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Kelly Perceived as Tough but Fair

Most police groups give positive reviews

By Rocco Parascandola
STAFF WRITER

Police officers who worked for Ray Kelly say he is a tough but fair commander with a Rolodex of Washington phone numbers critical in an age of terror.

The fraternal organizations representing minority officers expect a conscientious yet restrained approach to quality-of-life crimes.

Even Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari, one of David Dinkins' harshest critics, says the ex-mayor made an excellent choice when he tapped Kelly as police commissioner in 1992.

Yet not everyone thinks Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg hit a home run in selecting the Sunnyside native as the city's 41st police commissioner.

Michael Meyers, the head of the New York Civil Rights Coalition, recalls meeting Kelly at a time when Kelly was being praised for attending church services in minority communities.

"I was not pleased with his attitude toward racial profiling," Meyers said. "I told him there was a lack of accountability and that the real perception of minorities — whether it was factual or not — is that there's a problem with the way they're dealt with.

"He told me 'I can go to a street corner in Harlem and have someone tell me that. I don't need you to tell me that,'" Meyers remembered. "I was stunned."

Meyers says the church visits were more gimmick than substance, and he suspects Kelly's attitude toward criticism of the department on racial profiling has not changed.

"I don't think there's growth in that regard," Meyers said. "I think there's a thin skin in that regard and a 'I know better than you' attitude."

Norman Siegel, the former head of the New York Civil Liberties Union who was at the same meeting, said he was equally taken aback by Kelly's comments. Still, he said Kelly's church visits did make a difference.

Whether Kelly resumes those weekly visits remains to be seen, but Siegel said the terror attacks have presented the new commissioner a chance to capitalize on the "new trust between the police and communities."

Kelly said the terror attacks, a block from his Battery Park City residence, made him want to jump back into policing and safeguard the city against another attack.

He also stressed the importance of continuing the assault on quality-of-life offenses that has become a cornerstone of the Giuliani administration.

Det. Louis Hernandez, president of the Hispanic Society, said Kelly's approach — characterized as demanding yet fair — should help ease tensions between officers and minorities who feel police have trampled their civil rights during the Giuliani era.

"We'll be able to be aggressive without being overly aggressive," said Hernandez, who attended Kelly's news conference.

Det. Dennis Jones, a trustee with the Guardians, which is made up of black police officers, said he expects the same measured approach toward quality-of-life crimes, with all neighborhoods treated equally.

A Manhattan deputy inspector said he was particularly struck that Kelly regularly sought the opinions and input from the rank-and-file during his first go-round as commissioner.

"He has a very proactive approach to everything," said the deputy inspector, who asked that his name not be used. "He's the type of person who says, 'We're going to get the job done.'"

Other officers said because Kelly served under Dinkins, he would always be remembered for the Crown Heights riots, which Dinkins met with a cautious, delayed police response for which he was blasted.

Kelly's supporters said it was clear Kelly was not to blame.

"He knows what he's doing," said Det. Bill Burns, from the Central Park Precinct. "He knows what it takes to keep the PD together, especially with the threat of terrorism on the table. He's the right guy to take the torch from Kerik."



Newsday Photo / Audrey C. Tiernan

Ray Kelly, center, addresses the media yesterday after he was named New York City's next police commissioner by Mayor-elect Mike Bloomberg, left.

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