

World Trade Center tapes expose chaos of September 11 response

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The release last Friday of tapes recording some 130 calls made September 11, 2001 from the stricken World Trade Center towers to New York City's 911 emergency systems provided fresh and tragic evidence of that the city was woefully unprepared for such a crisis and catastrophically disorganized in its response.

Pried loose from the city through more than four years of litigation in the courts over a freedom of information law request by the *New York Times*, the tapes include only the voices of the 911 operators and police and fire dispatchers; the voices of those who called from the towers were edited out.

Still, the recordings once again underscore the immensity of the tragedy, as well as the toll that it took on emergency service workers who sought to coordinate a response with inadequate information and equipment.

In some cases, the tapes include the voices of 911 operators staying on the line with callers as they lost consciousness from the dense smoke coming from the fires in the high rise buildings. Others took phone numbers of victims' families and promised to call them.

"It's an awful thing. Awful, awful, awful thing to call somebody and tell them you're going to die," one police operator told another after speaking with a group of office workers group trapped on the 83rd floor of south tower.

In another tape, a clearly exasperated fire dispatcher asks of a police operator, "How can you build big buildings with no way to get out of it? That's ridiculous!"

A group of eight families of September 11 victims and one survivor intervened in the suit to demand that the city release the recordings. They are still pressing in court for the full tapes—including the callers' voices—to be released.

Norman Siegel, the former head of the New York Civil Liberties Union, who represented the families that joined the suit, pointed to the glaring shortcomings in the emergency response system that are exposed in the recordings.

"The 911 tapes clearly demonstrate the 911 operators were not given a uniform script," he said. "The 911 tapes clearly demonstrate the 911 operators' unfamiliarity with the building. Over and over they told callers to open the windows and—you can't open the windows in the World Trade Center. As we listened and read the 911 operators comments, at times they

were inconsistent and contradictory. You had generally the mantra of 911 operators saying, just sit tight."

Sally Regenhard, whose firefighter son Christian died in the trade center, was one of those who joined the lawsuit demanding the release of the tapes. The recordings, she said, exposed a total "collapse" of New York City's emergency response system. "It was a disgrace," she said, while adding that the tapes also revealed "the enormous compassion of the operators, who did the best they could to help."

"I'm hoping that the public and the system will learn how unprepared the City of New York and the Port Authority were on that day," she added.

The administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg has fought every step of the way to block the release of these tapes and other information relating to September 11.

In his weekly radio address last Friday, Bloomberg defended his administration's stonewalling. "You know exactly what's going to happen to the tapes. They'll be blasted all over and made a spectacle," he said. He added, "My personal opinion has always been, we should remember those that we lost and not focus on that particular day."

Who does the mayor think he is kidding? For four and a half years, the US political establishment has done nothing but "focus on that particular day," insisting that it "changed everything" and invoking it as a justification for everything from wars of aggression abroad to unprecedented attacks on democratic rights at home and even tax cuts for the rich.

All the while, however, it has systematically blocked any real probe into what actually happened that day. Meanwhile, in the face of what was ostensibly the most catastrophic failure of intelligence and national security in the country's history, not a single US official has been held accountable.

In Bloomberg's case, the concern is not protecting the families; after all, those who have intervened in the case have done so to demand that the tapes be made public, not suppressed. Rather, he is acting to protect his predecessor, Rudy Giuliani, and the myth that has been so assiduously cultivated that the former mayor represented some kind of a hero and a paragon of leadership in the face of the terrorist attacks.

What the tapes demonstrate, once again, is that the disaster of September 11, 2001 was compounded by the city's failure to provide its emergency service personnel with an adequate communications network to cope with such a large-scale incident.

As the tapes painfully make clear, those who called 911 from the towers were routed to police operators, who had to transfer them to fire and ambulance dispatchers, compelling them to give the same information all over again, because the police and fire computer systems had no link.

The police operators and fire and ambulance dispatchers—following the standard protocol for high-rise fires—told those in the towers to “stay put,” because they had no way of communicating with police and fire chiefs on the scene, who had already ordered the World Trade Center's evacuation. It will never be known whether more people could have escaped had such information been available.

Even more egregious was the situation facing firefighters who responded to the trade center, who were unable to communicate either with the Police Department, whose helicopter units had warned the buildings were going to fall, or in many cases with their own commanders who had given the order to evacuate.

The reason for this fatal failure was that fire personnel were using the same antiquated “handie-talkie” radios that had already proven unworkable during a previous truck bombing in the World Trade Center in 1993.

Family members of over a dozen firefighters who perished on September 11, 2001 sued the city over the radios, charging that the faulty devices were to blame for firefighters in the North Tower not responding to an evacuation order after the South Tower had collapsed. It is estimated that 121 of them died when the second tower came down. A federal judge, however, dismissed the suit on the grounds that the families had forfeited the right to sue the city because they had filed claims with the September 11 Victims Compensation Fund.

Why didn't the firefighters have equipment that worked? The Giuliani administration had in fact bought new radios less than a year before the September 11 attacks. The \$33 million deal was struck with Motorola Corporation under a no-bid contract.

The radios, which were bought sight-unseen and without the field-testing that is required under the Fire Department's regulations, were designed for use by intelligence agencies, with encryption functions that have no use in firefighting.

These radios were issued to firefighters and then recalled within barely one week after widespread failures, including one in which a probationary firefighter nearly lost his life.

While New York's firefighter unions called for a grand jury investigation into the deal, a convincing explanation of why these radios were purchased in this extraordinary manner has never been forthcoming. The transaction is consistent with a number of contracts struck by the Giuliani administration with the apparent aim of rewarding political allies or currying favor within Republican circles as part of the mayor's positioning

himself for a run for national office.

The end result was that firefighters—many of whom were resting after climbing up flights of stairs of the North Tower—did not have radios that could pick up the order to get out of the building.

In a despicable attempt to cover up his own responsibility, Giuliani has endlessly extolled the firefighters' undoubted bravery, falsely claiming that they deliberately ignored the evacuation order because they were “standing their ground” against the terrorists. In his book *Leadership*, he went so far as to compare them to the captain who prefers to “go down with the ship.”

Today, some four and a half years after September 11, the Fire Department is utilizing the faulty Motorola radios, which have been reprogrammed but still cause problems. The company has discontinued their production because of design flaws. Police and fire dispatchers in New York City remain on different computer systems, thereby retaining the delays and duplication reflected in the 911 tapes. According to the city, remedying this problem will take at least another three years.

Given this record, Bloomberg's uncompromising opposition to the release of the 911 tapes is readily understandable. They draw attention once again to what is at the very least the city's extreme negligence, and, in the case of the Giuliani administration's FDNY radio contract, suspicion of criminality.

On a more fundamental level, there is a general determination within ruling circles to as much as possible suppress information about the September 11, 2001 events, while utilizing them as a justification for carrying out sweeping changes in government policy.

In the absence of a serious, objective investigation, a myth has been promoted, centered on the claims that no one could have anticipated such attacks and that they were carried out without any forewarning to the US government. Within this myth, Giuliani has been assigned the iconic role of the inspirational leader who led the heroic response of the firefighters and other emergency responders.

None of these claims stand up to detailed examination. While the heroism of the firefighters who went into the burning towers—343 of whom never came out—is unquestionable, Giuliani's legacy is mired in incompetence and possible corruption that contributed to their deaths.

Even less credible is the claim that vast US national security apparatus knew nothing in advance about a major terrorist plot that the Bush administration immediately exploited in order to implement its longstanding plans for a war against Iraq.



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