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Kerik Wandering Into Minefield

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How did a nice guy like Bernard Kerik get into such a mess?

With the publication next week of his autobiography, Kerik finds himself in a situation that some see both as a conflict of interest and an abdication of his responsibilities as police commissioner.

Writing a book while serving as commissioner is so sensitive that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani cited it in firing his first police commissioner, Bill Bratton.

And considering the problems Kerik's predecessor Howard Safir created for himself by running around the country at a time of crisis in the city, it's surprising Giuliani has allowed Kerik's situation to go as far as it has.

It had begun so well. Here was Kerik, a third-grade detective and high school drop-out who'd achieved his dream of becoming commissioner.

True, his appointment was a mop-up job for the last 16 months of Giuliani's second term, but Kerik had come out of the chute at a gallop. While Safir had offended everyone, Kerik spoke softly, smiled easily and met with minority groups Safir had refused to.

As for crime, it took care of itself. It had dropped under Bratton and Safir and continued to drop under him.

OK, there was a problem with Safir's police museum and police detail, which Safir maintained even though he was no longer commissioner. Kerik transferred most of the 23 officers out of the museum and reduced Safir's detail but he couldn't eliminate it.

Giuliani was too committed. He'd publicly stated there'd been threats on Safir's life. Kerik and everyone else at One Police Plaza laughed at that, but why rile up the mayor and jeopardize the perks of the commissioner's job?

And there were perks.

First, there was the dazzling Judith Regan, editor, publisher and publicist of ReganBooks, a subsidiary of media mogul Rupert Murdoch's far-flung empire. Regan — who in her salad days had accused cops of holding her incommunicado in a midtown jail cell for five hours — took one look at Kerik or, as she said in a news release: When Bernie Kerik "walked into my office and told his story, my life was transformed."

The result: Regan gave Kerik a six-figure advance for his life story, which she entitled, "The Lost Son."

In May, the mayor gave Kerik a waiver with the Conflicts of Interest Board allowing him to write while serving as commissioner, something he had refused Bratton.

Meanwhile, Kerik accompanied Regan to Hollywood to plug himself. He began hanging out at Campagnola, an Upper East Side joint that Regan's friends frequent. One of those friends was Joe Tacopina, who represented Regan after her divorce lawyer filed a criminal complaint against her because Regan's celebrity private eye, Billy Stanton, allegedly stole Regan's file from the lawyer's office.

Another was Tacopina's client and special friend, Victoria Gotti, the daughter of you-know-who of the Gambino crime family and now a columnist who took to telephoning Kerik at headquarters.

And there was Stanton himself, whose investigations involve ladies at the China Club and is another Regan author. A news release for Stanton's book, "The Anti-Terror Checklist," calls it a "reassuring guidebook" that includes information on "bombings, bioterrorism, chemical terrorism, nuclear radiation."

As for "The Lost Son," it is due out next Monday.

Because Bratton's book, which appeared two years after he left office, bombed, Regan decided Kerik's should be published while he was commissioner.

And then came 9/11, as the World Trade Center attack is referred to at One Police Plaza. As the title of Stanton's book suggests, Regan saw the attack as a marketing opportunity.

She pushed Kerik to write an extra 60 pages on what he did during the attack, which a press blurb says will include pages of "never-seen photographs covering the attack and its aftermath."

The photos were taken by Det. John Botte, a photographer with the Police Department.

But while this may help sell "The Lost Son," it may not help Kerik.

Some people wonder if he's exploiting the World Trade Center attacks to promote himself.

Remember the trouble Safir had when he skipped town after the Amadou Diallo shooting and was spotted at the Oscars in Hollywood?

It turned out he and his wife had been comped $7,000 for the trip by the Revlon Corp. The Conflicts of Interest Board spent more than a year investigating Safir, whose reputation never recovered.

How will Kerik explain why he's now going on a two-week book tour with appearances on "60 Minutes" and "The Today Show" while police officers and firefighters remain working round-the-clock trying to retrieve bodies and clean up Ground Zero?

How will he explain why using police photographs to benefit himself is not a conflict of interest?

Why couldn't he simply have waited two months until he left office?

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