



FALL PRINT EDITION 2021

# 9/11: The Fall of 'America's Mayor'

*9/11 wasn't Rudy's finest hour, it was the beginning of his end.*

by EILEEN MARKEY

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**After the attacks in 2001, Mayor Giuliani wanted to postpone the election that would choose his successor. Nobody else did. Pictured here with the city's 108th and 109th mayors, Mike Bloomberg and Bill de Blasio, to his left, at the 9/11 memorial service in 2015.**

A KATZ / SHUTTERSTOCK

**This article is part of a series—*At 250, Who Will America Be?*—reporting on threats to American democracy as we approach the nation's Semiquincentennial, on July 4, 2026.**

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The sweaty man suspended from practicing law — because the New York State appellate court found he sought to mislead judges — and now hawking gold futures and conspiracy theories in YouTube videos and on right-wing radio used to be “America’s Mayor.” On this 20th anniversary of New York’s worst day, when the city is in the midst of another crisis, this one not a crash and collapse completed in 102 minutes but a slow-rolling disaster, it’s impossible not to look again on Rudy Giuliani.

In the image he’s burnished for 20 years, he is covered in that sickly grey-white dust, the fitted Yankees cap pulled tight over his pate, walking purposefully up West Street, a cloud of collapsing tower behind him. While George W. Bush was flown in circles seeking safety — offline and unreachable by the press for several hours after the attacks — Rudy was on the scene, as he’d been at so many fires, water-main breaks, snowstorms, and parades. Twenty years later, he’s still struggling through that cloud of death, perhaps more consumed by it now than then. On 9/11, even critics of Rudy’s mean-spirited mayoralty ceded that he was Churchillian, offering surety to a shaken city. But so many “What happened to Rudy?” stories have been written by now that we’re panning already-sifted fool’s gold, the last bits of the reputation of a man who long ago became so much smaller than himself. These pieces all feel like eulogies for Rudy. But Rudy didn’t die. A different New York did.

Whatever relevance he held into the Trump years was the flickering half-life of prestige earned on September 11. That itself was a reinvention. On September 10, 2001, Rudy Giuliani was a lame-duck mayor who’d scuttled a U.S. Senate run the year before as his marriage and health imploded. His political career was at an end. He had dismal approval ratings among New Yorkers, who had long since soured on his peevishness, brownshirt disregard for civil liberties, and compulsion to throw oil on the fires of

racial discord. As Rudy, in his first term and emboldened by the “Gingrich revolution” of 1994, rolled out one cruel and dehumanizing policy after another, these pages and the lips of many an outraged New Yorker cried fascism. Little did we know. On September 10, New Yorkers were ready for Rudy to exit stage right.

Then the planes hit.

We have a Churchillian image of Rudy in the crisis because he wanted to make sure we did. As Wayne Barrett and Dan Collins reported in *Grand Illusion: The Untold Story of Rudy Giuliani and 9/11*, Rudy was downtown on 9/11 because he was walking to his bunker, one of the most stupidly placed emergency command centers ever built. The prime requirement for this risible shelter was that it be within walking distance of City Hall. A more logical location would have been MetroTech, in downtown Brooklyn, where the fire department and 9-1-1 system already had a state-of-the-art facility. Rudy’s \$61 million bunker in the sky was 23 stories up, occupying a full floor of the overpriced building at 7 World Trade Center, part of a complex that everyone except Rudy Giuliani understood was a bull’s-eye for terrorists. In 1993, the North Tower had been the target of a gargantuan truck bomb, engendering a flurry of reports on the urgency of improving communication and cooperation between the police and fire departments and between 9-1-1 dispatch operators and first responders in the field; on the need to bring the Port Authority-controlled World Trade Center into compliance with NYC fire safety and egress building codes; and on the necessity of overhauling the FDNY’s protocol for fighting mega-high-rise fires. None of these issues were resolved in the eight years of Rudy’s mayoralty.

All of them proved fatal on 9/11.

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Damaged by debris from the first plane, the emergency command bunker was impossible to enter, and the mayor scurried from one makeshift location to another seeking somewhere to set up a crisis center. 9/11 wasn't Rudy Giuliani's finest hour. It was the first day of the rest of his self-aggrandizing life.

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by R.C. BAKER

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Within weeks, he'd be grasping for a third term and railing against Juan Gonzalez for writing muckraking *Daily News* columns exposing the lies his administration and the EPA were spreading about the air quality in Lower Manhattan. And he refused to enforce basic safety procedures during the clean-up of the mountain of toxic debris from the fallen towers — even as fires burned into December — in favor of advertising the city as open for business. That decision continues to extract its toll among those who spent time near Ground Zero. He congratulated Motorola for its great work, even though the company had sold the FDNY defective and inoperable radios in a sweetheart deal.

There were acts of breathtaking bravery, heroism, and generosity on 9/11. They deserve all of the veneration they've received. But hundreds of people might have been spared had the years of warnings that emerged after the 1993 bombing — from the NYPD chief of department to the FDNY assistant commissioner of communications to the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force — been heeded. On his way out the door, Rudy lined up million-dollar consulting contracts for Giuliani Partners, a flim-flam job cashing in on his leadership that day, when every warning given since he took office was ignored. By the time he threw in his lot with his old collaborator Donald Trump on Trump's presidential run, Rudy had become, as Wayne Barrett called him in these pages, a "used 9/11 memorabilia salesman."

Rudy has now spent more years portraying that dust-caked 9/11 leader than he spent as a corruption-busting federal prosecutor turned two-term mayor. Now he's a guy who recycles John Birch Society garbage in a pretend office, talking into a little box to the willfully ignorant.

Maybe 9/11 is when the country went berserk. Psychologists say victims of trauma either integrate the injury and recover or, failing that, become deformed by it. Rudy followed what was least in himself. And we accepted a war in Iraq built on lies, a regime of torture, permanent extrajudicial detention, a catastrophic erosion of media spine, and corporate surveillance masked by social media's mass distraction. There are the 9/11 diseases of the lungs and there is the hurt that festered into fascism or simple nihilism. The hard hats and uniformed services that reported to the smoldering pile, stoic and sacred, sifting rubble for human remains — a lot of them voted for Trump, twice.

We rebuilt. But we rebuilt a SimCity of empty glass towers, pieds-à-terre for people from nowhere, vastly more stratified than the city that struggled together on September 12. The undocumented immigrants who decontaminated the offices below Houston Street as unprotected subcontractors are hunted now by COVID and living off delivery apps, if they survived Obama's and Trump's deportation machines. Nineteen years after 9/11, the pandemic ripped through a city less connected, more transient, with fewer hospital beds, and more people living in extreme crowding because the cost of housing bears no relationship to the wages of most inhabitants.

After 9/11, we are less committed to reason, more willing to believe utter rot if it will comfort us or bolster our next 15-second battle. The 9/11 Truthers were an early warning of this alienation-driven appetite for nonsense, from QAnon to health quackery. Rudy spent 20 years exploiting proximity to a disaster when his actual leadership was a failure, a harbinger of the image-over-substance society we live in now. ❖