

Ex-New York Mayor Giuliani booted at 9/11 hearing

Myth confronts reality

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The two days of hearings held in New York City by the commission investigating the September 11 terrorist attacks exposed the disparity between the government- and media-crafted myths about 9/11 and the reality that has become all-too painfully apparent to those whom the events of that day touched most deeply.

The confrontation came with Wednesday's appearance before the commission of Rudolph Giuliani, the ex-mayor of New York City. The members of the panel, Democrats and Republicans alike, treated Giuliani like some sort of secular saint, the embodiment of the tragedy and heroism associated with the attacks on the World Trade Center in which nearly three thousand people, including hundreds of firefighters and other rescue workers, lost their lives.

While this was the image that the media and Giuliani himself aggressively cultivated, it was hardly embraced by many in the audience who were relatives of those killed in the attacks. They erupted in anger over the ex-mayor's testimony, as well as the fawning attitude of the panel members.

The failure to aggressively question the ex-mayor helped solidify the growing conviction among many of the relatives who had fought for the commission's creation that the panel's efforts are directed not at revealing, but rather at covering up critical questions surrounding the September 11 attacks.

The commission blocked any real inquiry by "cloaking everything in heroism," Monica Gabrielle, whose husband was killed at the trade center, told the media. She described herself as "frustrated" and condemned the panel for "letting Rudy Giuliani polish his crown."

Giuliani was allowed to drone on for 35 minutes—the longest presentation given by any witness who has thus far appeared before the commission—in a self-serving account that was crafted to serve both the Bush administration and his own business interests. He repeated US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's lie that no one could have imagined the use of hijacked airplanes as weapons—ignoring the numerous intelligence documents that had warned of precisely such an attack. He acknowledged that the Bush administration provided no warning to the city of the heightened threat of terrorist attacks on New York reported in the controversial August 6, 2001 presidential briefing, but claimed it would have made no difference.

The 10 members of the commission had only five minutes each to ask questions, and virtually every one of them wasted much of their time heaping praise on Giuliani.

"New York City...in a sense was blessed because it had you as leader," gushed the commission chairman, Thomas H. Kean. "It had somebody who was a great, great leader to take charge of a terrible, terrible event."

Commissioner James Thompson, the former governor of Illinois, hailed Giuliani for providing "extraordinary leadership" and "setting an example

for all of us."

"Your leadership gave the rest of the world an unvarnished view of the indomitable spirit of the city, and for that I salute you," declared Richard Ben-Veniste, a Democratic member of the panel who in previous hearings had posed some pointed questions to members of the Bush administration. Ben-Veniste worked with Giuliani as a prosecutor in the Manhattan US Attorney's office in the 1970s.

What precisely was the magnificent leadership that Giuliani supposedly displayed on September 11? By his own account, the ex-mayor spent much of the day wandering around lower Manhattan seeking a site for an emergency command post.

A complex that Giuliani had ordered built for this function was located on the 23rd floor of a building in the World Trade Center complex that was destroyed in the attacks on the twin towers. Why the building went down has yet to be fully explained, but some have pointed to the Giuliani administration's decision to run fuel lines up the side of the structure, in violation of safety ordinances.

The day before Giuliani appeared before the panel, one of his commissioners testified that he had opposed the decision to put what was widely known as "Rudy's bunker" in a high-rise. But no one posed any embarrassing questions to the ex-mayor about the decision.

Asked about the chain of command during the emergency, Giuliani declared: "The line of authority is clear. The mayor is in charge. That's why people elect the mayor." He further insisted that "there was no problem of coordination on September 11" between the city's fire and police departments.

During his meanderings on that day, however, Giuliani did little other than appear repeatedly before the television cameras. As for his claim about coordination between the police and firefighters, it was directly contradicted by the commission's own draft report. The document cited evidence that lack of coordination "hampered the city's ability to respond well in emergency situations." It added: "We are unaware of any communications among" the heads of the police and fire departments on September 11.

The day before Giuliani appeared before the panel, his police and fire commissioners testified. Both of these men are now employees at Giuliani Partners, a firm that markets corporate security services.

Former police commissioner Bernard Kerik, who was elevated to the post from the rank of third-grade detective after serving as Giuliani's bodyguard and chauffeur during his 1993 mayoral election campaign, largely stonewalled the commission, telling panel members they should direct their questions to the current city administration. Kerik's dog-like political loyalty earned him a short stint with the US occupation authorities in Iraq, where he headed the abortive effort to form an Iraqi police force.

Thomas Von Essen, the former fire commissioner, was named to that post after serving as president of the firefighters union and backing Giuliani's candidacy. He was widely loathed by rank-and-file members of the fire department. Von Essen, like Kerik, offered testimony that was both obtuse and hostile.

The grotesque flattery with which the panel treated Giuliani provoked increasing disquiet and murmurs of protest within the audience. The frustration with the panel's kid-gloves approach to the former mayor boiled over after Giuliani claimed that the deaths of at least 121 firefighters in the World Trade Center's north tower—the second to be hit by a hijacked airliner—were the result of their “standing their ground” against terrorism and “interpreting an evacuation order the way a brave rescue worker would interpret an evacuation order, which is to first get the civilians out and then get yourself out.”

In Giuliani's book *Leadership*, authored as part of his bid to cash in on the September 11 attacks, the ex-mayor advanced the same thesis somewhat more crudely, comparing the firefighters to a captain who elects to “go down with the ship.”

This claim contradicts the testimony of virtually everyone who survived the rescue effort at the World Trade Center that faulty communications equipment prevented those in the tower from ever hearing the order to evacuate. It has, moreover, been established that virtually all of the civilians on the floors that could be reached had already gotten out.

Eyewitnesses who escaped the building reported that many of the firefighters who perished had stopped to rest after climbing 19 floors lugging heavy gear, unaware that the south tower—the first to be hit—had already collapsed and that the second was about to follow suit.

Family members in the audience, many of whom are intimately familiar with the details of September 11, rose from their seats in outrage. “Liar,” they shouted. “Let us ask the questions.”

“My son was murdered because of your incompetence!” cried Sally Regenhart, whose son was one of the firefighters who died at the trade center.

Rosaleen Tallon, whose brother, also a firefighter, was killed on September 11, shouted at Giuliani: “Talk about the radios.”

The radios she was referring to were the antiquated “handie-talkies” used by the fire department. They were the same equipment that the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) had used in responding to the terrorist truck bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. They failed then, and, not surprisingly, they failed again on September 11.

Not only were firefighters on the 19th floor of the building unable to hear orders from their own commanders in the lobby of the north tower, but the fire department commanders had no ability to communicate with the New York Police Department (NYPD), whose members were responding to the same disaster. A police helicopter radioed to NYPD commanders that the building appeared about to fall. In response to this information, an evacuation order was communicated to police personnel on the scene. This report, however, never reached the fire department.

Similarly, 20 minutes before the south tower collapsed, a caller to the police department's emergency number reported that one of the top floors of the building was collapsing. While the information was relayed to the NYPD's commanders, it never reached the fire department, many of whose members were still in the tower.

Senior FDNY officials have testified that those watching the tragedy unfold on television knew more about the damage to the towers than fire chiefs directing rescue efforts from the buildings' lobbies. This lack of information helps explain why the death toll for firefighters was 15 times as high as that suffered by city cops.

Why didn't the city have a radio system that allowed firefighters to communicate with each other and with the police? Asked this question, Giuliani claimed that “technology” was the problem. “Those radios don't exist today,” he added. No one on the panel bothered to challenge this

incredible assertion.

Those who know the history of the fire department—including many of those who were in the audience—are well aware that the problem was not one of technology, but rather of political corruption.

Firefighter union officials called for a grand jury investigation into a \$33 million deal struck several months before September 11 between the city and Motorola Corporation for the purchase of new digital radios for the fire department. The no-bid contract resulted in the introduction of radios that proved grossly ill-suited for use by firefighters.

The model selected by the city was designed for intelligence agencies seeking encryption capabilities, something with no apparent use in emergency rescue operations or fire fighting. After the radios were introduced over the objections of department members, they had to be withdrawn in the face of repeated failures, some of them life-threatening.

The expensive new radios were mothballed, and the firefighters were stuck with equipment that was not only more than 15 years old, but was also incompatible with the communications system used by the police and known to be failure-prone in high-rise situations.

Suspicious about the peculiar Motorola deal were heightened by the well-known predilection within the Giuliani administration for steering city contracts to political supporters and allies. No one on the panel bothered to broach the sensitive subject of this contract.

While both Giuliani and the commission members sought to exploit the heroism of New York City firefighters to gloss over the city administration's responsibility for the problems that plagued the response to the September 11 attack, it was notable that not a single city firefighter was invited to testify at the hearing.

This was hardly an accident. Firefighters have repeatedly warned that the city is even less prepared now than it was three-and-a-half years ago to confront the kind of catastrophe that transpired at the World Trade Center.

Since coming to office in 2002, the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire Republican businessman, has closed down fire companies and fire houses in an attempt to balance the city's budget. Similarly, the Bush administration's fiscal 2005 budget slashes funding for first responders by \$800 million. Another program designed to aid local communities in purchasing fire equipment and training firefighters is to be cut by \$250 million.

Allowing the firefighters to speak about the real situation in the city would have only served to further puncture the official myths about heightened “homeland security” that have served as window dressing for war abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home.

What emerged most clearly at the New York City hearings is the immense social chasm between the working population and the corporate and political elite—a gulf that is particularly stark in the financial center of American capitalism. The social and political interests that are being defended by the 9/11 panel are diametrically opposed to the demand not only of family members, but the American public as a whole, for a truthful explanation of how these terrorist attacks were prepared and why the US national security establishment allowed them to take place.



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