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Rudy Does the City Council's Dirty Work

To understand this year's budget, ignore the numbers and look at the players. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, a Republican-Liberal, believes that good government means wielding an ax to the budget. The Democratically controlled City Council recognizes the fiscal crisis, but isn't prepared to solve it. This means the mayor is doing the dirty work that the City Council can't or won't do.

Don't be misled by protests about the mayor's budget. Despite a couple of lonely whimpers, there will be no budget wars this spring. When the City Council finally approves the Giuliani budget, it will be largely intact, with some cultural institutions and youth programs saved. The Democrats who control the City Council will not seriously challenge a mayor who thrives on confrontation, both personal and political.

After all, the council has come to respect, if not fear, a mayor who plays by his own rules. When David Dinkins tried to prune the budget in 1991, the steps of City Hall were jammed with protesters who couldn't be ignored. Now, with Rudy in command, there are almost no demonstrations; the unions have been neutralized; even the business-backed Citizens Budget Commission has been slapped down for speaking up.

The city's weak economy also bolsters Giuliani's position since it's impossible to challenge his conservative revenue projections. And despite the mayor's protests. State Comptroller Carl McCall's intelligent report on the slow rate of private-sector growth actually reinforces Giuliani's claim that tax and expenditure cuts are needed to create jobs.

Democrats do have one way to console themselves. When constituents complain about the loss of municipal services, there is no one better to blame than a Republican mayor. If services get really bad, then the Democrats might even have a chance to mobilize voters in 1997. Pain may inadvertently be good partisan politics.

And pain may be what's needed to balance the budget. It's hard to believe that Giuliani, elected to reduce crime, has emerged as the right mayor for these hard times. But he's proving that only a Republican mayor can do the unthinkable: Balance the budget without raising taxes. Since more than half of the city's budget goes to education, health and human resources, the poor and minorities will inevitably suffer the most. And since African Americans didn't vote for Giuliani, they have no strong advocate in City Hall.

The Giuliani prescription for the city's fiscal renewal is costly: reduced subway and bus

maintenance; more crowding in the city's schools and fewer summer programs for kids. But the Giuliani budget also tackles long-neglected problems: It provides the leverage for Health and Hospitals President Bruce Siegel to revise HHC's affiliation contracts, which subsidize high-cost medical school training programs.

Unlike Mayor John Lindsay or Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, old-style New York Republicans who governed by building, borrowing and taxing, Rudy is a new-age Republican neither a builder, a taxpayer, nor a borrower. The Giuliani agenda to cut crime and cut spending is a New York version of the Republican ideology sweeping the nation. And just as President Bill Clinton has been forced to concede to House Speaker Newt Gingrich's budget cuts, the City Council is learning to accept the Giuliani agenda.

Rudy cuts programs that no Democrat would dare touch. Though he's difficult to work with, Giuliani's agenda works in this difficult, no-growth environment: Someone to lead you through the desert, but not take you to the promised land.

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