The improbable politician

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Mike Bloomberg: Money, Power, Politics
By Joyce Purnick
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Just about no one imagined that the little Jewish kid from Medford, Massachusetts, the nerdy president of the Slide Rule Club who didn't even make his high school's honor society, would grow up to be Michael Bloomberg. The self-made billionaire who designed a must-use data system for Wall Street investors. And the mayor of the Big Apple, elected three times by New Yorkers who never really warmed to him.

In *Mike Bloomberg*, Joyce Purnick, a veteran journalist who has covered six mayors for the *New York Post*, *The New York Times* and *New York* magazine, tries to understand "the small, graying man with a few too many slightly bucked teeth," at once bold and bland, incapable of making a moving speech, who became a financial, philanthropic and political force to be reckoned with.

She has set herself a difficult task. An aggressively private person, she writes, Bloomberg has seen to it that decoding his finances "is a little like struggling with a jigsaw puzzle that is missing many pieces." Although he's one of the most generous philanthropists in the United States, Bloomberg has never revealed the complete details of his charitable activities. And as a politician, the Democrat turned Republican turned Independent is "unusually and insistently opaque." Although the mayor granted Purnick seven one-hour interviews, he "did not welcome the project." And, it appears, the men and women she interviewed were not intimates - or did not open up. Consequently, her book is informative and judicious, but tentative and, at times, a bit thin.

Purnick doesn't really explain why - and how - Bloomberg News succeeded so spectacularly, when other organizations, like Reuters, had access to the same data. She simply says that he focused on "storing and manipulating information to improve traders' calculations," was hungrier than his competitors and that "his company was small, quick on its feet, able to pursue the vision of one financial daredevil, not of a bureaucratic executive board."

Purnick does provide a fascinating look at Bloomberg the improbable politician. She demonstrates that but for 9/11, he would have lost his first mayoral race to Democrat Mark Green in 2001. She reveals details of his covert, "non-campaign campaign" for the presidency of the US in 2008. And she walks us through his decision to reverse himself on term limits so that he could run again in 2009. His inner voice must have told him, she guesses, that public life was more thrilling than making money or giving it away - and that "he loved the attention, the applause, the deference, the spotlight."
As mayor, Purnick indicates, Bloomberg has had some notable failures. His Hudson Yards Master Plan, whose centerpiece was a multiuse facility with a retractable roof, to lure the New York Jets football team back to New York and accommodate trade shows and conventions, ran afoul of Sheldon Silver, speaker of the New York State House of Representatives, who wanted resources allocated to his constituency in downtown New York. And PlaNYC 2030, his ambitious proposal to reduce pollution, improve mass transit and reclaim abandoned industrial land by charging drivers a fee to bring their cars into midtown Manhattan, never made it to the Assembly floor.

Nonetheless, she writes, he's been a "flexible risk taker," summoning skill and will to govern a city once thought to be ungovernable "not with dramatics, but with ideas." After 9/11 he had the guts to raise taxes and borrow heavily. When the city recovered, he put billions aside for the rainy day that has already arrived. And as architect of the most massive rezoning in New York in 40 years, he paved the way for a boom in construction and real estate.

By all accounts Bloomberg's signature achievement has been reform of the public schools, heretofore the third rail for New York City politicians. He persuaded the state legislature to wrest control from a balkanized Board of Education and invest authority in the mayor. He appointed Joel Klein, "a blunt hard-charging Washington lawyer," as school chancellor and stuck with him when Klein challenged the status quo and the teachers' union.

Their battle against "the culture of excuses" has already produced results. The schools are safer. The test scores of city students in reading and math - and graduation rates - have risen sharply. And the racial gap in academic performance is closing.

Although she insists that public schools did not improve as much as Bloomberg claims they did, Purnick acknowledges that the progress has been dramatic. Equally important, she adds, by making education a direct mayoral responsibility, Bloomberg has made it far more likely that it won't be shortchanged again.

Neither a native New Yorker nor a natural pol, Bloomberg nonetheless has found ways to help New Yorkers rediscover - and recover - their confidence, and at times, their swagger. For better and worse, he proved that he could be one of them and one of a kind. "It's a good bet," Purnick concludes, that there will never be another mogul-mayor like Bloomberg. Which, she suspects, "suits him just fine."

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