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Michael Bloomberg Pushed 'Stop-and-Frisk' Policing. Now He's Apologizing.

Ahead of a possible Democratic run for president, the former mayor of New York City reversed himself before an important party constituency: black voters.



By [Shane Goldmacher](#)

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Ahead of a potential Democratic presidential run, former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York on Sunday reversed his longstanding support of the aggressive “stop-and-frisk” policing strategy that he pursued for a decade and that led to the disproportionate stopping of black and Latino people across the city.

“I was wrong,” Mr. Bloomberg declared. “And I am sorry.”

The speech, Mr. Bloomberg’s first since he re-emerged as a possible presidential candidate, was a remarkable concession by a 77-year-old billionaire not known for self-doubt: that a pillar of his 12-year mayoralty was a mistake that he now regrets. It was also, in some ways, a last word on an era of aggressive policing in New York City that began a generation ago under former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani — though the fallout on neighborhoods is still felt to this day.

Speaking before the congregation at the Christian Cultural Center, a black megachurch in Brooklyn, Mr. Bloomberg delivered his apology in the heart of one of the communities most affected by his policing policies, and at a location that nodded to the fact that should he decide to run for president, African-American voters would be a crucial Democratic constituency that he would need to win over.

Mr. Bloomberg’s policing record negatively impacted huge swaths of people of color across New York, so much so that his support for “stop and frisk” is seen as one of his biggest potential vulnerabilities in 2020. During his 12-year tenure, there were millions of street stops heavily targeting black and brown young men. Few Democrats have such an indelible record on race in a party where black voters helped determine the winners of the last two contested presidential primaries, Barack Obama in 2008 and Hillary Clinton in 2016.

It is almost unheard-of for a former chief executive to renounce and apologize for a signature policy that helped define a political legacy. Even for a politician as dexterous as Mr. Bloomberg — who ran first as a Republican, then as an independent and now, possibly, as a Democrat — the reversal left his longtime observers astonished.

Until Sunday, Mr. Bloomberg had steadfastly — and his critics say stubbornly — defended stop-and-frisk, mocking only a few months ago the very notion of undertaking an “apology tour” for his broader record. Mr. Bloomberg stood behind the program, which gave New York police officers sweeping authority to stop and search anyone they suspected of a crime, even after a federal judge ruled in 2013 that it violated the constitutional rights of minorities.

Though Mr. Bloomberg has now distanced himself, the policing approach has another prominent champion in President Trump, who called for it to be used nationwide in 2016 and praised the tactics again last year.

Proudly technocratic and data-driven, Mr. Bloomberg had resisted acknowledging what the numbers showed so

starkly: First, that Latinos and blacks were disproportionately stopped, though only a tiny fraction had weapons. Second, even when stops were phased out toward the end of his administration and then decreased sharply under his successor, Mayor Bill de Blasio, crime rates continued to plunge to new lows unseen since the 1950s.

"I now see that we should have acted sooner, and acted faster," Mr. Bloomberg said on Sunday.

Mr. de Blasio, who himself briefly ran for president this year, accused Mr. Bloomberg of being "haughty" in the face of facts that crime kept dropping even as the policy was scaled back. "That is the danger of a billionaire, a self-funder, a guy who has little interest in listening to others," he said in an interview. Of stop-and-frisk itself, he added bluntly, "The way it was used is racist."

Though the police tactics had all but ceased in recent years, leaders in some communities of color were wary of quickly absolving Mr. Bloomberg.

"Forgive many of us for questioning apologies a decade late and on the eve of a presidential run," said Jumaane Williams, the current New York City public advocate. "It is not nearly enough to erase the legacy of the systemic abuses of stop-question-and-frisk on the people whose lives were harmed by over-policing, nor the communities criminalized by it."

Moments after services ended, Mr. Bloomberg called the Rev. Al Sharpton, who sparred with Mr. Bloomberg over stop-and-frisk during his mayoralty, from his car to ask if Mr. Sharpton had watched his speech.

"You can't expect people like us to forgive and forget after one speech," Mr. Sharpton said he told Mr. Bloomberg, promising to hold him to the same standard as other politicians, such as former Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., who has walked back his past support for tough-on-crime drug legislation, and Senator Bernie Sanders.

At the program's peak, the racial disparities in its enforcement were jarring. Of 575,000 stops conducted in 2009, black and Latino people were nine times as likely as white people to be targeted by the police (even though, once stopped, they were no more likely to actually be arrested). In 2011, police officers made about 685,000 stops; 87 percent of those stopped were black or Latino.

Mr. Bloomberg emphasized on Sunday that the decline of stop-and-frisk began during his tenure, and he touted his record fighting gun violence. Still, Mr. Bloomberg acknowledged that the policy had led to an "erosion of trust," and said that he hoped to "earn it back."

"Over time, I've come to understand something that I long struggled to admit to myself: I got something important wrong," he said. "I got something important really wrong. I didn't understand back then the full impact that stops were having on the black and Latino communities. I was totally focused on saving lives, but as we know, good intentions aren't good enough."

After Mr. Bloomberg stepped down from the pulpit and returned to his seat in the front row, the church's pastor, the Rev. A.R. Bernard, a longtime ally and former adviser to Mr. Bloomberg, shook the former mayor's hand.

"Come on, C.C.C., show some love and appreciation," Mr. Bernard said, amid tepid applause.

For 2020, the critical question is whether Mr. Bloomberg's reversal will be received among black voters as one of pure political expediency or genuine remorse.

Amira Beatty, 49, a teacher who lives in Far Rockaway and attended the church service, was incensed by Mr. Bloomberg's appearance. "This is about what he wants," Ms. Beatty said. "He didn't come to C.C.C. because he's here to promote a C.C.C. initiative. He's here to promote a Bloomberg initiative."

Mr. Bloomberg did not shy away from the fact that he was reconsidering his record in his last job as he eyed a potential new one. "In recent months, as I've thought about my future, I've been thinking more about my past — and coming to terms with where I came up short," he said.

Those close to Mr. Bloomberg have told him bluntly that running for president without addressing the stop-and-frisk matter first was a non-starter.

"This issue is a threshold issue," said Stephen K. Benjamin, the mayor of Columbia, S.C., who came to the church service and had dinner with Mr. Bloomberg several weeks ago, where the topic of stop-and-frisk came up. Mr. Benjamin said he had urged Mr. Bloomberg to run in 2020. "I'm a big believer that there is strength in humility and genuine contrition, realizing and articulating you got something wrong."

Mr. Bloomberg had consistently stood behind the program until now. "I think people, the voters, want low crime," Mr. Bloomberg told The New York Times last year. "They don't want kids to kill each other."

In fact, Mr. Bloomberg had come to this very same church, located in East New York, in 2012 to defend stop-and-frisk and answer mounting criticism around it.

"There is no doubt those stops have saved lives," Mr. Bloomberg declared then. Linking it to a crime rate reduction at the time, he said, "When you consider that 90 percent of all murder victims are black and Hispanic, there is no doubt most of those victims would have come from communities like this one."

But on Sunday, he acknowledged that the community around the church had experienced the program very differently. The church is situated at the edge of the 75th Precinct in New York, which the New York Civil Liberties Union said led the city with 265,393 stops between 2003 and 2013. In the nearby 73rd Precinct, total stops in that decade were 237 percent of the population, according to the report.

Mr. Bloomberg said he now recognized that too many innocent people were stopped. "And the overwhelming majority of them were black and Latino," he added. "That may have included, I'm sorry to say, some of you here today, perhaps yourself, or your children, or your grandchildren, or your neighbors or your relatives."

Inside the sanctuary, Alfonso Estrada, who lives in the area, listened to Mr. Bloomberg's speech and said he respected that the politician seemed to be examining his past closely.

"I think it is always good when you can reflect on your past mistakes, and try to make amends for them," said Mr. Estrada, 47. "We all deserve second chances."

Several Democrats already running for the 2020 nomination, including Mr. Biden, have also issued mea culpas on matters of criminal justice. Senator Kamala Harris of California has defended her record as a state prosecutor but said she regretted some of the positions her office took. Mayor Pete Buttigieg left the campaign trail and returned to South Bend, Ind., after a white police officer fatally shot a black man there, and admitted he had failed to diversify the city's force.

The reversal on stop-and-frisk is the starkest in a series of steps that Mr. Bloomberg has taken in the last two weeks to lay the groundwork for entering the Democratic presidential primary himself, a step that appears increasingly imminent.

He has already filed to be on the primary ballot in two states, Arkansas and Alabama. His advisers have outlined a strategy to leverage his personal fortune by competing in the Super Tuesday states on March 3. And he announced plans to spend \$100 million on digital ads criticizing President Trump — and not featuring himself — in general election battleground states, blunting criticism that he could spend his money better elsewhere.

Before his speech, Mr. Bloomberg sat down for coffee at the Park Plaza diner with Eric L. Adams, the Brooklyn borough president and a likely candidate for mayor in 2021.

“When he looks over his life and sees how much he has given back to the city but you see you have this real blemish that you realize is wrong, it’s not an easy thing to live with,” Mr. Adams said. “It becomes your narrative and overshadows all you have done to save lives.”

Jeffery C. Mays and Katie Van Syckle contributed reporting.

2020

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