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N.Y. Mayor Bloomberg Leaves GOP

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Move Fuels Speculation About Independent Bid for the White House

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Wednesday, June 20, 2007; A01

New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg abruptly left the Republican Party yesterday, declaring himself free of a "rigid adherence" to ideology and stoking speculation that he will use his multibillion-dollar fortune to mount an independent bid for the White House.

The founder of the Bloomberg financial media empire has repeatedly denied interest in the presidency. At a technology conference yesterday in which he attacked partisanship in Washington, he said: "I plan to be mayor for the next 926 days." But he has refused to rule out a run for the presidency, even discussing the possibility privately with close advisers and beginning to travel around the country, including a trip to the home of the nation's first primary, New Hampshire.

In a statement posted on the official Web site of New York City late yesterday, Bloomberg said that his plans "haven't changed" and that abandoning the Republican banner will better reflect his approach to governance. Bloomberg was a longtime Democrat before shifting his allegiance to the GOP before his first mayoral run in 2001.

"Any successful elected executive knows that real results are more important than partisan battles and that good ideas should take precedence over rigid adherence to any particular political ideology," the statement said. "Working together, there's no limit to what we can do."

Bloomberg, 65, is in a position to spend more than any candidate has ever spent in a presidential campaign. Forbes magazine lists his net worth at \$5.5 billion, although estimates run as high as \$20 billion. Bloomberg has reportedly told those closest to him that he would spend as much as half a billion dollars if he ran for the presidency, while some reports have suggested that he could spend double that amount.

That would be 10 times what businessman Ross Perot spent in 1992, when he captured 19 percent of the popular vote. In his 2005 reelection campaign, Bloomberg spent \$85 million, four times what his Democratic opponent spent.

Al Sharpton, a fellow New Yorker and former Democratic presidential candidate, likened Bloomberg's decision to the often mysterious ways of teenage romance.

"A girl in high school catches you looking at her and she starts wearing nice dresses," Sharpton said. "It doesn't mean she's going to date you. But she's at least teasing you, so it really increases your hope. This is a serious tease."

Asked whether he would endorse Bloomberg if he ran, Sharpton said: "I'm not saying I would necessarily endorse him. But I wouldn't rule it out either."

Bloomberg was in California yesterday for an afternoon speech and later held a series of private meetings, a spokesman in his New York office said. On Monday, he gave a speech at the Northern California headquarters of Google, where he playfully batted away questions about a presidential candidacy.

At the Google event, he declined to comment on reports that he had privately discussed a possible

presidential campaign with former senator David L. Boren (D-Okla.).

None of the representatives of the major presidential candidates would comment yesterday. But political strategists said the mayor's announcement will force the leading Republican and Democratic candidates to reassess their strategies.

"Now both parties will have to address what a Bloomberg candidacy means for them," said New York-based Democratic consultant Hank Sheinkopf. He said Bloomberg's success as a businessman and mayor could offer voters a starkly different alternative to the major parties. "What he may represent is a break from both political parties."

One consultant predicted that a Bloomberg candidacy could hurt the Republicans, including Bloomberg's predecessor, former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani. "The market for billionaire businessmen is basically with soft Republican voters, and so he is likely to help the Democrats if he runs," the consultant said.

Others have suggested Bloomberg will appeal to independent voters who backed Democrats in droves in the 2006 midterm elections.

Former New York governor Mario M. Cuomo, who famously considered and then ruled out a presidential bid of his own, speculated that Bloomberg might make a different choice than he did. "The only explanation I can think of is to make it more possible for him to run for president," Cuomo said of the mayor's announcement. "He doesn't want to be the governor; he can't be the mayor again; he's too young to be retired; he doesn't need to work at making a living; he is good at public service -- no, he's excellent at public service -- and so I'm sure he would enjoy being president."

The announcement takes Bloomberg a significant step closer to an independent run. But those familiar with his thinking say no decision is likely before early next year, after it becomes clear whom the two major-party candidates are going to be.

His advisers say he is likely to jump in only if a series of factors align properly: general dissatisfaction in the country, a willingness to vote for an independent, and the relative standing of the two candidates chosen by the major political parties early next year.

Recent polls show that 70 percent of Americans or more say the country is off track. That creates a climate that some Bloomberg associates believe makes an independent candidacy more viable.

But if one or both major-party nominees emerge from the primaries with solid approval ratings, Bloomberg might not be tempted to run. And if Giuliani wins the Republican nomination, Bloomberg and his advisers believe that it will be difficult for another New York mayor to put himself forward, to say nothing of the possibility that [Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) could win the Democratic nomination and add another New Yorker to the mix.

"This is another way to just continue the speculation and to test it," Sheinkopf said. "This is another trial balloon. And if it doesn't blow up, you'll see another trial balloon."

As daunting as the prospects are for any third-party candidate, including the challenge of getting on the ballot in all 50 states, Bloomberg associates think he could run a non-ideological campaign built around the theme of competence and unity.

To do that, he could offer himself as a candidate to a group called Unity 08, which will hold a citizens convention in July 2008 to pick a blended ticket that could include an independent, a Republican or a Democrat. One rumored -- or perhaps wished-for -- ticket would pair Bloomberg with maverick GOP [Sen. Chuck Hagel](#) of Nebraska.

"The mayor's move is certainly consistent with the notion of what we're trying to do," said Doug Bailey, the co-founder of Unity 08. "The political system is broken. The public knows that. They know also that this is the most important election in their lifetime. They are looking for leadership that can bring the two parties together and solve critical problems before the country."

Staff writers Dan Balz, Anne E. Kornblut and Sonya Geis and political researcher Zachary A. Goldfarb contributed to this report.

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