

Front man for a police state

Bernard Kerik to head US Homeland Security Department

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With the nomination of Bernard Kerik, former head of the New York City Police Department (NYPD), as Homeland Security secretary, George W. Bush has added another unconditional loyalist to his administration. He has also ensured that this vast umbrella agency stays in the hands of a right-wing proponent of police-state measures.

At first glance, Kerik seems an unlikely candidate to head a department responsible for overseeing the work of 180,000 federal government employees, including the US Secret Service, immigration and border agents, the Coast Guard and airport baggage inspectors.

A high school dropout—he later acquired a high school equivalency degree—Kerik has no experience in national politics or the Washington bureaucracy. The *Washington Post* said Friday that a “high-ranking business executive” familiar with Kerik’s career “expressed shock” at the appointment. “Management just simply isn’t his strong suit,” he said.

Kerik has other qualities, however, that Bush values. The *Post* quoted a White House adviser who stressed that the man who was New York police commissioner at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks “brings 9/11 symbolism into the cabinet.”

Indeed, Kerik embodies the cynical exploitation of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He has parlayed his eyewitness account of the collapse of the Twin Towers—and his dog-like loyalty to his boss, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani—into a sizeable personal fortune.

It was this personal connection to Giuliani that paved the way to Kerik’s wealth and fame. A martial arts expert, he had served in the military, worked as the warden of a county jail in New Jersey, and later as a security contractor for the Saudi monarchy. He then joined the New York City Police Department, working on drug busts as an undercover agent.

In 1993, he attached himself to Giuliani, who, as a former federal prosecutor, ran a right-wing, law-and-order campaign for mayor. Kerik, then an NYPD detective, became the Republican candidate’s bodyguard and chauffeur.

After Giuliani’s election, he was rewarded for these personal services with a series of increasingly senior posts in the city hierarchy—first as a deputy commissioner, then as head of the Correction Department, and finally as commissioner of the NYPD. He left in his wake a series of corruption scandals, and a residue of bitterness over the subjective and vindictive way in which he rewarded his supporters and punished anyone who challenged him.

As chief of the city jails, Kerik was relatively anonymous. The Correction Department is the city agency that is least exposed to the public, with the bulk of its employees working at the sprawling prison complex on Rikers Island.

Although Kerik left the jail system in August 2000, after he was tapped to head the NYPD, a series of scandals arising from his tenure continues to generate investigations. Among them is a kickback scheme engineered

between the Correction Department and major tobacco companies on the sale of cigarettes to inmates.

Previously, the tobacco companies had provided sports equipment and similar items in return for control of the lucrative jail market. After Kerik’s arrival in 1995, however, a new deal was negotiated in which the companies paid out checks to a newly formed foundation that collected and disbursed funds without any city oversight.

Up to a million dollars was spent by the foundation. No accounting has been provided of these expenditures, either to the city or the Internal Revenue Service.

In a separate operation now under investigation by prosecutors, Kerik’s top aide reorganized the jail system’s handling of scrap metal, which had previously been turned over to the city for resale. Under Kerik’s watch, an off-the-books operation was set up in which the metal was directly sold to private dealers. Investigators are trying to determine what happened to the proceeds, which amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Kerik’s two top lieutenants at the city jails—his successor as commissioner, William Fraser, and Anthony Serra, the officer who was in command at Rikers Island—have both been forced to resign because of the mounting scandals. Both men were accused of coercing subordinates to perform work at their homes. In Serra’s case, jail guards have charged that he forced them to work for Republican Party campaigns.

In 2000, Giuliani named Kerik as police commissioner, the most powerful position in the city administration next to that of mayor. The appointment came in the midst of a mounting crisis fueled by Giuliani’s unleashing of police repression against the city’s working class and poor. The crisis gained national notoriety with the 1997 stationhouse torture in Brooklyn of Abner Louima and the 1999 killing of African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who died in a hail of police bullets in his own doorway.

Kerik, who never rose above the lowest rank of detective, was picked over senior NYPD chiefs with decades of experience. His chief asset was his unwavering subservience to Giuliani. With his former chauffeur in the top position, Giuliani was assured that his word would be law within the police department.

While Kerik made a show of reaching out to minority communities, he did little to stem the hostility toward both Giuliani and his own “zero-tolerance” policing methods. After lawyers for the cops who killed Diallo succeeded in moving the case to Albany and securing an acquittal, Kerik added insult to injury by clearing them of any internal disciplinary charges. The action amounted to an endorsement of an operation in which officers fired 41 bullets at an unarmed man whom they had not even identified.

Then came September 11. While the Bush administration seized upon the terrorist attacks as the pretext for implementing long-planned military operations and attacks on democratic rights, Giuliani and Kerik used their

association with the events of that day to promote themselves.

Giuliani made an abortive attempt to have the November 2001 mayoral election called off and his own term extended, arguing that he alone was qualified to lead the city after the attacks. He then left office and established Giuliani Partners, a management consulting firm, bringing with him Kerik and a number of his other subordinates from the city administration.

Even before leaving the city administration, Kerik rushed into print with an autobiography, *The Lost Son*, which had largely been written before the attacks. A section on September 11 was hastily added, including pictures that had been taken by NYPD photographers.

Kerik was ultimately forced to pay a \$2,500 fine for using city police detectives to do research for the book. They were sent to Ohio to investigate the 37-year-old murder of his mother—a prostitute—whom he never knew. His publicist convinced him that using this angle would boost sales.

When the September 11 commission held its public hearings in New York earlier this year, Kerik stonewalled all questions, insisting that inquiries should be directed to the current command of the NYPD. On the basis of the panel's investigation, however, one of the commissioners, John Lehman, a Republican and former secretary of the Navy, gave his own evaluation of the NYPD leadership under Kerik, describing it as "a scandal" and "not worthy of the Boy Scouts."

In the private sector, Kerik joined Giuliani in the pursuit of wealth. As a senior vice president of the new firm, he raked in large sums by passing himself off as a security expert. On the side he made his own deals, joining the board of Taser International, the manufacturer of the Taser electrical gun, described by the company as a "less-lethal weapon." The widespread use of the guns by American police has led to a number of deaths and provoked mounting criticism.

Kerik recently sold his stock in the company for nearly \$5.8 million. There was speculation at the time that he was doing so to avoid a conflict-of-interests problem once he was nominated for the Homeland Security office.

In another lucrative arrangement, Kerik agreed to become a shill for the US drug companies by making the public argument that importing cheaper drugs from Canada would pose a "terrorist threat."

Politically, Kerik joined his boss Giuliani in providing unconditional support to the Bush administration. The debased level of this political relationship found expression at the Republican National Convention last August, when Giuliani gave a speech recalling the events of September 11. The ex-mayor made the improbable claim that as he watched the first tower fall, he grabbed Kerik's arm and said, "Bernie, thank God George Bush is our president." Kerik nodded knowingly from the audience.

Kerik campaigned tirelessly for Bush, emerging as one of the Republican pit bulls who warned that if Democrat John Kerry were elected, the US would be more likely to face another terrorist attack. He defended Bush campaign ads that used images of human remains being carried out of the World Trade Center, a ploy that provoked outrage among city firefighters and cops as well as relatives of those who died there.

The former police commissioner participated in a public speaking tour defending the repressive measures implemented under the USA Patriot Act and calling for their expansion, as advocated by the Bush White House.

Kerik was dispatched to Iraq in May 2003 for what was billed as a six-month effort to train a new Iraqi police force. Like virtually all the civilian functionaries assigned to the occupation, he was chosen not for his competency, but for his blind loyalty to the Bush White House.

While there, Kerik referred to himself as the "interim interior minister of Iraq" and told the press that for him the job was "very personal," indicating that he saw the suppression of resistance to American

occupation as revenge for the New York cops who died on September 11.

His thuggish behavior provoked controversy. In July 2003, the *Financial Times* of London reported that British police advisors had told London, "The law enforcement operation in Iraq could disintegrate unless US forces stop 'kicking ass' and take a more conciliatory approach towards civilians." The report continued, "Some UK officials have been appalled by the language and tactics used by the US security supremo, Bernard Kerik, the former New York police commissioner dubbed the 'Baghdad terminator' because of his uncompromising style."

Kerik left Iraq after only three months. No official explanation has ever been given for his early termination, though it is evident the police-training operation was hardly a success. There were some, particularly among the Iraqi members of the US puppet Governing Council, who raised sharp questions about major contracts signed under Kerik's authority. One of them involved the importation of \$20 million worth of Kalashnikov rifles, pistols and ammunition. Why such a purchase was necessary when the US military had recovered tens of thousands of such weapons from abandoned arsenals was never explained.

The announcement of Kerik's nomination has provoked no opposition from the Democrats. On the contrary, New York's two Democratic senators both praised Bush's choice. "If ever a state deserves to have a citizen appointed to Homeland Security, it is New York," said Senator Charles Schumer. Senator Hillary Clinton issued a statement saying, "Bernard Kerik knows firsthand the challenges and needs of New York and other high-threat areas. As a member of the president's Cabinet, he can make that case every single day."

Kerik is not coming to Washington as an advocate for New York City. He is being installed at the head of the Department of Homeland Security because he is prepared to carry out without hesitation whatever the Bush administration requires. He has proven himself by his unconditional fealty, first to Giuliani and then to Bush, and by his willingness to sell his reputation to the highest corporate bidder.

With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the Bush administration has erected the scaffolding of a police state, putting into place the means for a massive consolidation of repressive power. It has carried out this reorganization under the pretext of a "war on terror," supposedly made necessary by the September 11 attacks.

Kerik's presence at the head of the agency—his lack of management skills, political experience and intellectual ability notwithstanding—serves two essential purposes. First, there is his connection to—and shameless exploitation of—September 11. Second, he brings to the agency the political sensibilities of a prison guard and an undercover cop, having no compunction about trampling on democratic rights.

Kerik's elevation is an ominous warning of the repressive measures the Bush administration is preparing for its second term.



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