JOHN CORRY

New York, New York

America's Hero

THE SKY WAS crystalline blue the day it happened, and it stayed that way through Thanksgiving. The leaves turned color, but remained on the trees. Central Park was dappled in red, russet, and gold. It was the loveliest Indian summer New York had seen in years, as if somehow the city was being compensated for the evil that had overtaken it. Indeed you could sit on a bench in Battery Park in the warm afternoon sunshine and look out on the glistening harbor, and even though the rubble was only a few streets away, everything seemed as before. The promise of New York was still intact, and it would remain the world's capital. September 11 had not changed that.

Or so you hoped and truly believed, although you knew everything could not be the same as before. The attack on the World Trade Center had killed nearly 3,000 people. It also had made a city that only recently regained its old exuberance aware of its own vulnerability. The Twin Towers had anchored the

skyline at the southern end of Manhattan. New Yorkers might have taken them for granted, although they could never ignore their presence. They had risen up 110 stories each from a perfect square at the base, and then loomed over the city like sentinels. It was unlikely they were ever anyone's favorite buildings, but they had inspired a kind of awe. Seen from a distance, or when flying in over the city, the Twin Towers took on the visual force of the Pyramids. Over the years they had embedded themselves in the city's consciousness, and become its best-known emblem. On September 11, though, they vanished, and in their place were only grave sites. Bodies lay in the Twin Towers' ruins, and so, it seemed, did the city's best hopes for the future.

You must understand now that the business of New York has always been business. The Dutch founded New York as a business enterprise, and commerce has made its heart beat ever since. Some of its glories are made of steel and concrete, solid and visible; others are things of the spirit, aspirations and dreams that can only be felt. But both are shaped by the city's economy, and the attack had left the economy damaged. Just how badly it was damaged, or how long it might take to recover, was difficult to know, but pessimism seemed in order. The Chamber of Commerce and the New York City Partnership, which represents the companies that make up the city's business elite, estimated that 100,000 jobs had been lost in and around the World Trade Center, as well as almost 30 percent of the office space. And in turn, they said, this put "at risk" many of the 270,000 jobs still in place south of Chambers Street. In other words, there would be a ripple effect, and in time it would be felt throughout the city. The city comptroller said there would be $100 billion in economic damage within two years. Moreover, because of the slowing economy and a drop in tax collections, especially those from the big Downtown

financial firms, the city's own finances already were in decline before September 11. After September 11, the decline became a free fall. Revenues fell, and expenses climbed, and while the city had been projecting a small surplus, it now saw a $4 billion deficit. How would it meet its needs?

Neither Washington nor New York State was likely to bail the city out. A sympathetic President Bush pledged $20 billion in aid the day after the attack, but then Congress intervened. New York was to get $11.1 billion in emergency aid for the year. Meanwhile the state was having its own problems, and Gov. George Pataki said he wanted $54 billion in federal aid to solve both the state's and the city's problems. No one took that seriously; the $54 billion wish-list was stuffed with pork. But it did make clear that for the most part the city would have to fend for itself. It might get reimbursed for its huge cleanup and security expenses, but then it would be on its own.

RUDOLPH GIULIANI'S REAL ACCOMPLISHMENT

But outwardly at least, Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, New York's outgoing and incoming mayors, respectively, seemed confident. The city is "alive and well and open for business," Bloomberg proclaimed after he was elected. He won because of September 11. Only days before the election he had been expected to lose. He trailed his Democratic opponent, Mark Green, in the polls, and was no more than a blur to most voters. He had founded Bloomberg, the financial-information service, and was very rich. He had become a Republican because he thought the Democrat mayoral primary would be too crowded. Just what he would do, or try to do, if he were elected mayor was mostly unknown, although in his speeches, which he gave with a Boston, not a New York, accent, he said there should be less state intervention in city affairs, and that business

development should be encouraged. But none of this was likely to grip voters, and as Green said of Bloomberg, possibly correctly, "When he's been to all the neighborhoods like I have, perhaps he'll be slightly more insightful and credible."

Nonetheless Bloomberg won. He had spent $69 million of his own money on the campaign, or $92 or so for each voter, and been endorsed by Rudy Giuliani, but more important, he wasn't Mark Green. When New York finally focused on the election, it found him wanting. He was a casualty of the terrorist attack. The Democratic primary was supposed to be held September 11, but it was suspended in mid-morning, and the mayoral campaign disappeared from front pages and evening news broadcasts. When it reappeared a few weeks later it was only to remind the heavily Democratic city of the local Democratic Party's infinite capacity for racial warfare. Fernando Ferrer, the Bronx Borough president, Green's principal challenger in the rescheduled primary, talked of "two New Yorks." The Green campaign said that was a racial appeal: Ferrer was trying to divide the city by appealing to blacks and other Latinos. After Green won the primary, Ferrer said that Green had been racist. For one thing, he had used an ad that questioned Ferrer's competency, and asked, "Can we afford to take a chance?" And that, Ferrer and his campaign manager said, was a racial appeal. They demanded a recount of the vote, and complained to the Democratic National Committee about Green's supposedly unfair tactics. Even Bloomberg got involved, although it was unlikely many people noticed. He said that he himself would never have run the ad that questioned Ferrer's competency, and demanded to know why Green did.

Meanwhile fires still burned at the World Trade Center—they would not be completely extinguished until the week before Christmas—and the air was still acrid over Downtown Manhattan. Bodies, or parts of bodies, were being pulled from

the ruins, and there were funerals for lost firemen and police officers every day. New York had seen disasters before, but never anything like this, and when it finally focused on the election, the only question was, who would best help it to recover? In the ten days before the election, Green's poll numbers declined. Television ads in which Giuliani praised Bloomberg were responsible in part, but equally important, New York was at last paying attention. Green, the city's public advocate, had impeccable liberal credentials. He had begun his career with Ralph Nader, and been a champion of good causes ever since. If Giuliani had left office before his term was up to run for the Senate, Green would have become mayor. Under law, the public advocate, a kind of civic ombudsman, was next in the line of succession, and Green seemed to think this somehow entitled him now. His sense of self-worth was apparent; his manner was somewhat aloof. In earlier years that probably would have been interpreted as proof of his commitment to high principle. September 11, however, changed how New York saw things. Traditional liberal credentials, no matter how impeccable, declined in value, and rather than being an asset they seemed more likely to be a hindrance. At best they were an irrelevance. Sterner qualities were needed in a city that must deal with a crisis, and if New York could not re-elect Giuliani—barred by law from running for a third term—it certainly would not elect Green, the candidate who was most unlike him. Green still had his backers—the *New York Times*, for one, supported him and not Bloomberg—but to most of the city, its middle classes especially, he seemed like a man from the past, trailing useless baggage behind him.

Giuliani, of course, had inspired the city and much of the rest of America. A Time-CNN poll in December found that 90 percent of all Americans thought that the way New York had responded to the terrorist attacks had helped to rally the coun-

try; 94 percent said Giuliani had done either a "very good" or a "good" job in providing leadership. *Time* chose Giuliani as its "Person of the Year," and said that his performance after September 11 "ensures that he will be remembered as the greatest mayor in the city's history, eclipsing even his hero, Fiorello LaGuardia. . . . Giuliani's eloquence under fire has made him a global symbol of healing and defiance." Even the *Times* praised his performance after September 11. It said the crisis had brought out the best in him, and that he had shown a side of his character he had not shown before. The crisis in fact had brought out the best in Giuliani; the man and the moment had met, and he had been the true voice of New York.

Still, the strengths and virtues he showed after the terrorist attack were much the same ones he had shown before it. The *Times* and most of the city's elite, however, had not recognized them then for what they were, and had seen in them instead something unattractive and even menacing. It was mostly a visceral reaction. Giuliani, the grandson of Italian immigrants, was born in Brooklyn, and had attended parochial schools. Four of his uncles were cops, and one was a Fire Department captain. But another uncle, kept at a distance by Giuliani's father, was a mob-connected loan shark. When Giuliani was young he thought he might become a priest, but when he grew up he went into law enforcement. He was a product of his background, and he was just not the *Times*'s kind of man.

Separate now the paper's news coverage of the terrorist attack from its oracular editorial pronouncements. The coverage was splendid, and made the *Times* a leading contender for a Pulitzer Prize when the Pulitzers were next to be awarded. But the editorial pronouncements, as they often do, reflected a city of the *Times*'s own making. When most of New York hoped that Giuliani would find a way to waive the rules that kept him from a third term, and even West Side liberals were

writing in his name on Democratic primary ballots, the *Times* said it was only Republicans who wanted him to run again. Nonetheless the editorials have their uses; they record a way of thinking. The *Times* listens to the city's elites, and the elites listen to the *Times*, and on municipal matters they speak as one. Their views on Giuliani and how New York should be governed may be found in the paper's editorials.

New York in the 1980s was the poster city for liberal politics gone sour. Crime was up, municipal services were down, and the sound of the city was a car alarm at two in the morning. The city needed a new leader, someone not associated with the old regime. But in 1989, when Giuliani, then U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, ran for mayor, the *Times* supported his opponent, David Dinkins. Giuliani, it feared, was a Reagan Republican. He might also be "harsh and moralistic." However, Dinkins, "warts and all," was a "known quantity," and a "practical Democrat." And as New York's first black mayor, he would "instill a sense of pride and participation in blacks and other minority groups."

Dinkins won, and in 1993 the *Times* again supported him over Giuliani, although it needed a torturous editorial almost twice as long as the 1989 one to do it. New York was in an even steeper decline than before, and race relations were worse than ever. Gloom was palpable, and the city seemed resigned to its own decay. Obviously New York was in crisis, but try as the *Times* did, it was unable to explain the crisis away. Instead it attacked Giuliani. It said he was "a man of harsh attitudes," who was "prone to lurching behavior," and that at a police rally he had once used "barnyard language." The election, the *Times* said, was about "values," and if you understood that, you knew that Dinkins was "clearly the more worthy" candidate.

But Giuliani won, and his "values" turned out to be healthier for New York than those of the *Times* or any of his other

equally precious critics. He had promised to improve the "quality of life," and he did. The change was almost immediate. Squeegee men and panhandlers seemed embedded in city life; so did welfare cheats and deadbeats. The unacknowledged assumption was that any attempt to remove them would be mean and undemocratic. But the squeegee men went first, and the cheats and deadbeats were not far behind them.

Meanwhile New York, once the butt of late-night television jokes, became the safest big city in America. Neither demographics nor a booming economy, or any combination of the two, could explain why its crime rate dropped as sharply as it did. But soon after becoming mayor, Giuliani told the police department that the incidence of crime—the number of shootings, say, or robberies—mattered more than arrests did. When the incidence rates rose in any of the city's seventy-three precincts, he wanted to know why. Often he would call precinct commanders himself. Soon parks and public places began to fill up with families and children, and not panhandlers and junkies. Neighborhoods were revitalized, tourism was revived, and the city regained its old confidence. It was morning again in New York.

Consequently the *Times* surrendered in 1997, and endorsed Giuliani over his weak Democratic opponent, although it still had reservations. It recognized many of his accomplishments, but said he still had to learn to control himself. He had a "combative temperament," and his "pugnaciousness" was unattractive. But if Giuliani had not been combative and pugnacious, he would not have been able to turn New York around. Blight would have spread, confirming the fear that the city was ungovernable, and that there was an inevitability about its decay. If there had been a terrorist attack under those conditions, it would have had a far more devastating effect than the one on September 11. A dispirited New York would have been without

the emotional resources and resilience it needed to recover. But no one wrote the city's obituary after September 11, and as admirable as Giuliani's performance was then, he had done his most important work long before that. He had restored New York's self-confidence, and given it the strength to cope. He had shown it how to deal with a crisis.

NEIGHBORHOOD VALUES

But what if calamity should strike again? In November a jetliner broke apart after taking off from Kennedy Airport and plunged into Rockaway Beach in Queens, a neighborhood already mourning the deaths of some 80 residents lost at the World Trade Center. Meanwhile all 251 passengers on the jetliner died. Most were Dominicans by birth, and New Yorkers by adoption. The city was stricken, and the *Daily News* put out a special edition with a single word on the front page: "Why?" The meditation inside began: "In the depths of his despair, the biblical Job pondered a question for the ages, 'Why do the just suffer and the wicked flourish?' New Yorkers could be forgiven for wondering if God was testing them yesterday after the city endured its second cataclysm since September 11." The *News* is a tabloid, and tabloids sing the songs of the city. If God was testing New Yorkers, then He knew they would somehow survive. There has always been a grittiness to life in New York. It comes from cramming too many people into too small a space, and then insisting they all get along, and while the remarkable thing is that they more or less do get along, there is always some tension. Out-of-town visitors may experience this as rudeness or coldness, but it is really the restless, nervous energy that courses through the city and makes it unlike anywhere else. New York is an idea as much as a place, and whatever its

discomforts, people live there by choice. In a way, adversity becomes them.

A month before the attack, a New York Times-CBS News poll asked New Yorkers whether they thought the city would be a better or worse place in which to live in ten or fifteen years: 34 percent said it would be better, and 25 percent said it would be worse; 32 percent said it would be the same. But in a similar poll a month after the attack, 54 percent said that in ten or fifteen years the city would be a better place in which to live, while only 11 percent said it would be worse; 26 percent said it would be the same. The poll the month before the attack also found that 59 percent of New Yorkers thought life in the city had improved in the previous four years. In the second poll, taken the month after the attack, even as smoke still rose from the World Trade Center, 69 percent said they thought life had improved. No doubt that was an expression of defiance, but there was something else, too. September 11 had been horrendous, but it had also awakened a new appreciation of the city.

Much has been made about how the attack left New York steeped in shock, but not enough about how quickly it began to recover. New York was probably better able to cope with what happened September 11 than any other city on earth. Mindful of the 1993 terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center before he became mayor, Giuliani created the Office of Emergency Management soon after he was elected. Disaster scenarios were drawn up, and emergency procedures established for potential calamities. Some of them went into effect on September 11. Ambulances were at the World Trade Center, for instance, only minutes after the terrorists struck. No one, however, had envisioned hijacked airliners flown into skyscrapers, and when the first airliner struck 1 World Trade Center, the North Tower, it seemed possible a terrible accident had

taken place. But eighteen minutes later, the second airliner hit 2 World Trade Center, the South Tower, and New York knew it was under attack. In the next hour both towers collapsed. The buildings at 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 World Trade Center fell later, and sixteen acres of Manhattan were covered with more than one million tons of twisted steel and burning rubble. "I don't know what the gates of hell look like," a man who escaped from one of the towers said, "but it's got to be like this."

When the towers fell they disintegrated into a thick gray cloud that sped outward over the streets, and choked the air with dirt. Hundreds of thousands of office workers fleeing the disaster area had to trudge through the cloud on foot. Some were injured, and many were in shock, and almost all were preternaturally quiet. There was fear and uncertainty, of course, but no widespread panic, and it was much the same way throughout the city. A hush fell over New York, and people walked the streets. Only the day before they would have avoided eye contact, but now they sought it out. Clumps of people formed and re-formed, and asked one another what they had heard. Strangers stopped strangers who looked bereaved, and asked if they could help them. Food banks were started, and clothing drives begun. Blood-donor volunteers were so numerous on September 11 that hospitals had to turn most away; they did not have the facilities to receive them.

Meanwhile the city at large was in stasis, with bridges and tunnels closed, airports shut down, and buses and subways disrupted; but neighborhoods kept functioning, and the neighborhoods are the bones and sinews of the city. The fabled and celebrated people of New York do not as a rule live in those neighborhoods, but ordinary people do, and life there is not the same as it is in, say, the East 60s or the West Side of Manhattan. To be sure, they are neighborhoods, too, and the city would be poorer without them. They give New York cachet, along with

its most advanced thinking. But death and destruction demand a utilitarian response, and not advanced thinking. On September 11 the city was reclaimed by the people from the other neighborhoods. They rescued New York physically, and then their values sustained it.

Flags flew everywhere after the attack. They were also hung from apartment and office buildings, and fastened to street signs, automobile antennas, and park benches. There were flag decals on city buses. If you looked south from Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, you saw the cloud of smoke over what had been the World Trade Center, but if you looked to the north you saw flag after flag, all the way to Central Park. Granted that flying a flag may be an empty gesture, or—remember this was New York—perhaps no more than a fashion statement. Oscar de la Renta put flag decals on his models when he had his winter showing. Other designers did much the same. Nonetheless the patriotic feeling that swept New York was real. When the City Opera opened its season four days after the attack, the entire company came on stage. The company's artistic director asked the audience to stand for a moment of silence, and then join in singing "The Star-Spangled Banner." The audience did, and people cried. At Broadway shows, audiences sang "God Bless America." At the Central Synagogue on Lexington Avenue, the congregation sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee" during Rosh Hashanah.

For the city had suffered a terrible wound, and New Yorkers found solace in expressing a love for their country. In a way, they were also rejoining their country. The glory of New York—the idea of New York—is that millions of people of all colors, beliefs, and nationalities can live in one big city while they pursue their dreams and raise their families, and not get in one another's way. So you may think of New York as representing the best of America, although there have long been suspicions

that it is really not a part of America at all. It is too decadent and too international, and it dismisses both traditional patriotism and the old-fashioned manly virtues. The heartland is supposed to be a very long distance away.

But that was before the flags flew and people cried when they sang the National Anthem, and in fact the heartland had never been as far away as anyone thought. It had always been there in the neighborhoods. After September 11, the city's Board of Education passed a unanimous resolution requiring all public schools to lead their students each day in the Pledge of Allegiance. In the past, New York's schoolchildren had always recited the pledge, although in the sixties the practice had waned. At public schools in Manhattan, it seems, the pledge was no longer recited at all. But the old ritual had stayed on at many schools in the outer boroughs. The children there still began their day with the pledge, and often they sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

HEROES OF OUR TIME

The 343 firemen and 23 police officers who gave their lives on September 11 apparently went to schools like that; certainly their children do now. Most had lived in the outer boroughs or the family-friendly towns on Long Island or in New Jersey. A disproportionate 78 of the 343 firemen had lived on Staten Island. With only 440,000 people, it is the least populated of the boroughs; it is also the one furthest removed culturally from the rest of the city. Friendships are built around clubs, schools, and churches—a Catholic high school there lost 23 alumni, about half of them cops or firemen—and alone among the boroughs it consistently votes Republican. Every so often, even if not seriously, Staten Island threatens to secede from New York.

On September 11, however, policemen and firemen, the

firemen especially, of course, became New York's heroes. They had gone unhesitatingly into a dangerous place, and given their own lives while trying to save the lives of others. At a very dear and almost unbearable cost the city learned anew an old lesson. "One fireman stopped to take a breath, and we looked each other in the eye," a man who had made it to safety from the 86th floor of the North Tower said later. "He was going to a place I was damn well trying to get out of. I looked at him thinking, 'What are you doing this for?' He looked at me like he knew very well—'This is my job.'"

Yes, it was a job, and it was also a way of life that had been preserved despite the pressures to change it. The Fire Department has a distinct culture. Many firemen are Irish-American or Italian-American, and many had fathers and uncles in the department before them. Officially they are referred to now as firefighters, although the old-fashioned and presumably chauvinistic word, firemen, is more descriptive. The 343 firemen who died on September 11 were, in fact, all men. In a high-tech age, battling fires and rescuing people is still a low-tech operation. Physical strength and endurance are essential, and the Fire Department has had to resist the ministrations of advanced thinking. Some twenty-five years ago, when the Police Department set out to recruit more women and members of minorities, it said it would never lower entrance standards. The political culture, however, determined otherwise; the Police Department had to be more inclusive. Short, fat police officers—short, fat female officers, especially—are not at all uncommon now in New York.

But the Fire Department went on as before. Meanwhile firemen from around the country recognized the New York firemen as special; they came from all over on St. Patrick's Day to march with them in the Fifth Avenue parade, and testify to their legendary courage. New York, by contrast, respected the

firemen, but did not think much about them. New Yorkers could identify the police commissioner, but the fire commissioner was anonymous. Actually that was just as well. There was less pressure on the Fire Department to change its ways, and the bonds that knit the firemen together were allowed to stay intact. New York learned about that on September 11. Among the 343 firemen who died were 21 chiefs, 20 captains, and 47 lieutenants. They had led from the front, and the rank and file had followed. This was tragic and valorous; it was also inspiring. New York had found true heroes.

Meanwhile, that day and the next, homemade flyers with pictures of missing people went up on walls, kiosks, and subway and bus stops all over the city. "Have you seen this person?" the flyers asked. Surely some of those listed as missing had been hospitalized, or perhaps they had wandered away in shock. They could not all be dead; there had to be survivors, but even if there were none, there would still be bodies for burial. There would be solace in the rituals for mourning.

So the flyers described the missing people in only the most general way—height and weight, and perhaps eye or hair color—and that was thought to be enough. But by the end of the week the terrible reality had taken hold, and new flyers went up on the walls and kiosks. They described the missing people in more intimate detail, and even told something about their lives. One of the missing, for example, was "a wonderful father and husband." A picture, apparently taken at a backyard cookout, showed him with two small children. They all wore matching aprons. Another flyer showed an attractive young woman, last seen, it said, on the 95th floor of Tower One, wearing "a light green necklace, wedding ring with Nick on the inside, and a bracelet watch." An older woman was said to have had a "little scar at the center of forehead, and a mole at the jawbone near right ear." Meanwhile a man, shown smiling

as he sat behind the wheel of a car, had worn "a silver wedding band and silver watch on left hand." Another man, presumably young, had "braces on his teeth."

The men and women in the flyers were, of course, all dead, and the inclusion of the small details meant that their families recognized now that their bodies would never be recovered. But a light green necklace or a silver wedding band might help to identify the remains. Many of the families, however, would be denied even that small comfort. The explosive force of the attack had obliterated bodies, and identifying them was virtually impossible. On the other hand, there was always hope, and teams of police detectives were combing night and day through the sad rubble from the World Trade Center that was carried in trucks to a landfill on Staten Island. This was backbreaking work in what seemed to be an unpleasant place. The air was foul, and methane gas bubbled up from the ground. The detectives, many of them volunteers, had to wear protective suits to guard against contamination. Visitors to the site, though, were impressed by their determination. If there was anything in the rubble that might help comfort the grieving families, surely they would find it.

The scene at what was once the World Trade Center was quite different. Ground Zero had become a tourist attraction. At first the city had tried to keep visitors away. Tarpaulins were hung on chain link fences all around the devastated area to discourage people from coming by and staring. The sad and holy place was not to be a spectacle; it demanded a feeling of reverence, and it was not to be commercialized. But by year end the tarpaulins had come down, and the fences were moved closer to the crash site. The city even erected wooden platforms on which tourists could stand and get the best views. This may seem inconsistent with the earlier desire to keep people away, but it really was not. The tourists would also spend money and

stimulate commerce, and in New York's way of thinking there was no reason at all that this should be incompatible with feeling reverence. New York, as always, would be a place where money and dreams could meet, and a terrorist attack would not change that.