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A Street Cop's Rise From High School Dropout to Cabinet Nominee

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When the second jet crashed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, Bernard B. Kerik, the New York City police commissioner, was standing a block away, shouting evacuation orders through the torrent of debris. For the man in charge of protecting New York, he wrote later, that moment "was unimaginable."

So was Mr. Kerik's personal trajectory. The high school dropout and onetime street cop and undercover narcotics detective was serving as the third police commissioner of a lame-duck mayor that morning. But in the aftermath of the attack, Mr. Kerik, like Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, was thrust squarely into the national spotlight.

He caught the attention of President Bush, who sent Mr. Kerik to Iraq to create a police force after the invasion, gave him a speaking role at the Republican National Convention and is expected to nominate him today as the next secretary of homeland security.

Mr. Kerik's rise from a harsh upbringing to Cabinet nominee has much to do with his powerful patron, Mr. Giuliani, whom he first served as a bodyguard. Along the way, Mr. Kerik has developed a reputation as a tough-talking, sometimes coarse, law enforcer who is rarely one to stand on ceremony. He is known as a relentless boss who likes to shake up the status quo and toss out subordinates he considers slackers.

When Mr. Kerik was appointed to a top job in the New York City Department of Correction in the mid-1990's, one official told the department's commissioner: "Congratulations. You've just hired Rambo."

His style is likely to contrast with that of Tom Ridge, the first head of the department, who was widely seen as diligent, but who critics said was not hard-charging enough to cut through the turf battles that hamper the effort to meld 22 agencies into one domestic security department.

But running Homeland Security -- the largest federal department created since the Defense Department in 1949 -- also goes far beyond anything Mr. Kerik has done. If confirmed, he will oversee security of the nation's borders, ports and airports and will be in charge of the Secret Service, the Coast Guard, customs and much of the immigration service, and there are bound to be questions about how he can handle such an immense job.

Mr. Kerik, who declared bankruptcy as a young police officer, also could face questions about how he made millions of dollars since leaving city government, mainly through his partnership in a consulting firm led by Mr. Giuliani. Most recently, he sold \$5.8 million of stock in a company that makes stun guns used by many police forces.

As police commissioner, he had less than friendly relations with the F.B.I., and occasionally was criticized for his use of power. In writing his memoirs, which touched on 9/11 and detailed his abandonment by his mother, who was a prostitute, he used police officers to conduct research, a move that earned him a \$2,500 fine from the city's Conflicts of Interest Board. He once also dispatched homicide investigators to question and fingerprint several Fox News employees whom his publisher, Judith Regan, apparently suspected of stealing her cellphone and necklace.

In the last few years, Mr. Kerik, 49, has spoken broadly about the lessons of Sept. 11 and the kind of response that terrorism requires.

In an interview earlier this year, he said that one of his most important experiences in Iraq was "to see the hatred for the United States and what certain elements out there thought of the U.S. and how dangerous it could be."

He added that many "say that we have to sort of put 9/11 behind us, move on."

"You can't put it behind us," he said, "and you can't forget about it. Because if and when you do, they're going to come back."

Mr. Kerik, whose wife, Hala, was born in Syria, also spent time in the Middle East in the early 1980's, when he was security chief for the royal family's hospitals in Saudi Arabia.

That was just one of many stops in Mr. Kerik's journey, which began in rough-and-tumble neighborhoods in Newark, Paterson and in Ohio,

where his mother abandoned the family when he was 2 years old.

In his autobiography, "The Lost Son," Mr. Kerik wrote that he learned only in researching the book in 2001 that his mother had been a prostitute and that she died from a severe blow to the head, possibly murdered by her pimp.

He also wrote that as he got older, he had a "flair for truancy" and dropped out of high school to join the Army, where he became a military policeman and martial arts specialist, and finished work on his general equivalency diploma. He also wrote that when he was stationed in Korea, he fathered a child out of wedlock. By his early 30's, he was making \$50,000 a year as a jail warden in Passaic County, N.J., but he gave that up to pursue a long-time dream: a chance to become a New York street cop, at just over half that pay.

He later became a highly decorated undercover narcotics detective and then, after befriending Mr. Giuliani during a mayoral campaign, he was appointed to a series of jobs at the city's Correction Department.

At that department, where he was commissioner from 1998 to 2000, he and other officials used an array of tools and tactics, including a huge SWAT team and electric stun shields, to reduce slashings and stabbings among inmates by more than 90 percent.

Mr. Kerik then served as Mr. Giuliani's police commissioner for 16 months, a tenure largely dominated by the attack on Sept. 11, 2001.

During the last 12 months of his term, violent crime in New York City registered its biggest drop in five years, a decline that came as the rates of violent crime in many other cities started to increase and when many thought the city's crime rate could go no lower. Across the city, both violent crime and overall crime fell by more than 12 percent.

Mr. Kerik took over a department that was viewed with increasing hostility in the city's minority neighborhoods. He quickly began visiting church and other community leaders and worked to mend the frayed ties.

Mr. Kerik also liked to talk about the management principles he picked up through his reading, but his style as a police executive was largely influenced by his affinity for personal loyalty, his straight-ahead manner and a taste for instinctive decisions.

"I'm not big on doing things that are a waste of time," Mr. Kerik said in an interview in 2001. "If it's a waste of time, get rid of it. If it's a bad manager, get rid of them."

With his massive neck and bodyguard's physique, Mr. Kerik never looked much like a paper pusher, even on days when he would open his briefcase to show off the papers he was writing for his mail-order bachelor's degree, which he finally earned from Empire State College in New York in 2002.

Before the Sept. 11 attacks and in the days afterward, Mr. Kerik was critical of the level of sharing of intelligence by federal agencies, particularly the F.B.I., and his comments presaged the sort of intelligence critique later leveled by the 9/11 Commission. That kind of criticism made him few friends, however, among some federal law enforcement officials, including some with whom he will have to work if he is confirmed.

After the attacks, he appeared before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee and said, "Local police forces are on the front line, and are uniquely situated to gather information which, when coupled with federal intelligence, can not only solve cases but, much more important, prevent attacks from occurring."

The Police Department lost 23 officers on Sept. 11, the most ever in a single day. Mr. Kerik slept in his office for weeks afterward, supervising patrols and coordinating with federal and state agencies. The department also found itself facing an entirely new mission, with a need to help pioneer bioterror and other defenses.

In 2002, after Mr. Giuliani's term as mayor ended, Mr. Kerik joined him in forming Giuliani Partners, a business consulting firm.

Part of Mr. Kerik's job was as one of the firm's very public faces, speaking at events around the United States on topics ranging from how real estate executives can better protect their office buildings to disaster readiness tips for local government officials in suburban New York.

In the presentations, Mr. Kerik typically focused on New York City's response to the terrorist attack, or on its efforts to reduce crime. But his appearances were often sponsored by companies that were selling just the kinds of products that the former police commissioner was indirectly promoting, like Nextel, the cellular phone company that many police and fire departments use.

After the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003, Mr. Kerik took a four-month leave from the lucrative firm to go to Baghdad at President Bush's request and help set up Iraq's new national police force. He left just as the insurgency was expanding there and bombings were becoming common.

Mr. Kerik has also served on the board of directors of Taser, a company that makes stun guns used by police departments. Critics claim that

at least 50 people have died since 2001 after being shocked, though the company says there is scant evidence for that claim.

Nonetheless, its stock has soared as the use of the devices has spread. And company filings show that Mr. Kerik recently exercised options he had received as a director and sold \$5.8 million of its stock.

When news of Mr. Kerik's appointment began spreading yesterday, former city officials predicted he would take on the sprawling homeland security bureaucracy with his customary energy and directness.

"He liked getting up at 2 a.m. and making a surprise visit at one of the jails," said Michael P. Jacobson, a former correction commissioner whom Mr. Kerik served as a deputy for several years.

"He won't have any problem knocking heads with federal bureaucrats, and some of that is for the good," said John F. Timoney, chief of the Miami Police Department, who served in New York City.