NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

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As Rights Wane, Siegel's the Man

On Sept. 10, this country was paying for a sprawling, so utterly sophisticated intelligence agency, the CIA, and also the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Army intelligence, the FBI, the customs, and the immigration service.

They had investigators and contacts all over the face of the earth. They assured Congress of this each time they asked for more money.

And here in New York, we had the following people protecting us. The city police, the police anti-terrorist squad, the State Police, the Port Authority police and the National Guard.

Our nation's intelligence knew everything on Sept. 10, and they charged billions for it.

We did not have one intelligence agent who was dumb.

On Sept. 11, planes came out of the sky with terrorists nobody knew were coming and the World Trade Center towers disappeared in smoke.



Jimmy Breslin

Right away all these agencies announced that they knew where the attack had come from, who had wired money home, who had learned to fly. And they all knew precisely what had to be done immediately to save America.

The citizens had to give up their rights.

The intelligence agencies could set up roadblocks, frozen zones, wiretaps, video surveillance.

Give up and let the FBI take care of your rights.

The head of the FBI announces that he has over 200,000 leads on the terrorist bombing. He knew nothing before the bombing. Now he has 200,000 suspects, and you, or at least your cousins, soon will have agents at the front door.

In this city right now, there are few places in Brooklyn or Manhattan where you can walk without running into barriers and a cop or state trooper saying no, or a National Guardsman holding an automatic weapon that menaces a whole crowd.

My personal favorites are the cops with great big dogs. Bomb-sniffing dogs, cadaver dogs, whatever you call them. Dogs who act smart, sniff everything, and in all my time in my city have found nothing. In the '80s, they had nine dogs sniffing in a lot in College Point for the body of Antonella Mattina. Nine German shepherds. Nine bushy-haired dogs, who were the laziest animals on the face of the earth. All search dogs are slothful. The nine dogs found nothing in the lot. A few weeks later, some kids playing in the lot found a body.

The dogs are the great illustration of the illusion of law enforcement. Every agency says there must be tighter security, no, they aren't the right words, we must have higher security, a complete lockdown of all people and their rights. When they say this, think dogs. Big, lazy dogs snoring away.

Because of this, in the Democratic primary elections on Thursday there is one name on the ballot who can be vital to your life every day.

His name is Norman Siegel and he runs for the office of public advocate. That is a job that nobody knows anything about and is generally useless. Or it has been until now. This time you can vote to protect your rights by putting in Norman Siegel. It is the single solitary most important vote you can make.

For about four years, Norman Siegel was our best fighter for the Constitution that politicians wanted to snatch away from us.

When you look at Siegel's record, you can see why it is absolutely necessary to have him in the city government and confronting loss of rights every day as part of his job.

The two candidates for mayor may or may not stand up for you. Why the vote for Siegel is imperative is that he surely will.

"You've got to question anything that's being proposed. They want a 24-hour detention raised to 48. There's no objection to that at a time like this. But when they say they want it indefinitely, you have to say no and ask why. You have to minimize the loss of liberty while this is going on. But if you lose freedom entirely, then the terrorists win," he was saying yesterday on West 72nd Street. The New York chapter of NOW was endorsing him.

For the last several years, he went from the demonstrations in the streets to federal courtrooms, and he lost nowhere. He won 23 First Amendment cases against Giuliani the Mayor.

Here was Norman Siegel walking at the head of a parade of taxi drivers, who looked like ragamuffins. They were walking down Broadway, on the other side of the street from City Hall. There were maybe 150 of them and there must have been a thousand cops surrounding them. The mayor, Giuliani, was terrified of them. He called them "Taxi Terrorists" and tried to prevent them from coming across the bridge from Queens to demonstrate for their rights.

This was at a point where Giuliani was fully into his Mussolini period.

Norman Siegel was the head of the New York Civil Liberties Union; each day, he would stand up when the city government, through the police, tried to end one or another of civil liberties in this city.

Siegel took Giuliani to federal court and won the taxi drivers case. That was one of the First Amendment cases that Siegel won over the mayor.

Another group of Norman Siegel clients looked worse than the taxi drivers. They were called Housing Works. They wanted affordable housing. In the small march were people with AIDS, several of them on crutches or in wheelchairs.

This time, Giuliani was so frightened of them that he had snipers on the roof of City Hall, with rifles ready to drill these AIDS people who were walking with Norman Siegel, the only man in town who would help them that day.

"Look at this, Norman, they are going to end AIDS," somebody said. "They are going to kill everybody with AIDS."

But the most hapless clients Norman Siegel had were the city's museum directors and their boards who collapsed and hid when Giuliani decreed that an art exhibit in the Brooklyn Museum of Art was not covered by the First Amendment and therefore he could close it down.

Siegel was neither surprised by rich people quitting nor by anybody stepping out to replace them. He just put together a large group that started demonstrations and going to court and won another First Amendment case and the art exhibit in the museum went on.

That's what he did before this election and if elected, as he should be, then he will have to do even more for his city. He will have to save your rights while operating at gunpoint.

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