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Rudy, Say Hello to John Purroy Mitchell

Rudy Giuliani's bold decision to endorse Gov. Mario Cuomo's bid for a fourth term should come as no surprise to those who understand New York's political ecology. Republican mayors of New York inevitably move to the middle, alienating party leaders and often putting their political careers at risk. New York City is too different from the rest of New York State and too dependent on state and federal aid for a Republican mayor of New York not to establish alliances in Albany and Washington, often with the opposing political party.

The State Republican Party - a mix of upstate isolationists and suburban solipsists - would prefer to have nothing to do with New York City. And within the city itself the Republican Party is too narrow - ethnically, ideologically and numerically - for a mayor to use as an instrument for governing. The party doesn't even have a sufficient pool of local managerial talent to run City Hall.

To govern effectively, a Republican mayor has to expand his coalition by either working around or abandoning parochial Republican Party leaders. And Democratic presidents and governors, cognizant of the city's huge base of Democratic voters, cannot afford to ignore the city's needs, no matter who occupies City Hall.

Giuliani and Cuomo long ago forged an alliance based on the mayor's need for state aid and the governor's need for city votes. And in August, Giuliani appeared at a rally with Bill Clinton to revive the president's crime bill just after House Republicans had killed it. The president wanted to prove the Democrats were tough on crime and the mayor wanted federal funds for youth programs and law-enforcement initiatives. To protect the municipal budget, the mayor rescued the Democratic president, antagonizing Staten Island Borough President and Republican County Leader Guy Molinari.

History demonstrates that the greatest threat to a Republican mayor comes from local Republican warlords, not from liberal Democrats. John Purroy Mitchell, the city's first Republican-Fusion mayor, lost the Republican party primary in 1917, after Republicans became disenchanted with him. He went on to lose the general election running as the Fusion candidate.

During the New Deal, the city obtained a disproportionately large share of federal construction funds. Fiorello LaGuardia, grateful for help from Democrats in Washington, supported FDK in the 1936 presidential election; as a consequence, some local Republican leaders tried - without success - to prevent LaGuardia from running as a Republican in the general election of 1937. They challenged LaGuardia again in the 1941 primary; by 1945, LaGuardia stepped aside rather than face a grueling intra-party fight.

Giuliani's rupture with local Republicans, especially those based on Staten Island, is remarkably similar to the problems John Lindsay faced when he ran for re-election in 1969. Unhappy with Lindsay's school decentralization initiatives and support of a civilian board to review complaints against police, State Sen. John Marchi of Staten Island defeated Lindsay for the party nomination. Lindsay won the general election, but only because the Democrats had nominated Comptroller Mario Procaccino, who split the white ethnic vote with Marchi.

For LaGuardia, Lindsay and now Giuliani, the Liberal Party offered salvation from the constraints of the Republican Party. By supporting Cuomo, Giuliani may well face a Republican primary in 1997, but like LaGuardia, Rudy is developing a political persona that symbolizes New York City - and transcends partisan lines.

Most important, Giuliani has put New York back on the political map as a source of intense political combat. If nothing else, New Yorkers deprived of a championship hockey team and burdened with losing football teams owe him a lot for making this year's election exciting. We may not have a World Series, but at least we have a governor's race that is unpredictable, confrontational and lively. What more could a New Yorker want?

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