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A Greener Gotham

A NEW DEAL FOR NEW YORK By Mike Wallace
Reviewed by Michael Tomasky

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Mohammed Atta and his confederates did not know this, presumably, but when they attacked the World Trade Center, they struck not at a colossal, lustrous symbol of American capitalism, but at a boondoggle-ish and quite unloved – at least up through Sept. 10, 2001 -- emblem of state corporatism, New York-style.

For as the towers were rising in the 1960s and early 1970s, New York itself was falling. The city fathers had decided that New York's future lay in the financial-services industry, and they designed land-use and tax policies that would stimulate the building of office space while encouraging manufacturers and other "under-utilizers" of their precious real-estate parcels to find other pastures. That they did; in a few years' time, the city was generating prodigious wealth, to be sure, but its oft-mythologized working class had shriveled and the welfare rolls had ballooned. The towers, built by a public agency, were central to that strategy, and, with their sheer size representing the audaciousness of the gamble, they understandably became a flashpoint in an argument that started in about 1960 and really hasn't stopped.

It is an irony of the trade center's demise, then, that the yawning, 16-acre hole where the towers once stood has only served to reanimate the debate. What should go there? And since we're on the subject of rebuilding, shouldn't we just rethink pretty much everything that's happened in the last 40 years?

Mike Wallace thinks so. Wallace is a history professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and co-author of the masterful *Gotham: A History of the City of New York to 1898*, which won a Pulitzer Prize for history (with those credentials, he deserves not to be thought of as the other Mike Wallace). He has earned a place among the handful of scholars whose knowledge of the city, and passion for it, entitle him to say his piece and demand that the rest of us listen.

A New Deal for New York is Wallace's prescription for what to do now. It is part analysis and part polemic; and while it is more successful as the former than as the latter, it serves as a valuable guide to what the city can be if its political leaders can summon the will -- and find the money -- to undertake the kind of great public acts that New York, in its heyday, accomplished with such stunning regularity.

This short manifesto arrives in three logically ordered sections. The first addresses what should happen at Ground Zero and in lower Manhattan generally. The second expands

the gaze out to the city as a whole. The third discusses the priorities of the first two sections in a larger political and historical context. Along the way, he makes it manifestly clear what the world according to Wallace would look like. Your view of his judgments will very much depend on how you feel about phrases such as "the Lay/DeLay Axis of Avarice," referring to the disgraced former Enron CEO and the truculent House majority leader.

Pugnacious as Wallace's tone sometimes is, his proposals, at least in the first section, are not terribly controversial. Like most New Yorkers, he opposes rebuilding all 12 million square feet of office space lost in the attack and favors a mixed-use approach that will bring residential housing, nightlife and cultural and nonprofit institutions to the area. As for the Trade Center site itself, he notes -- surprisingly, since his disdain for Giuliani is evident in various passages -- that "my own vision leans toward Giuliani's" notion of preserving the plot as parkland and a memorial.

When he turns to writing about the city as a whole, Wallace's engine begins to rev. He bounces from one proposal to the next -- on housing, public health, the vital question of resuscitating New York's port, other pressing needs. The narrative sometimes smacks of the kitchen-sink approach, and his arguments are stronger when he stops to linger over a matter for three or four paragraphs. For example, the city once collected a transfer tax on all sales of stock. The financial-services industry won its repeal in the 1970s. But in fact, Wallace says, the tax is still collected, "only to be immediately returned." The case he makes for allowing the city to keep 10 percent of the revenue -- \$ 800 million a year -- is a persuasive one for these distressed times when all of us are supposed to be doing our share to get the city back on its feet.

But that can't really happen, Wallace emphasizes in the closing section, without a massive national effort to invest in New York's, and the country's, "social capital." Hence, the title: A new New Deal is what's needed, to focus resources on housing and public health but also "to launch a Prometheus Project" to tap alternative energy sources and promote "green" construction. Any prayer of this happening depends on "an urgent need to re-nerve liberal Democrats into retaking control of their party." He offers little insight into how this might happen. Wallace is not a political operative, so drawing a detailed road map here isn't necessarily his responsibility in life. A New Deal for New York would have benefited from a more rigorous retailing of how we get there from here, but it estimably lays out the goals to which New York should aspire. *

Michael Tomasky is a columnist for New York magazine.

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