

Bernard Kerik's guilty plea: Corruption case underscores fraud of "homeland security"

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Bernard Kerik, New York City's former police commissioner and George W. Bush's first choice to succeed Tom Ridge as secretary of the Homeland Security Department, appeared in a Bronx courtroom Friday to plead guilty to minor corruption charges. His guilty plea was part of a deal with prosecutors to avoid felony indictments and possible jail time.

The case against Kerik revolved around his receiving \$165,000 worth of unpaid construction work to convert two apartments in a luxury building in Riverdale into one huge unit, described by press reports as "opulent."

The work was performed in late 1999 and early 2000, when he was Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's correction commissioner. The company said to have paid for this valuable favor for the official in charge of the city's sprawling jail complex, New Jersey-based Interstate Industrial Corporation, was alleged by officials in that state to have had ties to the Gambino organized crime family. At the time, the company was seeking contracts with New York City.

Kerik quickly realized the cash value of the work performed by the allegedly mob-linked company, selling the apartment in 2002 for nearly triple what he had paid for it less than three years earlier.

Prosecutors had apparently threatened to bring felony bribery charges against Kerik before he accepted the plea deal. The reported substance of the accusations against the former official is that in return for services rendered—including the suspect firm's hiring of Kerik's brother and a friend who had served as the best man at Kerik's wedding—the then-correction commissioner acted as the company's advocate within the Giuliani administration, arguing that it be approved for contracts.

Under the plea bargain, Kerik was compelled only to plead guilty to two misdemeanors and pay a \$221,000

fine. The ex-police commissioner was represented in the case by Joseph Tacopina, an attorney who gained nationwide fame for defending one of the cops convicted in the notorious 1997 stationhouse torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima.

Following the ten-minute hearing in which he entered his guilty plea, Kerik offered no apology and showed no remorse. Instead he lashed out at his accusers. "Over the last year and a half I've watched and listened as people picked apart my 30-year career in fighting crime and fighting injustice and tried to destroy everything I've ever done," he said. "But today it's over. Now I can get on with my business."

The year and a half he referred to is the period since his December 2004 nomination as Bush's Homeland Security chief went up in smoke, as evidence surfaced pointing to serious corruption involving the nominee. At the time, the Bush administration and Kerik's defenders put out the implausible explanation that he had removed himself from consideration for the Homeland Security post because of evidence that he had failed to pay payroll taxes for a nanny who may have been an undocumented immigrant.

As for Kerik's statement about getting on with his "business," this was a reference to the plea deal's allowing him to keep his private investigator's license and pistol permit. Following the collapse of his nomination, and amid continuing revelations of misconduct, Kerik left Giuliani Partners, the consulting firm launched by the former mayor to cash in on his post-September 11 fame, and set up his own security consulting business. His latest job was reportedly in Jordan.

Kerik's assertion that "it's over" may be premature. The free construction work by a company publicly linked to the mob is only one in a series of scandals that

have swirled around the former New York City jail and police commissioner.

It appears that the plea deal involved a political decision by the city administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg to drop all other probes by the city's department of investigation into possible wrongdoing by Kerik. There were several such active investigations involving everything from charges of mismanagement of funds derived from the sale of cigarettes in the city's jails to suspect contracts, suspicion of credit card abuse at the police department, and the apparent use of city employees on work time to perform private tasks for the commissioner.

Both the city administration and the national political establishment were no doubt nervous about seeing television coverage of Kerik dragged into the lower Manhattan jail that now bears his name. However, multiple lawsuits in relation to Kerik's alleged abuses of power while serving first as jail and then police commissioner are still outstanding.

Kerik was tapped by Bush for the Homeland Security post largely because of his purported role in the response to the September 11 attacks. In the wake of his nomination, however, it was revealed that he had shamelessly exploited these attacks for personal gain.

This included rushing into print with an autobiography using "Ground Zero" photographs taken from the New York Police Department's files, as well as raking in tens of thousands of dollars in royalties for writing a brief foreword to another book, whose sale was supposed to benefit the families of slain cops and firefighters.

He also parlayed his 9/11 celebrity into a lucrative seat on the board of the Taser corporation, manufacturer of police stun guns, a deal that reportedly netted him millions worth of company stock.

It was also revealed that, in the course of the grim efforts to recover remains from the World Trade Center site, Kerik had accepted the use of an apartment overlooking the rubble—ostensibly donated as a rest area for recovery workers—where he simultaneously carried on two extra-marital affairs.

That such an individual was tapped by the president of the United States to head an agency that ostensibly has the lead responsibility for protecting the American people from terrorist attacks is damning proof that the entire "war on terror" is a politically motivated fraud.

Kerik began his meteoric rise as a third-grade detective who became Giuliani's bodyguard and chauffeur during the latter's run for mayor. He was chosen for high office by Bush—and by Giuliani before him—not because of any professional qualifications, but for his unswerving loyalty to his political patrons.

His corruption would hardly have been out of place in an administration that is up to its neck in multi-billion-dollar scandals that range from the no-bid contracts for Halliburton and other politically connected firms in Iraq to the mysterious evaporation of massive amounts of aid funds for the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast.

It is worth recalling that Bush's decision to nominate Kerik was warmly applauded by New York's Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton. At the time, she issued a statement predicting that Kerik would serve as an advocate for New York City. "Bernard Kerik knows firsthand the challenges and needs of New York and other high-threat areas," she declared. "As a member of the president's Cabinet, he can make that case every single day."

This claim was ludicrous. Had Kerik been appointed, he would have loyally carried out the same actions as his replacement, Michael Chertoff, who recently slashed homeland security funding for both New York City and Washington in order to funnel it into congressional districts that face no credible terrorist threats, but where Republicans are facing tight races in the November elections.



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