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Interview: Giuliani touts experience, acknowledges exaggerating credit for NYC advances

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Rudy Giuliani contested charges that he's a national security novice whose experience started and ended on Sept. 11, insisting Saturday that unlike any other presidential candidate he has had "the safety and security of people on my shoulders."

In a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press, the former New York mayor touted his crime-fighting record even as he acknowledged taking too much credit for it at times. Giuliani also dismissed suggestions that his Republican presidential campaign is stalled.

"I think we are very relevant," he said during a 15-minute interview

Giuliani's rare and brief visit to Iowa came as he refocused his campaign message on the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks a shift brought by a slippage in national polls and an attempt to capitalize on turmoil in Pakistan. While he still leads in many states that hold primaries in late January and February, Giuliani is struggling for attention and support in early voting states that matter now, starting with Iowa on Thursday.

From the start of his unconventional campaign, the moderate Republican has faced two questions: How does he connect with socially conservative voters? And how does he run on his management of the 9/11 attacks without looking exploitive?

The rise of former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee in Iowa has complicated Giuliani's task on the first front. Now his GOP rivals are trying to undercut his terrorism-fighting image.

Sen. John McCain of Arizona, experiencing a late surge in the early voting state of New Hampshire, questioned whether Giuliani's performance after 9/11, which he always praises, translates into foreign policy experience.

"It has very little to do with national security issues," McCain said. "It has a lot to do with handling a post-crisis."

McCain noted this week that Giuliani hasn't visited Iraq, though, as a senator, McCain has access to government-sponsored trips that a private citizen does not.

"I think John is leaving out the rest of my career," Giuliani told The AP. "But I had a long and in many ways accomplished career so accomplished that John McCain praised me many times for what I did before Sept. 11."

In one of three campaign stops Saturday, Giuliani asked a group crammed inside his central Iowa campaign headquarters to understand that his days as a federal prosecutor and crime-fighting mayor count for something, too.

"I had the responsibility, more than the other candidates, of having the safety and security of people on my shoulders," he said, clearly hoping to pad a thin national security resume with his crime-fighting credentials.

Later, he ticked off items in his resume involving "safety and security" including: serving on an anti-terrorism panel in the 1970s; prosecuting mafia leaders; negotiating with governments on criminal matters

from his perch at the Justice Department; and helping New York plan against potential terrorist attacks at the turn of the millennium.

"I think, actually, if you look at my experience I had more experience than any one in this area of safety, security of dealing with violence and terrorism," he told The AP.

In the same interview, Giuliani acknowledged that it's a mild exaggeration to suggest, as he often does, that he reduced crime in New York, cleaned up Times Square and lowered the city's unemployment rate on his own.

"You get more credit for success than you're probably entitled to and more blame for failure than you should get," he said. "That's just a nature of leadership."

"Maybe if I say 'I reduced crime,' it sounds like I'm saying I did it myself. I know I didn't do it myself. If you read my book, I explain in great detail that this was a team effort," he said. "Part of being a leader is knowing how to get the contributions from many people to achieve a singular result."

Soon after explaining the distinction between fact and hyperbole, Giuliani crossed the line again.

"But the reality is I was elected to reduce crime in New York City," he said, "and I did. So in that sense it was a singular achievement. If I hadn't reduce crime in New York City, I would have failed in the objective for which people elected me."

So the reduced crime was all his doing? "Of course, it wasn't," he replied.

"It was me as mayor of New York City," he said, with the help of police, volunteers and related initiatives such as welfare reduction.

"So it would be an exaggeration to say or even to suggest that I reduced crime all by myself," Giuliani concluded. "It would also be an exaggeration to say the reduction of crime was just a byproduct of my being there."

Trailing badly in polls here, Giuliani seemed to be going through the paces Saturday. His first two events were held in small rooms to accent the small crowds. At a bakery in Indianola, Iowa, one voter asked Giuliani why he rarely visited Iowa.

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