crime is low, test scores are climbing, and racial tension hardly registers. Having proved unusually adept at governing the ungovernable city, Bloomberg spent much of the past few years advancing an agenda beyond the borders of the five boroughs. Environmental activists rave about his global-warming speech in Bali, in 2007, and, through his efforts with the Mayors Against Illegal Guns coalition, which he co-founded, Bloomberg has probably done as much as any politician in the country to hold weapons dealers accountable. Far more than Rudy Giuliani, who parlayed his symbolic role as the stoic face of leadership after September 11th into the honorary title of America's Mayor, Bloomberg deserves the label, advising lesser cities in replicating his data-driven initiatives, like a political franchise. "They see it as part of their mission to export ideas," Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, said of Bloomberg's crew, and mentioned that he had just established a financial-counselling hot line modelled on New York's. Bill Clinton calls Bloomberg a "great mayor." Barack Obama calls him an "outstanding mayor." Booker and other ambitious younger mayors around the country, like Adrian Fenty, in Washington, D.C., call him Papa Smurf.

Last year, Bloomberg joined with Ed Rendell, the governor of Pennsylvania, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, the governor of California, to form the Building America's Future Coalition, which advocates greater infrastructure investment. "It's nice travelling around with Mike," Rendell said, citing Bloomberg's "Air Force"—a couple of Dassault Falcon 900s—as a significant step up from the usual gubernatorial accommodations. "I remember when we first started to go around, there wasn't much talk about changing your charter, or whatever, so he could run for a third term. The talk was about what he was going to do in addition to Building America's Future—what he was going to do after he was no longer mayor." It was late July, before the 2008 national Conventions, and Rendell and Bloomberg were aboard one of the Mayor's jets, flying from New Orleans to Minneapolis to address a gathering of the Independence Party of Minnesota. Bloomberg had officially abandoned his flirtation with running for President several months earlier, and no longer appeared likely to be a Vice-Presidential pick on either ticket. "We discussed a few things, and I tried to convince him to come down and buy the Philadelphia *Inquirer* and the *Daily News*," Rendell went on. "I said to him, 'Mayor, only you can save the newspaper business in this country.' And of course his staff, they wanted him to buy the New York *Times*."

Bloomberg was one of the largest philanthropic donors in the United States last year, and Rendell is far from alone in having thought of him as the natural white knight to save journalism—an antidote to predatory moguls like Rupert Murdoch and Sam Zell, who view the news strictly as a commodity, not a public service. "Everyone asks him about it," one social friend of the Mayor's told me. "Better him than that Mexican person"—a reference to Carlos Slim, who recently lent the *Times* two hundred and fifty million dollars.

I mentioned Rendell's suggestion to Bloomberg one afternoon at Gracie Mansion, before a reception that he was hosting for Susan Rice, the United Nations Ambassador. At first, he dismissed the idea, claiming not to know anything about newspapers, but then he began elaborating on the challenges facing the business, particularly at the *Times*. "Their business model is a national paper, but national papers have a particularly bad business model, because there's no such thing as national advertising," he said. "It doesn't exist. Which means you have to have sales forces locally, and, since you're going to print in different places, that's fine, you can run different ads. The trouble is, you've got to print in different places—the distribution cost will kill you."

Before becoming mayor, Bloomberg oversaw an international news-gathering organization of his own—Bloomberg News, whose staff is now larger than those of the *Times* and the *Washington Post*—and in his 1997 autobiography, "Bloomberg by Bloomberg," co-written by Matthew Winkler, the editor-in-chief at Bloomberg News, he portrayed himself as a kind of media visionary, "the Colonel Sanders of financial information services." At Gracie Mansion, he said, "My ethics are different than some of these people," meaning publishers like Murdoch, the owner of the *Post*, and Mortimer Zuckerman, the owner of the *Daily News*. "Rupert, and probably Mort, would say, 'It's my newspaper,'" he said. "I would never try, and have never tried, to influence a story at Bloomberg. Certainly can't now—but never. I'm so careful that nobody would ever *think* that I tried to influence a story. I've called Matt Winkler, who was there from Day One with me, and said, 'Matt, I read that story. That's bullshit. The guy missed the whole point of it.' And Winkler, I don't know whether he talks to anybody, but he would be the only one that I would talk to. And

if you don't use the paper the way Mort and Rupert do, why have the paper? I mean, everybody says to me, 'You could influence the dialogue.' Well, I can't influence the dialogue if I can't tell you, 'Ben, write this.' He seemed slightly exasperated by all the hopes associated with his expected transition into full-time philanthropy. "I mean, if you want to know why do it," he said, referring to his bid for a third term, "I guess this was not the reason, but at least it ended *that* stuff."

As it turned out, by the time of his midsummer travels with Ed Rendell, Bloomberg had already begun reaching out to Murdoch and Zuckerman and, most important, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., who controls the *Times*, to see if they might like to exert some influence over the dialogue, as it were, in support of undoing the term limits that would have forced their fellow media mogul out of office in 2010. The collapse of Lehman Brothers, and the public's sense of impending doom, was several weeks off, but the signs were plainly visible to anyone who followed the markets, and Bloomberg had been alert to the prospects of a debilitating economic crash since September of 2007, when he dispatched a memo ("Re: Fiscal Prudence") to his deputies and commissioners warning of "potential difficulties on the horizon" and "multi-billion-dollar budget gaps." Bloomberg's preferred white-knight scenario was on a grander scale than merely saving a family newspaper; he hoped to rescue New York City from financial ruin and prevent a return to the bloody chaos of the nineteen-seventies. "I didn't want anybody to think that you walk away when the going gets tough," he said.

What followed was, depending on your perspective, "one of the saddest days of our local democracy," as Randy Mastro, a deputy mayor in the Giuliani administration, put it; a huge relief ("THANK GOD," the executive director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center wrote, in a chummy personal e-mail to the Mayor); or, more likely, because democracy rarely delivers a perfect solution, both. The Bloomberg phenomenon, one had to remember, was never quite democratic in the first place. He bought the office, breaking local campaign-spending records by tens of millions of dollars in the process, and gradually won great popularity with his pragmatic and paternalistic liberalism. Now he seemed intent on bending the rules of succession to his will.

The three dailies endorsed the Mayor's wish, and, in the cases of the *Times* and the *Post*, justified their slavish devotion by protesting that they had never been in favor of term limits—an anti-*élite* reaction against professional politicians—to begin with. That the populist, and hugely popular, campaign to enact term limits, in 1993, had been bankrolled by the billionaire cosmetics heir Ronald Lauder only made things easier for Bloomberg. Lauder's intended targets were not corporate titans who offer their managerial services for a dollar a year but career political hacks. Bloomberg invited Lauder to a private sit-down at Gracie Mansion and asked him to consider supporting a one-time-only exemption, in return for a seat on a future charter-review commission. Lauder agreed. What's more, by putting the matter to a vote before the City Council, Bloomberg would be giving the hacks a say, too, and, as it happened, two-thirds of them were due to be expelled from office at the same time he was: perfect.

The Mayor's bill proposed extending term limits by four years. At the public hearings at City Hall to debate the issue, last October, the Council chamber was packed with mostly nonwhite citizens carrying professionally made signs ("Democrats for Choices," "Hear Our Voices, Give Us Choices") that, on first glance, could have been taken for expressing an opposing viewpoint. The number of Democrats considering a run for mayor was, by all accounts, inversely related to the likelihood of Bloomberg's running again. But the signs also featured smaller print that said, "Extend the Limits," and it emerged that a few dozen pro-Bloomberg citizens had arrived in vans provided by the Doe Fund, a nonprofit organization that has received more than a hundred thousand dollars from an anonymous private donor known to be in charge of drawing up the municipal budget each spring.

"You always want turnover and change," Bloomberg once said. "Eight years is great." His top three aides had since advised him against contradicting that sentiment, but, once he set his mind to it, the result was never much in doubt. (The Council voted in favor, twenty-nine to twenty-two.) You'd be hard pressed to find many observers who feel good about the way it all came off: a carnival of contorted self-interest to rival sneering First World depictions of life in a banana republic. Months later, a reeling media establishment, fearing for its continued existence, felt compelled to acknowledge that the Mayor who might

have bought the *Times* could well outlast it. The opening number of this year's Inner Circle roast, a local version of the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, was set in 2033, with Bloomberg still in office and running for the ninth time.

It can be tempting to view with an air of inevitability Bloomberg's steady rise from the Salomon Brothers basement "cage," where, in 1966, he started counting stocks and bonds in his underwear. Salomon Brothers, according to the Mayor's description in "Bloomberg by Bloomberg," was "a dictatorship, pure and simple. But a benevolent one." Its leader, Billy Salomon, was "decisive and consistent," and "if he ever harbored doubts after making a decision, I never saw it." The executives all worked out in the open, side by side, without doors to allow for private politicking: "It was the ultimate 'what you see is what you get' environment." Those descriptions, published at the end of Giuliani's first term, sound almost like a mission statement for the future mayor, who went on to wrest control of the schools from the old Board of Education, ban smoking and trans fats, raise property taxes by nearly twenty per cent, close firehouses, and shut down Broadway to car traffic.

Bloomberg took office during a recession, and quickly established himself as a bold and decisive fiscal manager, ultimately demonstrating, as his friend Mitchell Moss, an urban-planning professor at N.Y.U., says, that New York was "open for business after 9/11." As the economy recovered, Bloomberg set about trying to transform the city, on a scale not seen since the days of Robert Moses. "I think if you look, we've done more in the last seven years than—I don't know if it's fair to say more than Moses did, but I hope history will show the things we did made a lot more sense," Bloomberg told me. "You know, Moses did some things that turned out not to be great: cutting us off from the waterfront, putting roads all along the water." The Bloomberg model, under the direction of Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff and Amanda Burden, the City Planning Commissioner, was based to a large extent on undoing the Moses legacy: rezoning for commercial and residential use large tracts of waterfront property that had once been the province of industry.

Grand projects in New York had long been believed to be unfeasible; the costs up front were too high, and the red tape too thick. (The Second Avenue subway has been in turnaround since 1929.) Urban planning was strictly an academic discipline, and development proceeded on a piecemeal basis. Doctoroff, who as an investment banker in the mid-nineties had dreamed of bringing the 2012 Summer Olympics to the city, persuaded Bloomberg to enable supersized, centrally planned mixed-use projects that would essentially create new neighborhoods from scratch: in downtown Brooklyn, in Hunts Point, on the far West Side of Manhattan.

Four years ago, while pushing for a new football stadium to anchor the Olympics bid, Bloomberg said, in an interview with this magazine, "All the great architects seem to want to work here. . . . Whether it's Sir Norman Foster, or Cesar Pelli, Viñoly, Piano—they all want to work here." Not by nature an anecdotalist, he also pointed to statistical trends like commercial vacancy rates (down) and residential real-estate prices (up) to bolster his case that the strategy was working.

Those trends, of course, have now been reversed. Neither the stadium nor the Olympics came to fruition, and, instead of great architecture, retrofitting is at the top of the agenda. Cataclysmic events like September 11th and the current global financial crisis have a way of occasioning revisionist thinking, and in the early months of this year, after the shock of the prospective third term had subsided, a more skeptical narrative of the Bloomberg mayoralty began to surface, in which he appeared less like Batman and more like a beneficiary of larger social and economic forces. One Manhattan businessman, after warning that he would say only "extremely positive" things for attribution, suggested that just about anyone could have been mayor from 2002 to 2008 and overseen sustainable development and growth. As the former *Times* columnist Joyce Purnick writes in a new book, "Mike Bloomberg: The Mogul and the Mayor," to be published next month, "Ed Koch had cracked the eggs, Giuliani had made the omelet, and then Bloomberg appeared, and served it."

The re-assessors rattle off similar lists of unfulfilled projects to imply that the verdict on grand-scale transformation is far from certain. The World Trade Center remains unbuilt, the conversion of the old Post

Office on Eighth Avenue into a new Penn Station—Moynihan Station—is stalled, and the real-estate giant the Related Companies has had to postpone financing for the Hudson Yards project on the West Side, where the stadium was to have gone. If Atlantic Yards, a proposed remaking of downtown Brooklyn centered on the relocation of the New Jersey Nets basketball team, ever proceeds, it will be greatly diminished, and without the participation of Frank Gehry, whose involvement was originally used as a selling point. The rezonings, which amount to an impressive one-sixth of the city's total land area, await the next boom cycle, but their primary imprint on the skyline, thus far, can be seen in luxury condominium towers and garish McMansion co-ops in Brooklyn and Queens that now seem emblematic of an unrealistic age when Wall Street money accounted for thirty-five per cent of the city's earnings.

Who would have guessed, back in 2002, when the businessman Mayor seemed to regard recycling as a discretionary luxury, that his physical legacy might come to be defined as much by the planting of a million trees and by lawn chairs in the middle of Times Square as by gleaming (and empty) new office towers? Third terms—think of Ed Koch, Mario Cuomo, or George Pataki—are rarely smooth, and, back in March, amid the public anger over bonuses paid to A.I.G. executives, a prominent political figure proposed the following scenario. Imagine, he said, that it is four years from now, and you're writing the political obituary of a failed mayor, as someone like Mark Green is about to be sworn in at City Hall on a populist wave. (Green, whom Bloomberg narrowly defeated in 2001, was moved by the term-limits extension to end his retirement from electoral politics, and is now seeking his old position of Public Advocate, and leading in the polls.) "It could happen," the man said. "It's not out of the question." Despite professing to "like Mike enormously," he did not sound displeased at the thought.

One day this spring, while waiting for an appointment at City Hall, I sat on a wooden bench outside the reception area and watched aides and visitors come and go. Their pace was hurried but not frantic, in keeping with one's image of a meritocratic machine at work. Spring is budget-making season, a lesson, even in more bountiful times, in the limits of a mayor's power. The state's legislative system virtually assures that the city gives billions more than it gets. This year brought the added pressure of a looming verdict in the capitol on renewing the Mayor's control of the public-school system, one of Bloomberg's earliest and proudest achievements, and Bloomberg had spent the morning upstate, meeting with Governor David Paterson, the Assembly Speaker, Sheldon Silver, and the Senate Majority Leader at the time, Malcolm Smith—the so-called Three Men in a Room who made up the capitol's power structure—to press for allotting federal stimulus money to education. After a few minutes, the receptionist got up and, using a brass kickstand, propped open the swinging gate through which everyone had been passing. She had just resumed her regular routine when the Mayor walked briskly through the open gate, trailed by a security guard. After he turned to head upstairs, the receptionist released the kickstand.

The Mayor works in a cubicle no bigger than his secretary's, and his regal entrance was a reminder of the inherent tension in Bloomberg's public persona—the technocrat whose daily commute often includes a chauffeured S.U.V. to the express subway stop. He was scheduled to meet the mayor of Jerusalem, in Giuliani's and Koch's old corner office, which has become a greenroom for visiting dignitaries, and features pillows that read, "It's my world—deal with it," and "Don't start with me. You will not win."

Bloomberg is often seen as having a unified vision for New York, but his experience of the city is highly compartmentalized. When he ran into Norman Seabrook, the president of the corrections-officers union, a couple of months ago, he asked how Bernard Madoff was enjoying Rikers Island, and it dawned on Seabrook that the Mayor might not have spent any more time thinking about the logistics of the correctional system than the average, disengaged citizen. (Madoff, a federal criminal, would never have been sent to Rikers, a city prison.) When he's bored, riding in the back seat of the mayoral S.U.V., Bloomberg counts pieces of trash—or, because his Department of Sanitation has proved more effective than most, he measures the distance between pieces of trash, by counting blocks. ("It is *fascinating*," he told me, and gave the example of Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, which was "like a sewer," he said, when he was first elected. "Today, you can go for blocks without seeing a piece of paper.")

In person, Bloomberg is lively and disarming. He told me that filthy streets are about all he remembers of life in New York in the seventies. "You know, you're young, and you're single, and you don't pay

attention,” he said. Unlike many accomplished people, who project unease around strangers, he jumps right into conversation. There are no awkward pauses or silences, and one isn’t left with the uncomfortable impression of having wasted the Mayor’s time. He tells stories that give a sense of unfiltered access to the back channels of power: say, about how it finally dawned on Bill Harrison, the former chairman of J. P. Morgan Chase, that he was retired (“He went downstairs, got in the back seat of his car, and it didn’t move”); or about the self-important hedge-fund guy who once approached Bloomberg and Joel Klein with “great news” about a plan that he and his friends had conceived (“They were going to raise a billion dollars to *fix* public education. When I told him our annual budget’s twenty billion . . .”). Invariably, given enough time, Bloomberg will slide into data mode, but on a conversational level he tends to deploy his figures in the service of folksy insights that stick with you. (“We’re down to the point where eighty-five per cent of our murder victims have criminal records, which means you’re really getting down to gun dealers killing gun dealers.”) He is capable of making even the budget process accessible verging on interesting, like a good introductory-level college instructor. His tone is conspiratorial and, therefore, inclusive—which may help explain the fact that the city’s five county Republican chairmen managed to emerge from a closed-door meeting with Bloomberg, in late February, convinced that he had voted for John McCain.

Bloomberg was attempting to make amends after his public resignation from the Party, in 2007, when he was still entertaining the idea of running for President as an Independent. He now wanted the convenience of the Republicans’ ballot line, again, for his reelection bid. He told reporters that the conversation had revolved primarily around President Obama, and, after the McCain rumor surfaced, denied having said anything about whom he’d supported in the past. “The consensus is he didn’t lie about that,” one leading Republican later told me, after making me promise not to mention which borough he is from, lest he incur any financial retaliation. “He just created a strong inference. As near as I can tell, he just said, ‘McCain’s a friend of mine.’ True statement. ‘Rudy Giuliani would make a great governor.’ True statement. Didn’t say he was going to *support* him, though he probably believes Rudy would make a better governor than this hapless guy we got right now.”

The city’s Republicans, outnumbered by six to one, are not under the illusion that they constitute a relevant and functioning political party, so their aims are small: a patronage appointment here, some cash there. They view Bloomberg as a conventional tax-and-spend liberal who has overseen fifty-per-cent growth in government spending, far outpacing inflation. Yet has any individual in the past decade contributed more money to Republicans, statewide, than the otherwise progressive Mayor? As one ambivalent Republican put it, “You have to lobby where the sun shines.” After several more weeks of notional deliberation, the Party leaders gave his third term their blessing.

Bloomberg, unlike some of his predecessors, is a strong proponent of the institutional role of the press, to which he often refers, sometimes in mock solemnity, as “the fourth estate.” He is an evangelist for the open exchange of information—his fortune was made this way—and at times seems to take an almost academic interest in the news-gathering process, interrupting with questions of his own at joint press conferences when he feels that the essential point (usually one that highlights New York’s success) is at risk of being obscured, or when his personal interest is sparked. (To Jeffrey Skiles, the co-pilot of the U.S. Airways plane that landed on the Hudson River last winter: “Had you ever hit a bird before? What’s it like?”) One of his first acts as mayor was to pay a visit to Room 9 in City Hall, where the beat reporters are stationed, and ask if there was anything he could do to improve their working conditions. (He had the room renovated in 2003.) But his estimation of the individual reporters who make up the City Hall press corps has never been high. They represent a different kind of hack—sloppily dressed, and resentful of power.

The following exchange occurred at the beginning of this year, after Anthony Weiner, a congressman who represents a district in Brooklyn and Queens, and the erstwhile mayoral-campaign front-runner, appeared before the Citizens Union, a good-government organization in lower Manhattan, and attacked Bloomberg’s fiscal record as an example of “the worst kind of boom-and-bust planning.” The political press thought it had the makings of at least a scrap, if not a real race, and sought a reaction. They got a scrap, but not the one they were hoping for:

Q: Mayor, can you respond to Anthony Weiner's criticisms of you this morning?

A: I didn't hear what Anthony Weiner said, so it's kind of hard to respond, and I'm not worried about campaigning. What we're trying to do today is spent working on the budget.

Q: If I could just read you a quote that he said this morning?

A: I just said that I didn't hear him, and I'm not going to respond, so if you want to waste your question, you've just done it. . . .

Q: Would you like us to read what he said?

A: I don't have any interest in reading. I've got enough things to read. I've got a pile this big on my desk every day.

Q: We would read it to you. That's what I'm saying.

A: That's nice. Well, that would show that you could read.

The mayor of New York is perhaps the highest-ranking official in the world whose job description still calls for answering daily, unscripted questions from a competitive news media, and if there is only one reason that Bloomberg envies President Obama's position then surely this must be it. As the Mayor has raised his national profile, and as his ambitions for his own job have grown nearly to the point of abstraction, with talk of changing the world and creating an idealized model of the democratic process, the ambition of the newsmen and women covering City Hall has remained basically the same: to drag Bloomberg back down into the municipal muck. Reporters thrive on opposition and conflict, but Bloomberg systematically squelches opposition, and although he can be a profane and antagonistic negotiator, he chooses not to dwell publicly on most conflicts. He is an unwavering believer in incremental progress, and feels that the small-minded grievances that drive daily circulation threaten to impede big-picture governance, of the sort that can be measured only through Scorecard Cleanliness Ratings, NYCStat Stimulus Trackers, and sustainability indicator dashboards. "We put out the information," he has said. "I wish people would take a look at it. Good news or bad news, it's *our* news."

Often, it is hard not to sympathize with the Mayor's frustration. Sometimes, however, it is Bloomberg's own peevishness that distracts from pressing issues, as was the case with Governor Paterson's announcement of a marriage-equality bill, in April. Bloomberg arrived late at the event, as Paterson was citing the Dred Scott case, in the course of a triumphant windup linking the cause of the moment to generations of struggle for civil rights. Paterson, despite an approval rating below President Bush's at its lowest, was in a gracious mood, at one point acknowledging the extreme public skepticism of all things originating in Albany ("where there is no gravity, and light waves bend right around the capital") and blaming, among other things, a leadership vacuum for the state's lagging reform.

"And right on cue, as soon as he heard we were doing this, rushing to my defense as he always does, the mayor of the City of New York," Paterson joked, welcoming Bloomberg, whose public support of the Governor has been tepid, and whose approval rating at the time exceeded that of President Obama. The Mayor's own speech, at least as written, was similarly exultant. "This is where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony began the struggle for women's suffrage," he said. "This is where the N.A.A.C.P. was founded a hundred years ago." Then, just as he started to connect the thread to gay rights, he froze, annoyed by an apparent noise disturbance, in front and off to his left.

Paterson, recognizing the need for a little levity, said, "Mayor, that's, like, your theme music."

"I appreciate that," Bloomberg said, unappreciatively. "Something's playing. Can we just stop this, and maybe we'll start again?"

To a person sitting toward the back of the room, near the network television cameras, the main conduits of the message, the source of the Mayor's irritation was initially unclear. Christine Quinn, the City Council Speaker, who could see what most in the room could not—that the offending device, a digital recorder that had fallen to the floor and activated, belonged to a young man in a wheelchair—leaned in to suggest another approach. She cupped her hand over the microphone and whispered, "He's disabled."

“I understand that,” the Mayor said. “He can still turn it off. It’s a little bit too important for playing music.” Twenty more seconds passed, during which the sound of cameras firing rapidly and the sight of politicians shifting and smiling uncomfortably behind Bloomberg certainly overshadowed the disturbance of the errant recorder. “All right, let me start again, because this is just too important to get disruptive,” Bloomberg finally said, and then trailed off, still unsatisfied. “Maybe we just take everything outside?” he suggested, glaring again at the man in the wheelchair, a twenty-four-year-old reporter named Michael Harris, who writes for the Web site Examiner.com. Harris suffers from a neurological disorder and is hard of hearing.

Bloomberg afterward sought to explain his tantrum as an act of equal-opportunity mistreatment (“You have a responsibility to make sure you don’t disrupt other people and so does every other reporter that’s here”), as his staff pointed out the lengths to which they had gone to accommodate Harris, providing an extra wheelchair-accessible van for transporting him from City Hall to the Mayor’s public appearances.

“The gift he gives is that his personality is not just neutral,” one political reporter later said of Bloomberg, and then added, “If he weren’t sometimes such a dick, it would be an unbearable beat.”

These days, with job loss on the minds of so many of his constituents, Bloomberg is fond of recalling his eventual firing from Salomon Brothers, in 1981, as the best thing that ever happened to him. Using ten million dollars in severance, he pursued “the great American dream” and started his own company, Innovative Market Systems—later Bloomberg L.P.—which was based on an awareness that financial professionals, who require fast access to vast quantities of information, could benefit from rapid advances in computer technology. It was a visionary enterprise—“This is not like adding a great Web site to the Internet,” Tom Secunda says. “This is like *building* the Internet”—but it was also, in an important respect, an accident, the result of Bloomberg’s having been demoted, two years before his firing, and placed in charge of Salomon’s I.T. division, which was thought to be beneath the attention of most senior partners. Bloomberg’s great vision was to find the opportunity in an unfortunate situation.

Last summer, as Merrill Lynch was collapsing and in desperate need of cash to remain solvent, Bloomberg saw another opportunity and bought out the firm’s twenty-per-cent stake in his company for four and a half billion dollars—a transaction that had the effect of making the Mayor’s personal wealth appear to grow (according to *Forbes*) in a year when the Gateses and Buffetts lost billions, and bolstering the impression that he is uniquely qualified to lead the city through the present downturn. Bloomberg entered City Hall with an estimated net worth of five billion dollars, and during his time there has more than tripled that amount.

Thanks to his money, Bloomberg has managed, perhaps more than any democratic politician ever before, to govern strictly with what he considers to be the greater good in mind. And, thanks to his money, the counterargument goes, he has essentially corrupted the system itself. New York, despite its vast complexity, still operates as a small, one-party town, and it’s been made even smaller by the concentration of financial and political power in a single man. “He’s probably been a fine mayor, but he seems a lot better, because all the usual agitators—groups that exist to drive a mayor crazy—have in one way or another been bought off,” one Democratic political consultant theorized. “It’s amazing the climate you can have when nobody is criticizing you.” Off the record, would-be critics complain about a phenomenon I’ve come to know as “anticipatory genuflection,” in which other politicians, anticipating a future or backup career in the nonprofit sector, when they might depend on the largesse of the extremely wealthy, defer too readily to the Mayor’s wishes. Bloomberg has never seemed greatly troubled by the systematic implications of such placating, and he once responded to an anecdote about a charity’s having expressed disappointment at the size of a check from the older of his two daughters, Emma, by saying, “That’s not very smart. Emma is going to run a very large foundation of her own some day.”

No one would accuse Bloomberg, who owns vacation homes in Vail, Palm Beach, London, and Bermuda, of having the common touch, yet his tastes are not particularly rarefied, or even well defined, and although he eats out most nights, making a point of rotating boroughs, his restaurant of choice is still a Greek diner—*any* Greek diner. But, through his philanthropic cultivation of the city’s arts foundations, dating

back to his pre-political days, he has put himself at the center of a social scene that bridges both sides of the Park, and extends uptown and downtown, to include the kinds of non-wealthy achievers who enjoy the attention of privilege. He lives with his longtime girlfriend, Diana Taylor, the former State Superintendent of Banks, and their two Labradors, Bonnie and Clyde, in a five-story Beaux Arts town house that, as a result of occasional targeted acquisitions in the neighboring building to the east, is effectively a double-wide. (Bloomberg and Taylor were recently named to *Vanity Fair's* 2009 International Best-Dressed List.) Art Garfunkel lives next door, as does Tom Wolfe, who once sent the Mayor a letter objecting to the administration's refusal to consider landmark status for Edward Durell Stone's "lollipop building," at 2 Columbus Circle, and received a lengthy personal reply. Eliot Spitzer lives down the block.

A man with an estimated sixteen billion dollars can't easily be said to have peers, and Bloomberg's circle sometimes seems culled from the guest list of "The Charlie Rose Show," which tapes in the offices of Bloomberg L.P. The Mayor's pals include all the usual real-estate big shots and the philanthropically minded financiers, like Pete Peterson and Felix Rohatyn, "wise men," as Bloomberg calls them, who helped orchestrate the city's bailout in 1975. ("How much of that's relevant, I don't know," he told me. "But it's a good sounding board. If you don't have any clothes on, they can tell you.") The crowd also includes members of a subset of Manhattan media, like Diane Sawyer and the gossip columnist Liz Smith, to whom the Mayor sometimes signs his letters "ME!" Smith first met Bloomberg on the recommendation of their mutual friend Barbara Walters, and now talks of having "the kind of delightful friendship you can have with an important person when you're a woman of a certain age." She credits Bloomberg with being the sort of rich man who likes and appreciates women, instead of simply "collecting" them, rebutting the crass caricature that lingers from the Mayor's C.E.O. days. ("I am a single, straight billionaire in Manhattan," he once told a reporter. "It's a wet dream.") "He's always just sweet and affectionate—very touchy-feely," Smith said. "I can't see not supporting anything that he wants to do."

If you live in New York, you have by now probably received seven or eight glossy brochures in the mail from Mike Bloomberg NYC, talking about his Five Borough Economic Opportunity Plan or his success in raising high-school graduation rates, and have seen, a few dozen times, his television commercials—in which he always seems to be dressed for the weekend—without a clear sense of whether or not he has an opponent. Seldom does a day pass without his campaign promoting a new endorsement. Imams, Bukharians, Reaganites: the variety is in some ways a testament to Bloomberg's broad appeal, and no constituency is apparently too small for doubling or even tripling up. According to his campaign literature, Bloomberg now has the official backing of "Korean Business Leaders," "Prominent Korean Leaders in the Garment Industry," and Yong Sun Kim, the president of the Korean Nail Salon Association. Absent an actual race to speak of, the campaign staff seems to have made a sport of matching endorsements to the calendar, for kicks. On Cinco de Mayo, the campaign locked up "Mexican Business and Community Leaders." And just in time for the Puerto Rican Day Parade there came this announcement: "Puerto Rican Guitar Legend and Eight-Time Grammy Award Winner Jose Feliciano Endorses Mike Bloomberg."

Despite the widespread certainty that he will win, and win big, Bloomberg has spent money at nearly twice the rate he did in 2005, when he defeated Fernando Ferrer, the Bronx Borough President, by nineteen points. The complaint that Bloomberg buys elections has this time around shifted, amid a dismal fund-raising climate, to a somewhat more troubling one about his using his wallet to preempt any real competition—hiring political operatives, in effect, not to work for anyone else. ("Camp Bloomberg," the *Observer* calls it.) Working for Bloomberg is an opportunity not to be dismissed lightly, given the potential for generous bonuses (Bill Cunningham, who advised both the 2001 and 2005 campaigns, has attributed his children's college tuition and his home mortgage to the Mayor's gratitude), along with the likelihood of a victory on the résumé, and a number of the consultants and strategists now on the Mayor's payroll were critics in the recent past. Howard Wolfson, Hillary Clinton's former spokesman, once argued that Bloomberg's excessive spending "distorts the terms of the debate," and is said to have fed a story to the *Times* in 2006 about the hypocrisy of Bloomberg's private funding of N.R.A.-backed candidates while publicly denouncing the spread of guns. Wolfson is now the campaign's communications director.

Bloomberg struggles righteously to maintain a wall between his governance, on which he is happy to expound on the level, and his campaign, whose staff is ready and willing to engage in the usual spin. And

while Bloomberg, as mayor, may have been unwilling to discuss Anthony Weiner's criticisms with the press, people close to his campaign let it be known from the start that the campaign was prepared to devote upward of twenty million dollars to ruining Weiner's reputation—portraying him as, for example, a model-crazy bachelor without scruples. (Weiner had proposed a bill to expand the number of visas available to foreign fashion models working in New York, some of whom attempted to contribute to his campaign.)

Weiner, who is forty-four, is tall and thin, with angular features that seem to accentuate his ambition. A striving career legislator, his entire life plan had seemed geared toward a run for City Hall this fall. He grew up in Brooklyn, pre-gentrification, apprenticed in the nineteen-eighties as an aide to Charles Schumer, then a congressman, and became, at twenty-seven, the youngest person ever elected to the City Council. When Schumer vacated his congressional seat after winning a race for the Senate, in 1998, Weiner took his place in the House. He has styled himself as an abrasive spokesman for outer-borough middle-class values, and is in many ways the anti-Bloomberg. Instead of spending his evenings on the charity cocktail circuit, he plays goalie in a men's ice-hockey league, with the same bunch of nobodies, week after week.

Fearing that all the negative attention might make him vulnerable to a future rival for his House seat, Weiner suspended his campaign in March, ostensibly to focus on the challenges in Washington. But what had appeared, at first, to be a political brushback pitch from Bloomberg's team began to seem, as the spring wore on, like running up the score, with the attacks persisting, and even intensifying, to the point of comedy. In the first week of May, the *Post* ran a story with the headline "WEINER'S A PUCKING GOOF-OFF," alleging that the congressman skips votes in order to play hockey at Chelsea Piers, in Manhattan. The article noted that Weiner (who has a voting attendance record of ninety-five per cent) had missed five voting sessions since 2005 on days when his team, the Falcons, was scheduled to play.

In Bloomberg's court, Weiner's jock persona was viewed with contempt, and, a few weeks before the story appeared, someone suggested in passing that I look into whether or not taxpayers had been funding Weiner's travel to and from Washington on hockey nights. Another political reporter, unaffiliated with the *Post*, predicted a hockey hit piece soon, and then forwarded me an e-mail from a Bloomberg campaign official linking to the *Post* story on the morning of its publication. Weiner formally announced his withdrawal from the race at the end of the month, in an Op-Ed for the *Times*, in which he cited the Mayor's "avalanche of television ads" and said, "I'm increasingly convinced a substantive debate simply isn't likely right now." A photograph of the congressman in his goalie mask was hung, scalplike, in the Bloomberg campaign headquarters, near Bryant Park.

The attention lavished on Weiner had another benefit, in that it allowed Bloomberg's campaign not to acknowledge his actual presumptive rival, Bill Thompson, the city comptroller. Thompson is an African-American with a professorial temperament whom Bloomberg likes. Thompson is also not naturally inclined to the kind of populist aggression that generates headlines, and until recently, when he began seizing on Bloomberg's struggles in the state capital, most New Yorkers were not aware that he was running.

Bloomberg may have ruled New York City for the past seven and a half years, but he hasn't ruled Albany. In times of fiscal difficulty, City Hall must depend upon the good graces of state legislators from farming communities outside Oneonta and depressed mill towns along the St. Lawrence River for funding its subways and its teachers. The Mayor and his deputies and commissioners had earned a reputation for lecturing the upstate lawmakers (who trade, instead, in favors), only to see their bold proposals denied, as in the case of the West Side stadium or last year's plan to reduce traffic and energy consumption by imposing heavy tolls on driving in midtown. The toll plan, known as congestion pricing, was wildly popular in progressive transportation circles, and variations on it have already been implemented successfully in places like London and Stockholm. Bloomberg's Transportation Commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, lobbied the State Legislature by arguing, "You are either for this historic change in New York or you're against it." An assemblyman from the Bronx, where the proposal was more commonly viewed as Manhattan-centric and elitist, took umbrage and circulated copies of the *News*, which reported that Sadik-Khan's chauffeur had been stopped on the way up for speeding and using his lights and sirens illegally. ("CONGESTION CAN'T WAIT," the headline read.)

“Albany is so complex,” Bloomberg said to me back in April, anticipating some of the troubles that came to plague his summer. “You have a governor who is a perfectly nice guy, and tries, but once you get down, even if it’s no fault of your own, it’s hard to pick yourself up. And you’ve got a State Legislature that’s dysfunctional at the moment. . . . What a cynic would say is you can’t fix it, because there’s no provision for a referendum, the way you have in California—which, incidentally, referendums have their own problems.” He went on, without irony, “There’s no term limits, so it just goes on and on and on. . . . An optimist’s point of view is that, if you had a governor who could lead, you could make a difference. Spitzer came in. Spitzer’s claim to fame was—very smart, very tough. Both of which were true. But it didn’t work very well. Paterson came in. Nice guy, friend of everybody, everybody likes him, and it’d be a big change from Spitzer—refreshing change. Well, that hasn’t worked well, either.”

Bloomberg’s traditional nemesis in Albany—the man often credited with being the most influential politician in the state—is Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, an Orthodox Jewish attorney from the Lower East Side who has represented the same legislative district for thirty-two years and proved impervious to criticism from élites. (All three dailies endorsed Silver’s challenger Paul Newell in the 2008 Democratic primary; Silver took sixty-eight per cent of the vote.) Until last fall, when the Democrats won a slim majority in the State Senate for the first time since 1965, Bloomberg’s chief upstate ally was the Republican state senator Joseph Bruno, another legislative mainstay, whom the Mayor relied on to counter the municipal unions’ heavy sway over the Assembly, and funded amply for his efforts. Bruno is now under indictment for corruption (he maintains his innocence), and when an elected official warned Bloomberg that his term-limits maneuvering could jeopardize his credibility with Albany lawmakers at a time when he would need their support on a vital issue like renewing schools control, Bloomberg replied, “We’ll make a deal with Shelly.” The Mayor sometimes uses a salesman metaphor when talking about government (“You have to be able to go to the next door with a smile on your face, ring the bell, and get the first rejection out of your mind”), and his customers in the legislature appear to have taught him, at last, to barter.

“The *Times* wrote a story, an editorial, that I should be up there screaming about the M.T.A.,” Bloomberg said, referring to the state-run transit agency’s latest fare-hike threats. “If I turn it into the old ‘Bloomberg congestion pricing,’ not a chance. You have to do it quietly. The state government said, ‘No, we’ll do it ourselves.’ O.K. I’ll be helpful, and I can work quietly behind the scenes, but you can’t have it both ways.”

By Memorial Day, the quiet approach appeared to be paying off. An M.T.A. bailout package fell short of Bloomberg’s aims for substantial capital improvements, but managed to prevent the doomsday scenario he and other politicians had been warning about. Speaker Silver was drafting a bill that would retain most elements of mayoral school control. Bloomberg and the City Council were close to working out a budget agreement that would avoid major layoffs, thanks in large part to a proposed rise in the sales tax, pending Albany’s likely approval, that could deliver nearly a billion dollars in new revenue. And, meanwhile, the local economy was faring better than expected.

Bloomberg visited Jamaica, Queens, with the Secretary of Labor, Hilda Solis, to announce a new job-training plan at the end of May. “I’m reasonably optimistic that we’ve turned the corner,” he said, prompting Azi Paybarah, from the *Observer*, to ask him whether, in light of the surprisingly favorable conditions, the Mayor’s stated rationale for running again—to save the city from a historic crisis—might no longer apply.

The press corps, in its churlishness, had come to view Bloomberg’s statements about the financial crisis as his weapons of mass destruction—a mere pretext—and was determined to get him to admit in public what even his friends acknowledge in private: that he is running again because he knows he is good at the job and because a comparably satisfying alternative, like heading the U.N. or the World Bank, is not available. (“No, it was not the economic crisis,” Mort Zuckerman told Joyce Purnick. “What else was he going to do?”)

Bloomberg turned on his questioner. “Why don’t you just get serious,” he said. Before leaving, he looked directly at Paybarah and muttered, “You’re a disgrace,” inadvertently echoing a press conference, in 2005,

at which he had called the prospect of a City Council override of term limits “disgraceful”—and thereby delighting his detractors. Within hours, a video of the latest tantrum was linked to the Drudge Report.

In the next few days, as the press took a Pyrrhic victory lap, the Mayor seemed to console himself with the long view that legacies are built on achievement, not temperament. And then a partisan squabble led to a coup in the State Senate, in early June, that seemed to render moot Bloomberg’s focus on repairing his relationship with Sheldon Silver and the Assembly. For a month, the Senate Democrats and Republicans bickered over questions of precedent and procedure, unable to produce a quorum, and, despite Governor Paterson’s efforts to compel a resolution, the scheduled end of the legislative session arrived without any action taken on either the crucial sales tax or control of the schools: partisanship trumping progress. The city’s Board of Education, which had run the schools before Bloomberg took control, was reconstituted overnight.

Political ironists were pleased to note that the mastermind of the Senate coup, and, by extension, of Bloomberg’s monthlong headache, was another billionaire with big ideas: Tom Golisano, the owner of the Buffalo Sabres hockey team and sometime Republican vanity candidate for governor. Golisano had helped finance the Democrats’ successful takeover of the State Senate, last fall, hoping that this might preserve his influence. But when he visited with the new Majority Leader, the Queens-based senator Malcolm Smith, in April, Smith kept looking distractedly at his BlackBerry. Golisano felt disrespected—Smith was guilty of *insufficient* genuflection—and eventually persuaded a couple of easy Democratic marks to switch parties, appearing to tip the balance back in favor of the Republicans and creating the legal standoff that shuttered the legislature.

Making matters more frustrating for Bloomberg, Golisano’s meddling had the unintended effect of emboldening a renegade faction of Democratic senators. When the Democrats regained the upper hand, after the Fourth of July, these senators seemed to revel in all the negative attention. They belatedly granted the sales tax but balked on the schools, arguing that parents felt alienated from the Bloomberg administration’s top-down management. Their driving motivation seemed more personal than ideological, and the more the Mayor seethed, the more determined they seemed to be to flaunt their unexpected power, breaking for summer and announcing that they’d revisit the matter in September, at their convenience. Bloomberg went on the radio and cited Neville Chamberlain and the dangers of appeasement. The senators, in turn, likened Bloomberg to a plantation owner.

For a few weeks, the senators had their fun, but they eventually relented. No one really wanted to return to the days of decentralization and runaway local school boards—they just wanted to see the Mayor sweat. The Albany bozos, as unlikely a Greek chorus as you could imagine, may have unwittingly been channelling the larger ambivalence of the general public. According to polls, a majority of the city’s voters would prefer a new mayor but also believe the current one is the best available man for the job.

On a rainy morning in June, Bloomberg arrived at the Dyker Beach Golf Course, in Brooklyn, wearing a horizontally striped polo shirt and khakis. He helped himself to a cup of coffee and took a seat at a table with the chef Mario Batali, the former Merrill Lynch C.E.O. Stanley O’Neal, and several other men, all of whom leaned forward, elbows bent, as though ready for class. He made a joke about term limits, to knowing laughter, and dismissed the “park-bench wisdom” that crime goes up when the economy goes down, noting that murders were down twenty-two per cent for the year thus far. “Don’t worry—we love New York,” a man in an Argyle sweater vest said. “We’re not leaving.” The Mayor was in his comfort zone.

Bloomberg is not a sports fan. He avoided taking up golf for far longer than most executives do, and began playing only shortly before deciding to run for public office, in his late fifties. But the challenges and the relentless frustrations of the game, and the never-ending quest for new personal benchmarks, seem to suit his nature, and he is said to have become proficient through tireless dedication. The occasion for his appearance was the eighth annual Mayor’s Cup, a charity event to benefit the City Parks Foundation, which recently opened a junior golf center at Dyker Beach.

Marty Markowitz, the Brooklyn Borough President, stood and thanked “the Tiger Woods of mayors.” He was dressed in a suit and tie, and said that he had never played a round of golf but that he recognized its social value to the city’s future strivers. (“Who knows, maybe if I’d taken up golf early in my life, besides having a similar birthday as Michael Bloomberg, maybe I could have matched him dollar for dollar.”) Markowitz was among those considering a run for mayor this year, before the term-limits upheaval, and last October, before the City Council vote, he forwarded an e-mail he’d received through the “Ask Marty” feature of the borough’s Web site to Kevin Sheekey, Bloomberg’s Karl Rove, that was perhaps the clearest indication of the way ordinary voters think about matters relating to the democratic process. It was from a resident of Brighton Beach, who wrote, “While I did not vote in favor of term limits, it is the law according to the wishes of the citizens of NYC. I do not approve of Mayor Bloomberg seeking to overturn the will of his constituents. Be that as it may, if he does manage to thwart the will of the citizens of this city, the only good that could come out of it is that you could run again.” Markowitz is now running for a third term of his own, virtually unopposed.

The golfers headed outside, into a light drizzle. The Mayor put on a pair of waterproof pants, a baseball cap, and a pullover with the logo of the Deepdale Golf Club, on Long Island, where he and Tom Brokaw and Frank Gifford and Sean Connery are reported to be members. He climbed into the passenger side of an electric cart and was driven to the fourth hole, a downhill par-3 with a few trees to the left and a small sand trap to the right—nothing treacherous. His job for the day was to play the same hole eighteen times, posing for pictures with each passing foursome.

While waiting for the first group to arrive, Bloomberg retrieved a 5-wood from his bag and teed up a couple of practice shots. His swing was hurried and ungraceful but his balls went straight, and the second rolled up to the fringe of the green. He saw fit to point this out to David Rivel, the executive director of the City Parks Foundation, who was standing nearby. Rivel opened a black umbrella featuring the Bloomberg L.P. logo.

“Hey, that’s very fancy,” the Mayor said. “I wonder what those things cost.”

“I just picked one out of the closet, I swear to you, and this is the one that came out,” Rivel said. “I’ve been to so many Bloomberg-sponsored events over the years.”

A black BMW convertible was parked behind the tee box, intended as a prize on the off chance that anyone sank a hole-in-one—the odds of which, Bloomberg pointed out, were thirty-three thousand to one. “What would I do if I won the car?” he asked, rhetorically. “First, I’d give it back so they can raffle it again. ‘Cause I don’t have a lot of use for it.” He then mentioned that he had recently stopped by the film set, in Times Square, of “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” starring Nicolas Cage, where a Ferrari had spun out and crashed into a Sbarro’s, injuring two bystanders. “And it was a seven-hundred-thousand-dollar car,” he said.

“Who’s got that kind of money?” a press aide added, evidently used to playing the straight man to a mayor for whom everything has a price.

“Didn’t even have a back seat,” Bloomberg said.

It was Friday. On Monday, the Senate coup occurred and the Mayor’s irritability returned, but for now he had only the problem of his golf stroke to address. The practice shots were starting to look like beginner’s luck—the stuff of first terms, with their low expectations. He was no longer hitting straight. He began to top the ball, and took first one mulligan, then another. Here, in the rain, as others around him shivered, he’d been reduced to the level of an ordinary hack. The mosquitoes were out in force, but if they were biting the Mayor he didn’t let on. Barring catastrophe, he’d have four more years to try to win a car he doesn’t need.

◆

ILLUSTRATION: GERALD SCARFE

[Print E-Mail Feeds](#)

Share:

- [Digg](#)
- [facebook](#)
- [Yahoo! Buzz](#)
- [More](#)

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: