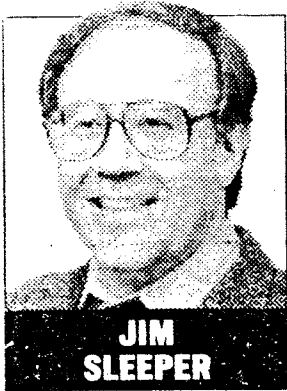


A skimpy circle in Sharpton's corner



"It's rope-a-dope," the Rev. Al Sharpton bragged again yesterday at City Hall after leading a ragtag band over the Brooklyn Bridge. "Rudy

ty," it isn't at ringside in the great face-off between Al and Rudy over recent clashes between cops and Muslims.

In that sense, at least, Giuliani is indeed swinging at nothing — if, that is, he is swinging at all. Is he? Or are the media reading too much into Hizzoner's remarks? A predominantly black audience at the Brooklyn Academy of Music gave Giuliani respectful applause yesterday after he calmed hecklers and asked everyone not to judge him as a stereotype. And Giuliani and Sharpton both seemed to acknowledge yesterday that, just after the election, some of the mayor-elect's people, including future Business Services Commissioner Rudy Washington, had reached out to Sharpton, who rebuffed their suggestion that he meet with Giuliani.

Who comes off better in light of this revelation depends on where you sit. Then again, who cares? This is a fight not about substance, but about who first picked the fight itself. I say Sharpton. Not only did he rebuff the Giuliani camp's overture; on Jan. 6, before the mosque incident, he announced that his march of yesterday would protest "Giuliani the dream-buster."

It doesn't matter. No Muslims from Mosque Number 7 or from Brooklyn joined Sharpton on that march yesterday. And, later, the Islamic Leadership Council held its rally at City Hall without Sharpton or C. Vernon Mason. Wherever the substance of the dispute was, Sharpton wasn't. Wherever he was, there was no substance, just schoolyard rhetoric. If anyone was "dissing" him, it was the Muslims, not Giuliani or Police Commissioner William Bratton.

MEANWHILE, BACK in the real world, a Daily News poll has 28% of New Yorkers blaming the cops for the mosque incident but only 7% approving of how Sharpton and Mason are handling the dispute. What a verdict: Those who don't trust the cops in this matter trust Sharpton & Co. even less. You can run from City Hall to 125th St. and back to hear otherwise, but most of the city thinks this is a case not of Giuliani trying to pick black leaders but of Sharpton caught trying to pick a fight. Giuliani can knock him out simply by *not talking about him*.

Yesterday, only a few lost souls, whom I dearly hope Sharpton let march with him

only out of Christian charity, claimed that cops had actually sat around saying, "Let's go storm a mosque" and had set up the robbery call themselves — as Sonny Carson charged yesterday on WLIB. Everybody else knows that Bratton's comment — "It's not an assault on the black community of New York. It's an incident . . . which we are attempting to ameliorate, get resolved and get on with our lives" — rings true.

Everybody also knows that if it had been a synagogue up there on the third floor of a building housing a supermarket and a gym — there were hundreds of such synagogues when Jews were new here — cops would have charged up the steps just as fast. And while the killing of the imam's son is still a murky tragedy, everyone now knows that he was a convicted drug dealer, which means not that he deserved to be shot but that he did put himself in harm's way.

So the question isn't whether Giuliani is trying to pick black leaders or doing enough to reach out to "the black community." It's whether those who are black leaders, including those who've actually been elected to lead, are too busy dancing with Butterfly Al to care anything for substance and truth.