

State of the Mayor

By Leonard Quart

IT'S BEEN hard to focus on New York City politics while the Bush administration stokes up the war rhetoric daily and ships more battle-ready troops to the Persian Gulf. Still, a number of significant urban matters have come up during the past few weeks that demand commentary.

The one that was most striking was Mayor Bloomberg's precipitous decline in the popularity polls with 53 percent of New Yorkers disapproving of the way he handles the job. I find that statistic truly disturbing, though given the nature of the electorate, not really unexpected.

Bloomberg's recent achievements in office have been impressive. The latest was an agreement signed with the Legal Aid Society that would bring to a close the interminable courtroom battles they have waged against the city over the way homeless families are housed. The agreement would bring the city back in control of the family shelter system (mediated by a three-member panel that will evaluate the shelters and suggest improvements), and it would permit the city to eject from shelters those families who refuse to accept apartments offered them.

Bloomberg also proposed a well-received reorganization of the New York school system by replacing the 40 district superintendents with 10 regional superintendents who will focus on instruction and six service centers that will handle everything from hiring to bus schedules. The aim of the plan is to centralize the system's power, cut layers of bureaucracy (many of the district employees would likely return to the classroom), and create a uniform back-to-the-basics curriculum for all but the top 200 schools. The proposal was a cogent if not innovative one. The transformation of the school system is a daunting task, and over the years we've seen so many new plans go awry that have merely accelerated the system's decline.

Obviously, Bloomberg holds power in a period when the city's unemployment rate is one of the highest in the country, and he has had to face tough decisions like raising taxes and cutting jobs when dealing with the severe budget crisis. But none of this sufficiently explains why the New York public dislikes him so.

The public clearly wants a mayor who will connect to them emotionally, whom they see as one of their own, but at the same time, someone charismatic and larger than life. Giuliani's authoritarianism and Koch's absurd egotism were acceptable to the public because these men

were bold, flamboyant, and populist politicians. They pressed flesh and seemed passionate about both the city and the needs of a good portion of their constituency (African-Americans excluded), and were as different as possible from the rhetorically flat and emotionally remote Bloomberg. Bloomberg, in turn, speaks publicly and proposes changes with a directness and matter-of-factness that barely acknowledges the political significance of his actions. (Contrast his political style with Gov. Pataki's odious mix of elusiveness, hypocrisy, and rank political opportunism.) Bloomberg doesn't seem to pay attention to polls and answers questions from the press without a politician's normal evasiveness. He is a billionaire who doesn't pretend to be a "regular guy," (no pork rinds or malapropisms) and in an age where politicians' personalities are often much more important than the substance of their beliefs and achievements, Bloomberg's political (or anti-political) style deserves admiration.

Though it's doubtful Bloomberg will radically transform his personality, he will ultimately have to become less the CEO and more the politician. He will have to learn to communicate and empathize with the electorate. There is no person in political power who can avoid projecting public warmth and concern if he wants to garner support for his programs and get re-elected. In fact, in his recent budget address, Bloomberg had already learned to deliver the bad news with repeated references to the "human tragedy" that must accompany cuts in city services.

Since I'm writing about city politics I wanted to recommend a short book, *A New Deal for New York*, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Mike Wallace, author of "Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898." The new book offers a plethora of proposals for how to rebuild downtown Manhattan, and, more importantly, how to revive the city as a whole. Many of the proposals are imaginative, others are commonsensical, but what's most interesting is Wallace's linking up his vision of the future city with FDR's New Deal.

In the 1930s New York was the seat of social policy innovation, and the terms New Dealer and New Yorker were virtually interchangeable. Wallace writes of the New Deal's commitment to relief in the form of income and jobs, its attempt to "jump-start the economy," and its commitment to rebuilding the city's infrastructure. What Wallace proposes is a 21st century version of the New Deal for New York -- one that is "bolder, smarter, more inclusive." Of course, his is an overly sanguine vision, but it's heartening that somebody is willing to think audaciously about the city's future.