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Giuliani Is Tough to Love but So What?

The 1997 New York City mayoral race looks as if it will focus on Rudolph Giuliani's personality.

It's hard to challenge his record on crime. So, Giuliani's potential rivals will challenge his heavy-handed tactics and his tendency to intimidate critics and bully adversaries. In fact, his confrontational approach is not a weakness but the secret to his success. He is an "in-your-face" mayor, and that's what's needed to take on the mob, the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association, the United Federation of Teachers and the Port Authority.

Giuliani is a prosecutor who thrives on conflict, even if it means hand-to-hand combat. Judging by the polls, New Yorkers don't love Giuliani, but more important, he clearly is not looking for love, from his allies or enemies.

To his credit, he has accomplished what his predecessors failed to do. Giuliani successfully persuaded the state Legislature to merge the separate housing and transit police departments into one citywide police force. He waged war on the mob for control of the Fulton Fish Market and street fairs, and even offended the all-powerful taxi fleet owners, by trying to get more yellow cabs on the streets. Giuliani has impeccable taste in his choice of targets. He has thrown Yasser Arafat out of Lincoln Center, trashed TWA for poor management after the crash of Flight 800 and waged war on foreign diplomats for abusing their parking privileges.

Surely, no elected official has less respect for the political rules of the game and for party loyalty than Giuliani. In fact, his persona as an "unpolitician" has allowed him to survive in Democratic New York City. Despite Republican opposition, Giuliani embraced the Clinton administration's effort to pass a crime bill with gun control. And he avoided endorsing Bob Dole until the Republican candidate was well on the way to defeat.

While most Democrats took a vow of silence on the new welfare reform law, Giuliani was outspoken in his criticism of its anti-immigrant provisions. Under Giuliani, the city's corporation counsel is suing the Clinton administration, challenging the new legislation that denies food stamps and benefits to legal, tax-paying immigrants. Giuliani has become their champion.

Of course, the mayor has also benefited from sheer good luck. During his term, both the Rangers and the Yankees have won world championships and he has basked in the glory of their triumphs. The city's treasury has also shared in the profits made by the thriving financial-services industry. While job growth in the city is up slightly, Wall Street tax revenues are booming. As a result, Giuliani has more money to dispense this election year.

And although Giuliani was heavily criticized for running former Schools Chancellor Raymond Cortines out of town, he has supported Rudy Crew, who has gained control overall community school boards. After cutting school funds, on the grounds that more money would not solve the system's problems, Giuliani is now putting money into them. But, unfortunately, he is continuing to undermine public education by encouraging efforts to transfer public school students to parochial schools.

Of course, the Giuliani administration has made its share of mistakes as well. He could not work out a compromise with the City Council to simplify the obsolete zoning code to attract "big-box" discount stores. He has given up his attempt to build a new stadium for the Yankees in Manhattan, and he has been unresponsive to increased complaints about police brutality. And when two of his closest advisers were criticized for their profitable lobbying business, Giuliani's response was to question "the intellectual integrity" of the media.

But after the courts and child-welfare system failed to protect a 6-year-old girl who died at the hands of her abusive mother, Giuliani appointed a seasoned prosecutor, Nicholas Scoppetta, to overhaul the city's Byzantine bureaucracy. Unlike other mayors who traditionally picked someone from the social welfare establishment to oversee children's services, Giuliani selected someone he knew and trusted. Paradoxically, Giuliani's least heralded achievement is the new child-care system.

New Yorkers understand that Giuliani is not a regular guy with an easy sense of humor, and he is overly concerned about controlling the flow of information from municipal agencies. Giuliani differs from most bullies who go after only weaklings. He's attacked the little guys as well as the big guys, including some of the toughest and most entrenched interest groups, which have traditionally intimidated elected officials. Perhaps, that's what makes him such a unique politician, one only New Yorkers could love.

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