

Rudy defeat marks end of 9/11 politics

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Rudy Giuliani's distant third-place finish in Florida may put an end to his bid for president, and it seems also to mark the beginning of the end of a period in Republican politics that began on Sept. 11, 2001.

Giuliani's national celebrity was based on his steady, comforting appearance in Americans' living rooms amid the terrorist attacks, and his campaign for president never found a message beyond that moment.

The emotional connection he forged that day, it seems, has proved politically worthless. After months of wonder that the former mayor seemed to have no ceiling to his support, he turned out to have no floor, trading fourth-place finishes with Ron Paul, a little-known Texas congressman.

"There's a paradox for Rudy," said former Nebraska Sen. Bob Kerrey, who was a member of the 9/11 Commission. "One of the things he did very well on 9/11 was say, 'We've got to get back to normal.' And that's what's happened. We've gotten back to normal."

Giuliani's failure reflects a broader shift in the American landscape, in which Sept. 11 has so diminished as an emotional touchstone that neither The Gallup Organization nor The Pew Research Center has even polled Americans about the attacks for a half year.

"We have 9/11 fatigue in the United States," said Mitchell Moss, a professor at New York University and an adviser to Giuliani's successor, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a technocrat who has focused on the future, and away from 9/11 and terrorism-related concerns.

Giuliani isn't the only one who suffered from the declining salience of the terror attacks. The Partnership for a Secure America, a bipartisan group that's still pressing to fulfill the recommendations of the 2004 9/11 Commission Report, announced Tuesday that it had produced a 30-second television advertisement to remind Americans of the threat of nuclear terrorism. A country that was brought to war less than five years ago in part by the specter of a "smoking gun" in the form of "a mushroom cloud" now needs reminding that the threat even exists.

"The American attention span has always been very short," former New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean, the former chairman of the commission and an adviser to the Partnership, told Politico.

When Gallup last asked about Sept. 11, in the summer of 2007, only 43 percent of Americans considered the war in Iraq "to be part of the war on terrorism which began on Sept. 11, 2001." Four years earlier, in the summer of 2003, 57 percent of Americans believed the war in Iraq was related to the Sept. 11 attacks.

It was that perception shift that made a Sept. 11 campaign far more effective in 2004 than in 2008. The image of George W. Bush standing amidst the rubble of the World Trade Center gave the Bush campaign an anchor to effectively tout their candidate's leadership qualities.

But in the ensuing years — as the war in Iraq plummeted in popularity, concern over imminent attacks ebbed, and Americans became increasingly worried about the economy — the evocative image of Giuliani managing a city under attack became less and less relevant.

The Giuliani campaign failed to shift with the country. Last year, as Sept. 11 was receding from the American zeitgeist, Giuliani's strategists made his performance that day the bedrock of his campaign.

"They never made the pivot from success as a leader after 9/11 in New York to the ability to make success as a leader in federal or national government," said Matt Dowd, the chief strategist for George W. Bush's 2004 campaign. "They over relied on 9/11. There was no reason to talk about that. It was baked into his DNA. What they had to do was to make the transition from why what he did in the aftermath of 9/11 why that would make him a great leader at the time of any situation."

Instead, Giuliani managed to do something that would have been unthinkable a few years earlier: He turned 9/11 into a punch line. The late-night television riffs bubbled into prime time during a Democratic debate in October, when Sen. Joe Biden dismissed the former mayor scornfully.

"There's only three things he mentions in a sentence: a noun, a verb and 9/11," Biden said.

Giuliani's campaign tried in vain to awaken the country to the urgency of terrorism with a television ad released Jan. 2, which featured chanting terrorist hordes and the images of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and Osama bin Laden. Another ad, released Jan. 18, flashed an image of the ruined Twin Towers.

"When the world wavered and history hesitated, he never did," said the narrator.



His ads, though, drew more snide jokes than votes, and he closed out his campaign in Florida on the relatively anodyne question of insurance policy.

After growing accustomed to tapping into fears of terrorism and faith in Republican strength, Giuliani's failure will force a major shift in Republican campaigns, some GOP strategists said.

"Between the trauma of 9/11 and the civil war we had over the present policy in the Gulf — people have reached a point where they're just exhausted by it. I think that's a terrible, terrible thing," said Rick Wilson,

a Florida-based GOP adman who produced perhaps the iconic post-9/11 television ad: Saxby Chambliss' searing attack on the willingness of Democratic Sen. Max Cleland, a Vietnam War hero, to keep America safe — a spot illustrated with the visages of Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

"Americans want to watch 'America's Top Model' — and they really, really don't want to be reminded that bad people want to kill them," said Wilson, who worked for Giuliani's 2000 Senate campaign and advised him informally this year. "Talking about 9/11 now is like 'Remember the Maine.'"