

Reports on emergency response to World Trade Center attacks

Did Mayor Giuliani's policies contribute to loss of life on September 11?

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Two reports issued this week on the response of rescue workers to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center failed to spell out much more than what was already known by those familiar with the tragic events of that day. Acts of individual heroism by firefighters and other emergency workers occurred in the midst of a chaotic and uncoordinated response from the top.

The studies, one on the response of the New York Police Department (NYPD), the other on the response of the New York Fire Department (FDNY), were conducted by the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, in collaboration with the fire and police departments.

The reports failed to include a detailed account of the response. They explicitly ruled out assigning any responsibility or blame for the disorganization that characterized the desperate efforts by firefighters, emergency medical workers and police to rescue people from the burning buildings.

Implicit in the reports' findings, however, is the possibility that many of the more than 400 public service workers killed in the attack lost their lives unnecessarily because of a lack of effective leadership. Some may have died needlessly as a result of definite policies pursued by the administration of former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

The former Republican mayor has been lionized by the media for his actions on September 11 and in the aftermath of the attacks. He was proclaimed "person of the year" and "mayor of the world," and received a knighthood from the Queen of England.

Among the reports' findings was the fact that an eyewitness made a phone call at 9:37 a.m. to the police emergency line reporting that one of the top floors in the South Tower of the trade center was collapsing. The call was relayed to the NYPD special operations command, but was never passed on to senior fire chiefs on the scene. At 9:59 a.m. the South Tower fell with many firefighters still inside.

Police Department helicopters circling the Twin Towers reported that the North Tower, the second to fall, was glowing red on the outside, an indication that it was in danger of imminent collapse. Cops inside the building heard the warnings and most of them got out. Firefighters, who had inferior radios that were incompatible with the NYPD's system, did not, and scores of them were killed when the skyscraper gave way.

According to the McKinsey report on the Fire Department: "Throughout the response, the FDNY and NYPD rarely coordinated command and control functions and rarely exchanged information related to command and control.... There were no senior NYPD chiefs at the Incident Command Post established by the Fire Department."

Media accounts of the McKinsey reports have made superficial reference to the "ingrained cultures" of the fire and police departments and trivialized the issue of inter-agency rivalries by referring to shoving matches at police-fire football games.

In reality, the discrepancies between the two agencies are founded not merely on hoary traditions, but on definite social policies pursued by Giuliani in the 1990s. Focusing his administration on a "war on crime," directed at the city's poor and minority neighborhoods, the ex-mayor built up the Police Department to an unprecedented headcount of 41,000 cops, while approving huge annual budget increases.

At the same time, social service agencies were sharply scaled back and benefits cut. With the police given vast powers—contributing to tragic acts of brutality such as the torture of Abner Louima and the shootings of Amadou Diallo and Patrick Dorismond—the NYPD increasingly encroached on jobs formerly performed by other agencies. In the case of the FDNY, the cops tended to muscle their way into control of disaster scenes, often in situations where they lacked the expertise to respond appropriately.

Despite working blindly, without the benefit of the information relayed from the NYPD helicopters, FDNY commanders arrived independently at a decision to withdraw firefighters from the North Tower within less than a half an hour after the second jet airliner crashed into the South Tower at 9:03 a.m.

The order to come down, however, never reached many of the men who had climbed the staircases of the North Tower. The battery-operated "handy-talkie" radios carried by the firefighters did not work in many cases. The faulty communications left firefighters with "little reliable information" about the developing catastrophe, the McKinsey FDNY report concluded.

Firefighter union officials have estimated that at least 100 of their members would have lived if the radios had functioned properly. The president of the Uniformed Firefighters' Association (UFA) pointed out that the faulty radios used on September 11 were the same ones that had been in service eight years earlier, when firefighters responded to the 1993 terrorist bombing at the Trade Center. They failed to work properly on that occasion as well.

"Eight years later, those same radios are responsible for the deaths of at least 100 firefighters who did not hear the call to evacuate," said UFA President Steve Cassidy.

Meanwhile, the head of the Uniformed Fire Officers' Association, representing the department's supervisors, formally requested last month that Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau launch a grand jury investigation of the Giuliani administration's \$33 million

deal to purchase new Motorola digital radios several months before the September 11 disaster.

Over union objections, those radios were introduced into the firehouses without field testing. They were withdrawn in March of 2001 after widespread protests by firefighters following repeated failures, including an incident in which one new member of the department was trapped in a burning basement and his “Mayday” call for help went unheard because of the radio’s glitches. They have remained on the shelf ever since.

The fire unions have questioned the bidding process used to purchase the radios, which had never been used by any fire department in the country and had been designed by Motorola for intelligence agencies needing encryption capabilities, a feature with no application on the fire ground. The suspicion that firefighter safety may have been sacrificed for political motives was heightened by the tendency of the Giuliani administration to award contracts to well-heeled political supporters and allies.

The reports issued this week also criticized both the police and fire department commands for failing to set up a unified command post at a secure, central location some distance from the catastrophe, and for the fact that most senior officials rushed to the trade center, while playing little or no role in the operations themselves.

At least 26 of the FDNY’s 32-member executive staff, for example, were at the Twin Towers after the planes struck. Both the department’s first deputy commissioner, Bill Feehan, and its chief of department, Peter Ganci, were killed in the collapse.

The report on the Police Department noted that a similar rush to the scene by the top NYPD brass only contributed to the chaos. The department’s response suffered from the lack of a “single, strong operational leader” and a clear command structure, the report said.

Present at the trade center and nominally in charge of the operation was Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik, a former third-grade detective who was given a series of political appointments culminating in the top position at the NYPD after serving as Giuliani’s chauffeur and bodyguard during his first successful run for office in 1993. The mayor picked him over career police executives for his unwavering political loyalty and subservience.

In the Fire Department, the situation was still worse. Giuliani tapped Thomas Von Essen, the president of the firefighters’ union, to serve as commissioner, using him to conduct a purge within the top ranks of the FDNY’s uniformed leadership. Von Essen set about to systematically dismantle the department’s command structure, while in several instances using privileged information he had gained as a union leader to carry out vendettas against perceived enemies within the department. His methods had brought morale within the department to an all-time low by the time of the September attacks.

Both Kerik and Von Essen have since been given berths in “Giuliani Partners,” the firm formed by the ex-mayor in an attempt to cash in on his media image by recasting himself as a management consultant on security issues.

Why did all of the top police and fire brass rush to the scene, and why was there no central, secure location from which they could coordinate their activities? To answer these questions one must examine the actions of then-Mayor Giuliani, whose role is not touched upon by either of the McKinsey reports.

The fire and police executives were only following the mayor’s example. Giuliani himself raced to the scene with his press secretary and the rest of his entourage, a response that was cast by the media as heroism, but, in reality, expressed far more the mayor’s habitual

practice of placing himself at the center of every major news event, with one eye on the city and the other on his image in the national Republican Party.

Giuliani’s methods of leadership by photo-op played no small role in undermining an effective and coordinated response to the disaster. Meandering around the trade center site, the mayor managed to avoid being crushed by the falling buildings, but only added to the chaos and confusion.

As for a secure and central location for responding to a disaster, such a site had been set up by the mayor—inside the World Trade Center complex itself. Universally characterized as Giuliani’s “bunker,” the \$13 million command center was placed on the 23rd floor of 7 World Trade Center, a 47-story office complex located next to the Twin Towers.

While critics of the administration pointed out the obvious—that a bunker is generally located underground—the choice of this particular complex was all the more bizarre, given that the trade center had already been hit by a terrorist bombing in 1993 and was considered by federal authorities to be a prime target for future attacks.

Though not directly hit by the planes, 7 World Trade Center was totally destroyed on September 11, in large part as a result of the bunker that Giuliani had installed. As part of the installation, the city had rigged a massive tank holding thousands of gallons of diesel fuel near the ground level of the building, with pipes running up to smaller tanks and emergency generators for the command center. On September 11, this fuel was ignited by debris from the Twin Towers, melting 7 World Trade Center’s key structural supports.

The entire fuel system was in violation of city codes, and fire department personnel had warned that it was a “disaster” waiting to happen.

While there exists ample justification for criminal investigations into actions carried out by the Giuliani administration that contributed to the September 11 disaster, the former mayor is still being cast as the official hero of that day. He is scheduled to play a prominent role in the official ceremonies that will mark the first anniversary of the attacks.

The distrust of those most affected by the destruction of the Twin Towers is reflected in the demand by a group representing victims’ families for an independent investigation into what went wrong with the Fire Department’s communication equipment and other questions surrounding the response to the trade center tragedy.



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