NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Times Sq. turnaround

BERNARD B. KERIK

A lawman all his life, Bernard Kerik, New York's Police Commissioner, began his professional career as a member of the United States Army's Military Police.

Like everyone else, I've been watching for signs of hope within my city as it struggles to deal with tragedy and, more often than not, my thoughts are pulled back to the last time I worried about the future of New York.

In July of 1987, the threat wasn't terrorism, but crime out of control — and I was right in the middle of the fight.

As a street cop working a foot post on "the Deuce," West 42nd Street from Seventh to Eighth avenues, my beat was Times Square — the centerpiece of decadence in the free world.

Back then, I don't care who you were or where you came from — Long Island, Orlando, Fla., Tokyo, Japan — if you wanted to paint a picture of an American no-law zone, two words were all you needed: Times Square.

I was 32 years old when I first took that post on 42nd Street. I had grown up in a slum, traveled the world as an Army MP and managed a 1,100-inmate facility filled with some the hardest criminals in southern Jersey.

I thought I had a pretty good idea of what criminals could do to other people and to a community. I was in for a lesson.

It was as if a secret agreement had been reached in some back office: from 42nd to 45th Streets and from Sixth to Eighth Avenues, all bets were off, the law just didn't apply.

'My beat was Times Square — the centerpiece of decadence in the free world.'

You name the vice — violence, prostitution, larceny, pedophilia, alcoholism, drug addiction — it lived and thrived on the streets of Times Square. The pornographic images in the marquees, the screams of hookers and johns in fistfights, the pungent smell of urine in every doorway, all guaranteed that no human sense was left unoffended.

Worst of all, the bad guys honestly believed that these blocks belonged to them, and that the legitimate people who made the mistake of wandering onto their turf were trespassers and fair game.

I ended up working in a plainclothes anti-crime unit, and from time to time we would set up observation posts from the nearby office buildings. It was like watching something from the Nature Channel.

The unsuspecting prey (typically tourists) would wander in, the predators would swoop down, pick them clean in an instant and disappear even faster into the night.

What got me, though, was how brazen they were; five minutes after committing a felony, five minutes after watching their buddies get arrested, these guys were right back at work ripping off someone else. It wasn't that the police stopped trying, there was just more of them than us.

The futility of the whole thing left me disheartened, and I can remember thinking to myself that New York City was in bad shape and only going to get worse.

But it didn't. A strong leader came to City Hall and raised the bar on what New York City could be. With the support they needed, the cops took back the streets and put the bad guys on the run.

Times Square remained New York City's centerpiece, not for crime and decay but for redevelopment, investment and enterprise. Hotels sprouted everywhere, porno houses gave way to Toys 'R' Us and Warner Brothers, and the neon "XXX" signs that used to light up the night were replaced by an eight-story NASDAQ digital billboard.

On the same Sunday that President Bush ordered our nation's response to the Sept. 11 attack, I went back to Times Square. I was there to help Mayor Giuliani deliver the message that our lives and our enjoyment of the city had to continue, but the significance of this visit was much greater for me.

Fourteen years ago I stood on those streets, pondered a crisis that seemed insurmountable and came as close as I ever have to giving up hope for the future of my city.

Now I was back, 26 days after evil personified crashed into the World Trade Center, and hope was everywhere.

It was in the cafes that used to be crime scenes and it was in the family from Wisconsin that brought their kids here to see The Lion King.

Most of all it was in the New Yorkers, who had rallied together to reclaim a piece of stolen turf, and now came in droves to show the world they weren't about to hand it back to anyone, terrorists included.

I've seen what this city can be and what it can overcome. I've seen cops and citizens take a modern day Gomorrah and turn it into a cultural and economic jewel. I've seen corporate finance and government vision merge together to turn the bleak into the beautiful and do it better and faster than anyone would have thought possible.

Tough times are surely ahead, but all I need to do is walk down Broadway to know we're going to make it. New York City and Times Square: open for business, better and brighter than ever.

Start spreadin' the news.

NEW YORK POST, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2001

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NYC-WTC_000414947