Bernie Kerik Won't Fold

Battered by scandal, facing down a federal indictment that could put him behind bars, the onetime hero of September 11 tries to prove there are second acts in American life

BY JOSEPH BRAUDE PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANA LIXENBERG

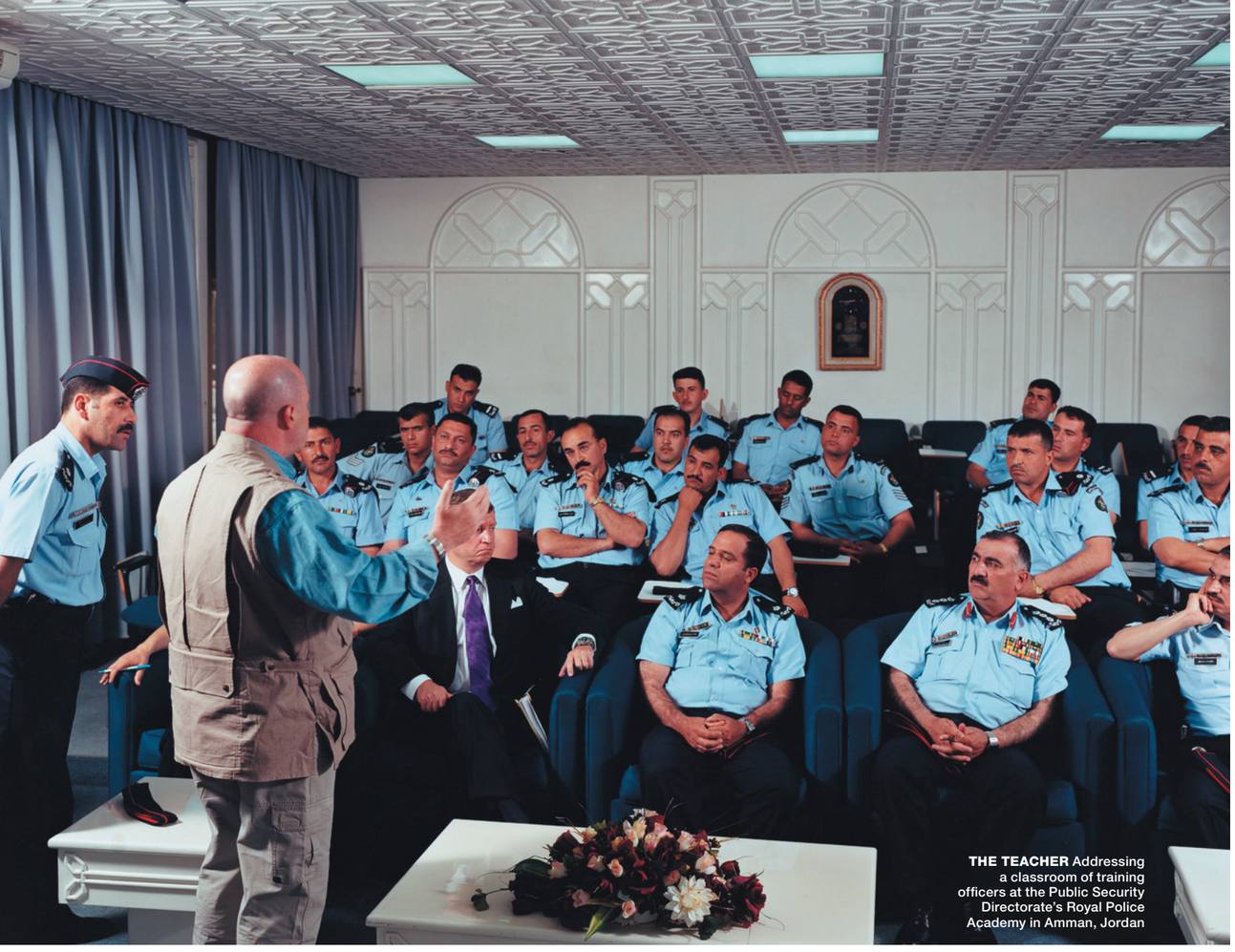
I. The Pit

It is called *Al-Hafr*—the Dig—this giant pit that stretches a quarter mile across and seven stories deep into the reddish Arabian soil. A steep, jagged road cut into the side of the crater provides access for a procession of trucks and turbaned laborers who work long hours seven days a week to deepen and enlarge the hole. I am here on a pleasant, wind-whipped March afternoon in the desert kingdom of Jordan with Bernard Kerik—former police commissioner of the City of New York, President George W. Bush's onetime nominee for homeland security chief, a Rudy Giuliani confidant, and a true hero of September 11, whose fall from grace is one of the most astonishing political tales of the age of terrorism.

"I'm pouring my heart and soul into this," Kerik shouts over the roar of the construction. "Everything I got." *Al-Hafr*, I've already learned, is the first stage in the construction of a high-security crisis-management headquarters commissioned by Jordan's royal family. As integral as this project is to the future of the Hashemite Kingdom, it is equally important to Kerik, who sees it as the centerpiece of his comeback.

The project is top secret, though it has to be one of the noisiest, most glaring national-security secrets in the Arab world. Jordan's security establishment has effectively barred local journalists from reporting on the excavation and will not allow me to reveal its location. The men driving tractors and earthmovers at the base of the pit—Tonka miniatures viewed from ground level—know little about the nature of their work. Even a

HIS KINGDOM COME Bernard Kerik, photographed in Amman, Jordan, May 2007



THE TEACHER Addressing a classroom of training officers at the Public Security Directorate's Royal Police Academy in Amman, Jordan

four-star general in the country's military intelligence can provide only hints about its purpose when questioned by uniformed colleagues.

In a softly lit corner of Amman's Four Seasons Hotel lobby, the mastermind of this project harbors his own secret. Just a few days before, on February 28, 2007, Bernard Kerik made a fateful decision: He turned down a plea bargain from the United States Attorney's Office in White Plains, New York, which was investigating him on matters of income-tax fraud. Because he did not cut a deal—which would have mandated jail time—he was told he faces possible indictments on a variety of charges that could bring down his new career and send him to prison. It could also damage the presidential campaign of his close friend Rudy Giuliani. Now, while his attorneys in the United States work to forestall the indictments, Kerik carries on in Jordan, forging ahead, keeping his counsel, and fighting his nighttime fears.

At the Four Seasons, Kerik takes his morning macchiatos with Sweet'N Low, one shot following the next, sometimes a bit sweaty after lifting weights upstairs in the gym. In the afternoon, it's sirloin with french fries, interrupted by a respectful parade of visitors from the Middle East and elsewhere.

"Thanks for what you did on 9/11, Commish," says an executive from the New York area, extending his hand. "*As-Salamu 'Alaykum*, Bernie," says a Jordanian guest at the hotel, intoning the Muslim greeting of peace that Kerik has grown accustomed to hearing. Groups of tourists seek his autograph, and he obliges every one. To these admirers, he is Bernie Kerik the Commissioner, the man who shielded then-mayor Giuliani as the South Tower of the World Trade Center crashed down around them, the man who escorted the president through Ground Zero, the New York Police Department's top cop who projected to the world an aura of steely authority in the days after September 11.

Kerik greets his well-wishers with genuine warmth, in a gravel-throated New York accent, F-words flying. But some of these visitors want to talk business, knowing Kerik's can-do reputation and royal connections, and on these occasions he turns his shaved head slightly away and the conversation goes *sotto voce*. There are deals in the air and many conversations at this table that cannot be repeated. The Four Seasons lobby is the scene of back-channel diplomacy of the highest levels, and Kerik is proud that he is sometimes at the center of it.

King Abdullah II brought Kerik to Jordan in 2005, after the hero cop withdrew his nomination for secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, facing a fusillade of scandals that would have crushed a less resilient soul. For those who don't recall the ugly details, Kerik's vetting process brought forth a lifetime of bad judgment calls: associations with sketchy, possibly Mafia types; two flagrant adulterous affairs; bankruptcy; and insider business deals that reeked of opportunism at best and possibly graft. A "multiplatformed flameout," wrote *The New Yorker*. "Disgraceful," wrote *The New York Times*.

"When they write something positive about you," says Kerik, "the story doesn't last very long. But when they write something negative, it stays with you forever."

To Kerik's great good fortune, King Abdullah hasn't flinched. He has grander plans for the commissioner's talents. He has hired Kerik to collaborate on the design of his underground, seismic-shock-proof, oxygen-stowing compound that could withstand a nuclear attack. The bunker would be linked to sensitive installations in each of the kingdom's provinces, enabling centralized command and control even if chaos reigned above on the kingdom's sands. Inside its secure walls, the leaders of Jordan could draw up contingency plans to manage megaterrorism, civil war, and other disasters that could befall a modern monarchy. It is a massive project, the first of its kind in the Arab world.

"Jordan is the linchpin of American hopes for peace in the Middle East," says Kerik, "and this hole is going to be the foundation of one of the most substantial tools the king has to combat terror for the next 20 to 25 years." As large as the project is, the crisis center is not the full extent of Kerik's purview here. Based on his undisputed success as commissioner of New York City's prisons, Kerik has been entrusted to overhaul Jordan's prison system and design a "supermax" facility to incarcerate hard-core Al-Qaeda detainees. Then there is the unmanned spy-plane project he's overseeing. For Kerik, these projects are "less like a job and more like a mission. If I never got to serve on top of homeland, I still want to contribute some other way, and these projects are a big part of that."

In Jordan, Kerik works long hours knowing his reputation is still in free fall back home, wondering if these major security projects will still be his when the royal family grasps the gravity of his legal situation. To understand his current troubles, go back to 2005, when the City of New York began to look into his connections to a company called Interstate Industrial Corporation, which employed his brother and his best friend. City investigators charged that Kerik accepted free services from Interstate, while recommending the firm for municipal contracts—an ethics violation compounded by the company's reputed underworld ties. After a year of wrangling, he pleaded guilty to two misdemeanors in a Bronx County courthouse: accepting $165,000 in renovations, as well as failing to report a personal loan of $29,000 for the down payment on his apartment. He believed this would put an end to it.

He was wrong. Federal attorneys launched a second investigation, apparently based on his guilty plea—he allegedly did not pay income tax on the value of the free renovations—and explored two new charges: providing false information to the FBI during his homeland vetting and conspiring to commit illegal wiretapping, based on conversations he had with Westchester District Attorney Jeanine Pirro, who was trying to catch her husband cheating. "The investigation might appear to be a mile wide, but it is an inch deep," Kerik's defense attorney Ken Breen told me. "Bernie Kerik has already copped to the inch deep in the Bronx."

In Arabia, Kerik needs no defense. "This man is a hero," says Brigadier General Reda Al Btoush, the ranking Jordanian official who now collaborates with Kerik on building the crisis-management center. "Some very important people in my country are entrusting him with their lives and the security of the kingdom. Myself, I trust him like a brother."

King Abdullah has nothing but praise for Kerik: "We're struggling to make our prisons tighter and more effectively guarded, while also improving on our past record in terms of compliance with minimal human-rights standards," he says. "When we win credit from international monitors for having achieved these goals, it's going to be a tribute to Bernie Kerik."

Far from home, Kerik has been welcomed as a flawed hero, his value to the kingdom not defined by his past failings but by his endurance and his strength. "At least here in Jordan, I stand half a chance," he says at the pit, as if to himself. "Back home, it's death by a thousand cuts—cuts to your emotions, finances, family, and your life....Now is the darkest time in my life, and nothing I have been through has gotten me ready for it....I am truly f--kin' afraid."

II. The Haunting

Veteran police officers speak of fear as an erratic companion. Often it is missing during the most threatening moments of their lives, moving in only when the danger has passed. Kerik worked the most dangerous years of his career as a plainclothes narcotics detective, often working undercover in the Bronx. There, on a chilly November morning in 1991, a 35-year-old Kerik, wearing five diamond earrings and a gold hoop under his long, shaggy mane, saved his partner, Hector Santiago, from certain death by an act of bravery that bears repeating.

Kerik, Santiago, and several other cops had cornered a drug dealer they had been chasing through an Upper Manhattan neighborhood. Trapped, the dealer got out of his car ready for a showdown. In one hand was a black bag holding five kilos of cocaine; in the other was a Sig Sauer 9mm semiautomatic pistol.

"He raised the gun and began firing," recalls Kerik, "as calmly as if he were asking directions."

A bullet shattered the windshield of Santiago's car and struck him in the arm. The detective slumped through the open driver's-side door and crawled under the car. The drug dealer proceeded in Santiago's direction to finish him off. Kerik, sitting in another car, watched in disbelief. He recalls thinking, *Shit, is this guy crazy?*

In the horrific scene that followed, Kerik does not recall feeling fear. He emerged from his own car to meet the gunman head-on. Kerik remained calm, a tribute to training, temperament, and a grim sense of duty. He fired his service revolver into the man's rib cage as he walked toward him. His target returned fire several times and fled. Kerik gave pursuit amid flying bullets. No blood, Kerik remembered later, and barely any adrenaline. A passing patrol car emptied onto the street, and uniformed cops rallied behind Kerik, who then chased the man down. When the shooting stopped, a trail of 58 spent metal cartridges zigzagged through the housing projects, down to the alley where the gunman finally fell with two bullets in his right leg, two in his back, and one buried in his ribs. »

"Thank you, Commissioner Bernie!" a trainee stammers. His swollen eyelids block his vision, and his skin is a painful-looking shade of crimson.

SUPERMAX IN PROGRESS Kerik's "pride and joy" will house the worst Al-Qaeda offenders in Jordan. It is expected to be completed in September 2007.

"It wasn't until he was down and I took a good look that I truly comprehended the bullets whizzing all around me," says Kerik. "There were bullet holes in the trees, the car, the buildings. You say, 'Shit, that was close,' and you break out in a sweat. You go home at night and retrace what happened in your mind, and that's when it gets the most severe. That's when you get scared."

In 30 years of law enforcement, he says, this was the only type of fear he really knew.

Was Commissioner Kerik's brilliant career, in the parlance of TV cop shows, one man's relentless search for justice? Or is it better seen in psychological terms, as an attempt to redress a childhood injury? Either way, all roads lead back to Newark, New Jersey, where Kerik was born on September 4, 1955. Kerik's mother was a prostitute, and she abandoned him as a child. She turned tricks for booze and cash until she was murdered, apparently by her pimp. Kerik lived with his father's new family, and as might be expected, he got off to a troubled start in life. He cut classes and eventually dropped out of high school. He joined the military police in Korea, guarded a hospital complex in Saudi Arabia on behalf of a local prince, and put in time in New Jersey as a corrections officer before he arrived at the NYPD in 1986. As a New York City narcotics detective in the 1980s and '90s, he traveled undercover in South America, seizing millions of dollars in cocaine from the drug lords of the Cali cartel. Kerik was awarded 100 citations, including the Medal of Valor and commendations from the Drug Enforcement Administration and one of his heroes, President Ronald Reagan.

From detective third grade (the lowest grade), he ascended in short order to running the largest and most grandly budgeted city police force in the world. Along the way, Kerik spent three years as deputy commissioner of corrections and three years as commissioner in the late 1990s, during which time he presided over a more than 90 percent decline in inmate violence within the Rikers Island prison complex. "This was a hellhole," says Kerik, "that nobody was ever able to handle." And though it is clearly a boast, it appears to be accurate. He was widely credited for having tamed Rikers with muscle, charismatic leadership, and electronic "stun" technology (for which he was later rewarded with a seat on the board of Taser Corporation). An adoring press stoked rumors of his imminent promotion to police commissioner nearly a year before then-mayor Giuliani announced the decision.

Kerik was a stalwart of the Giuliani administration, commonly derided by its critics as insular, authoritarian, clannish—in a word, *tribal*. Loyalty was prized. Power was understood and deployed—not always with consensus. The mayor's inner circle, many charged, played by its own rules and guarded its flanks. As Kerik's rise continued, nobody in city hall seemed to notice a pattern of improper conduct in his career. Sporadic, sure, but it had been there from the beginning. In 1976, he had accepted a demotion in Korea from corporal to private first class rather than face a court-martial for breaking a soldier's middle finger. His post-Army stint in Saudi Arabia as security chief for a hospital complex ended in his expulsion from the kingdom in 1984, after he fought with a Saudi secret-police official who was trying to interrogate him. Kerik attributes his travails to a power struggle among rival princes, one of whom had been his boss. But the allegation later surfaced that in serving his employer so loyally, he acted in effect as a private enforcer, policing the personal lives of women with whom the prince had been romantically involved. Kerik waves away the veracity of this claim, calling it "bullshit."

Giuliani bonded with the ambitious cop, hiring Kerik to serve him as driver and bodyguard during his 1992 election campaign. They thought alike, and they hugged and kissed and cried freely—and each man says he has watched *The Godfather* 50 times. The mayor paid his driver back for his loyalty by making him New York's 40th police commissioner in August 2000, in the final year of Giuliani's second term. Local media, for the most part, credited the Kerik appointment as a reasonable choice to steward the police through a lame-duck administration. But Kerik acted nothing like a lame duck. In the ensuing months, he made sweeping changes in the command structure of the NYPD, in the process making plenty of enemies.

September 11, 2001, hoisted Giuliani and Kerik to mythic status. Stranded in a cloud of black fumes and swirling dust amid the fall of the South Tower, Commissioner Kerik emerged as controlled and steely-eyed as he was in that gunfight. His calm, authoritative voice—beamed around the world in televised press conferences with Giuliani—seemed to embody the resilience Americans aspired to in the face of this aggression. Events had transformed a onetime serial truant and high school dropout into a national icon. He bonded with President Bush and shared tears with Cardinal Edward Egan at a Mass for martyrs and fallen heroes at New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral.

When Giuliani's term was over, the mayor and the commissioner went into business together. Giuliani-Kerik Partners scored millions of dollars in lucrative security-consulting contracts with governments and the private sector. Kerik went on to accept a six-month stint as Iraq's interim minister of interior under the Baghdad occupation administration of L. Paul Bremer III. In December 2004, he received word that President Bush wanted to nominate him to serve as the nation's most powerful enforcer, secretary of homeland security. DUBYA'S TOP COP, crowed the *New York Post*. BERNIE'S BEEN W'S GO-TO GUY SINCE SEPT. 11, added the *Daily News*. Here was a bullet-dodging, bootstrapping American success story that would have made a great book, and sure enough, Kerik had a contract to write one. Kerik had initially demurred at Bush's invitation, but a deft White House headhunter played to his ego, he says, persuading him to begin the vetting process. The president, Kerik recalls, gave him a simple mandate: "He told me to go in there and 'break some china.'"

Just help us answer a few questions, Commissioner.

And so began one of the steepest falls in recent American history. "From the highest mountain," in the words of an ancient Babylonian lament, "to the deepest pit." Or as Rebecca Mead described it in *The New Yorker*, a "complete obliteration of his reputation." A week after Kerik withdrew his nomination, a Mafia informant alleged that Kerik had Mob ties. Sacked employees of the Saudi hospital that Kerik had policed in the '80s told journalists he had been a "gestapo"-like "goon," cracking down on drinking and dating on orders from a sex-starved prince. Others charged that Kerik had sex with publisher Judith Regan at a Ground Zero safe house meant for rescue workers, and then dispatched a homicide detective to search for her cell phone. Within weeks, the hero who could do no wrong seemed to have morphed once more, this time into a villain who could do no right. Within months, the strongest claims against him found their way into a grand jury room in the Bronx, and Commissioner Kerik became a criminal defendant.

"The facts speak for themselves," says *Village Voice* investigative reporter Wayne Barrett, coauthor of a book on the Giuliani administration. "It's a set of facts that diminishes the guy to a petty thief."

Kerik, for his part, declines to refute the specific evidence against him on the advice of his attorneys, but he claims, despite his guilty pleas, that the Bronx trial distorted evidence and smeared him as part of a broader campaign to tar Giuliani. "By the time I entered the guilty pleas," says Kerik, "I just f--kin' wanted it to be over. I didn't take the pleas because I really thought I had done anything wrong. It was just, *Pay the f--kin' fine, give 'em their pound of flesh, whatever the f--k they want*. There's a point where you just lose the ability to fight."

Kerik's father, with whom he had been close, was at the end of a yearlong battle with cancer. "No matter how much you're prepared for your pop's passing," says Kerik, "when it happens, it's like somebody rips your f--kin' heart out." So the commissioner moved to end his legal woes in June 2006, accepting as punishment two misdemeanor convictions and $221,000 in fines. Whatever sense of relief Kerik enjoyed at the resolution of his legal battle, it lasted only a few days. It was within a week that he learned federal prosecutors were looking into pressing felony charges based on some of the same evidence to which he had pleaded guilty. Ever since, Kerik and his family have been living with intense public shame and a foreboding of troubles ahead.

"My wife is a wreck," he says. "And anytime there's stress like this, whether you intend to or not, you take it out on each other—husband and wife—and you take it out on your kids. There are times I'm so f--kin' depressed, I don't want to work. I don't want to get out of bed. You go to sleep, you wake up in a f--kin' sweat. Sometimes I take one thing to put me to sleep and another thing to keep me awake. It's like being haunted."

III. The League of Disgraced Gentlemen

A German shepherd named Duke patrols Kerik's two-acre homestead in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey. In the middle is a 7,500-square-foot suburban mansion, which he had built "mostly from the ground up" after tearing down the bilevel that came with the $1.2 million property. This is Kerik's refuge, one of the major perks of his success, the home he shares with his Syrian-born wife, Hala, and their two young daughters.

"Stay!" commands Kerik, grabbing the dog in one arm and waving me in with the other. The smell of coffee brewing comes from the kitchen, but we head off to his den, a sumptuous home office with an oversize mahogany desk and a lifetime of awards and photographs on display—group smiles from uniformed men, framed snapshots of Kerik with Giuliani, Bush, Mother Theresa, Paul Wolfowitz, Queen Elizabeth, and Oprah.

Hala appears with coffee and cookies on a tray. Kerik registers a small complaint about the cookie tray, which threatens his diet.

"It's for the guest," she says.

Their daughters, Celine, 7, and Angelina, 4, come in for after-school hugs. "They kill me," says Kerik, lifting his older daughter's auburn hair to find a kissing spot on her forehead. "It's totally different from having a son. These feelings are completely new to me." Kerik has an estranged daughter by his first wife, a Korean woman, and a son from his second marriage, to a Cuban woman. His complicated family life is "like a little United Nations," he says. "Now I got a couple of little Syrians running around the house." The cuddling goes on for a few minutes, and then the girls are off.

Kerik won't answer questions about the impact of his extramarital affairs on his family ("Don't wanna go there," he says), but here in his den he takes me through the first dark days after his homeland security withdrawal. He quit Giuliani Partners to protect his friend, and he hunkered down in New Jersey. The phone began ringing. The first to call was disgraced New York Stock Exchange ex-chief Dick Grasso, who offered his home in the Hamptons to the Kerik clan as a place of refuge. ("He told me to think of all the good things I did during my 30 years of service," recalls Kerik.) Former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey, who resigned after publicly admitting he was a closeted homosexual, also phoned in a pep talk. ("I didn't know him that well, but he called me up and basically said, 'Look, you have a huge following in Jersey.'") And former Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney, who left office as one of the least popular PMs in Canada's history, called to offer the benefit of his own seasoned perspective.

"You look at the people who called me to show their support," he observes, "and all of them, or most of them, are people who get it, who understand, who have been through it."

Kerik's Arab contacts proved sympathetic to his predicament as well. First to call was Egyptian-born British tycoon Mohamed Al Fayed, whose son Dodi had died alongside Princess Diana in the famous 1997 Paris car crash. "He said he wanted to see me in London," recalls Kerik, "to talk about his security issues. So I got on a plane and flew to London, and when I got there, I realized it was more about Dodi and Princess Diana. He wanted me to get involved in the investigation and what he believed was a cover-up by the British and U.S. governments of intelligence information that he alleged they had about his son's death. He wanted me to be a part of this. He sort of wanted me to lead this investigation for him."

Kerik doesn't say it exactly, but his tone of voice reveals that after a job offer from the president to supervise the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Al Fayed's overture felt a bit, well, deflating. "I listened to him," says Kerik, "and I said, 'You know, I wish you luck,' but I wasn't interested. My personal opinion is I think he believed I was angry at Bush and the U.S. government, so I would be one to come out

swinging and attack them on these intelligence issues. Not gonna happen."

Later came a message from the son of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, by way of a personal emissary. Libya was interested in building up its tourist industry, but couldn't seem to get around the problem of old land mines blowing up along its highways. Would Commissioner Kerik care to manage a countrywide minesweeping operation and help train Libyan security forces as a side project?

"It could have been a substantial business," muses Kerik, "especially on the de-mining end. And I know Libya has been taken off the terrorist-watch list. But just on a personal level for me, that would be difficult, especially after September 11. On top of that, the public perception would be insane. It would be, you know, crazy."

So the call from Jordan's King Abdullah asking for help on a few national security projects suddenly seemed the perfect choice, as American as apple pie. "Everything His Majesty has been asking me to do is totally in keeping with the struggle for peace and against the evil forces that brought us September 11," says Kerik. The king retained Kerik's services even after his guilty pleas in a Bronx court in 2006 made him radioactive in the United States. "Never once did he ask me about any of those issues."

Kerik, a fallen hero of September 11, was now a hero in the Middle East. On closer inspection it makes sense. Just ask a host of other scandal-tainted Americans—and American institutions—who also have found asylum in the outlying autocracies of the Pax Americana. Michael Jackson makes his new home in the pro-American Arabian island of Bahrain, where he enjoys the comfort of a complete state-sponsored paparazzi blackout as well as the friendship of the royal family. Halliburton, the much-maligned American corporation, recently moved its headquarters to the gray market haven of Dubai, another pro-American Arab state.

In March, I tag along with Kerik to see him at work. When we meet at Kennedy Airport for the night flight to Amman, he warns me to keep my laptop and camera on the plane. "F--kin' thieves," he mutters. "Even pepper spray isn't safe in a suitcase anymore." At the mouth of the plane, we split up. Kerik and his security team move forward to settle into the first-class cabin. "We won't be talkin' on the flight much anyway," Kerik tells me. "Something about this flight—it's the only time I ever get a f--kin' good night's sleep."

IV. Thank You, Commissioner Bernie

Jordan's prison system, about 9,000 inmates strong, has hosted its share of militant Islamist convicts who went on to become international terrorists, notably the slain chief of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The kingdom has also faced repeated charges of human-rights violations throughout its corrections facilities, as well as a prison riot in March 2006, in which inmates took seven police hostages and commandeered a cell phone to call for pan-Arab and pan-Islamic solidarity, broadcast live on Al-Jazeera.

Copycat riots broke out within hours in two more prisons where inmates had been watching the news on satellite TV. Clearly, there was a problem—and an opportunity for the right guy. Kerik won't reveal his group's compensation scheme, "But we're a hell of a lot cheaper than f--kin' McKinsey," he says. He puts it to me that a "Big 5" consulting firm like McKinsey & Company would probably outsource the sort of specialized work he does to somebody else—if such a person exists—and add on a hefty management fee. The notion of a "disgrace discount" on Kerik's services presumably wasn't lost on Abdullah, who reigns over a cash-strapped, oil-free kingdom.

LIFE AT CENTER STAGE (clockwise from top right): Kerik and Giuliani at Ground Zero, September 12, 2001; the mayor and his top cop at New York's St. Patrick's Day parade in 2002; in Baghdad in the aftermath of a suicide bombing in 2003; campaigning with President Bush in 2004; with Giuliani and Governor George Pataki in New York in November 2001

We drive into the outlying desert of a central Jordanian province, past a strip of body shops, a vast military installation, and a rundown mosque. It is a drab moonscape of parched rocky gray desert, broken only by flocks of herded sheep. There are five of us in the Land Cruiser, listening to up-tempo patriotic anthems at high volume. In the closing distance, I spy a sprawling compound with black steel gates and a looming watchtower.

"My pride and joy," proclaims Kerik.

It's the new supermax prison, being designed to Kerik's specifications. Here in this remote location, the kingdom's worst violent offenders will live out their days in isolation "so they don't inspire any lesser criminals to join them in a terrorist campaign," says Kerik. Contrary to a press report last year, this new compound is not the CIA's local Al-Qaeda "ghost prison"—which does exist, but is in fact a smaller installation, staffed by Americans, and located elsewhere in Jordan's vast deserts.

A wiry, mustached warden-to-be greets Kerik and three aides. "So let us show you where matters stand," he volunteers in thickly accented English, and we begin moving through a long, dark corridor of skeletal holding cells the size of walk-in closets, past laundry and recreational areas, a large kitchen, and a mess hall with long cafeteria tables made of shiny granite. Kerik pauses every few feet or so to run his hand over a sharp edge, scrutinize a wall socket, or simply lecture his clients.

"What are you plugging into that hole in the corner?" he asks the warden. Identical sockets are drilled into the top of the far right wall of each cell.

"Television," the guard replies.

"No way. Fill 'em all in. If somebody made it into supermax, he's not gonna get such easy access to information."

Kerik sees potential weapons at every turn. The meat hooks in the kitchen? "Get 'em outta here!" He's no fan of the granite dining tables either: "I could just jump on the edge of this table and break off the rock that kills you!" he shouts. In the cafeteria, he asks for an overhanging metal slab to be installed to hide the faces of the serving staff—"No dirty looks, no nasty ideas." A cocoon of razor wire is to be mounted around the entire facility.

Shifting gears, he turns to his audience and gives an impromptu lesson on the questions of visiting arrangements, phone calls, mail, and food. "You give 'em the basics and you get a much less violent system," he explains. "The riots that happened here last March, we've determined that a lack of basic essentials was the real stuff the inmates were rallying around. You give 'em the minimum standards and they won't be able to rally around negativity. It's all preventable."

After watching him for more than a week, it seems to me that Kerik basks in these training sessions, the walking tours of sites under construction, and the presentations to four-star generals of assessment reports generated by his group. He elaborates three simple, basic ideas, all of which trace back to his experience on Rikers Island: First, the criminal mind is universal—race, creed, and country of origin notwithstanding. ("You can take lessons from the gangs of L.A. and Rikers and apply them in any Arab country," he says.) Second, corrections officers must be professionalized as a unique cadre, with their own career incentives and distinctive skills. ("Police work and the care of inmates are two very different careers with very different mandates, skills, and requirements," he writes in a prisons-assessment report.) Finally, the twin requirements for reducing human-rights abuse in a prison are to grant inmates their basic human needs and to wield overwhelming, nonlethal force as a deterrent to potentially lethal violence.

At an outdoor training session later in the day, Kerik delivers a low-key pep talk (through a translator) to 20 or so young men who are corrections cadets. At the same time, two of his aides, Frank Ciaccio and Jimmy Grillo, stand by readying a frightful dose of Oleoresin Capsicum for each man—that's airborne habanero pepper concentrate. We are about to see a hands-on demonstration, Rikers-style, of the deterrent effect of the pepper spray.

"I wanna say you are all very lucky to have His Majesty King Abdullah as your leader," Kerik tells the mustached trainees, who are beginning to look a little nervous. "He is absolutely committed to getting you the latest equipment and the best training and to advancing your careers in the PSD [Public Security Directorate], and I'm committed to finding out what you need and what you need to learn and making sure His Majesty knows so you will get it."

Then the moment of truth arrives. One by one, the cadets line up in front of Grillo, who

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KERIK IN EXILE "Back home, it's death by a thousand cuts," he says. "At least here in Jordan I stand half a chance."

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) BRIDGET BESAW GORMAN/AP; RICHARD B. LEVINE/PHOTOGRAPHER SHOWCASE/NEWSCOM; ABBAS/MAGNUM PHOTOS; PABLO MARTINEZ MONSIVAIS/AP; BRAD RICKERBY/REUTERS

aims a silver gas-powered gun at each man's face and lets him have a two-second blast of the pepper spray.

"*Ufffff!*" exclaims the first victim, doubling over, his reddening face awash in phlegm and tears. Each man steps up, trying to remain stoic as Grillo points the gun at his face. Some close their eyes and manage to keep silent; others walk off in obvious agony to the training ground's edge and vomit by the curb, where gaping colleagues pour bottled water over their eyes.

"You learn you had phlegm in you that you didn't know you had," Ciaccio explains later, with a slight chuckle. The premise of the exercise, he says, is that a corrections officer will gain full confidence in the spray's deterrent capability only after he suffers its effects himself. "Your prisoner can smell your fear," says Ciaccio. "He will know when you're afraid and when you're not. We take our guys through this, and we make them understand what they can do." In Ciaccio's experience, prison guards are less likely to employ gratuitous violence if they have been trained to conquer their own fears of the inmate population.

"Thank you, Commissioner Bernie!" a trainee stammers. The man can hardly see. His swollen eyelids block his vision, and his skin has turned a painful-looking shade of crimson.

"Hey, thank *you*," replies Kerik. "Be good." The Land Cruiser arrives to pick us up and stirs up a cloud of capsicum. Though Kerik has kept far enough away from the initial airborne barrage, as he enters the car his expression sags and he looks disturbed. I ask what's wrong.

"It's the shit back home," he sighs. "You can only get it off your mind so long, and when it gets back in, it f--ks with you."

"Say hello to His Majesty for us!" the puffy-faced trainee cries, his voice trailing behind.

V. Bernie in Exile

"The thing about going through hell," says Kerik, "is that some of the people you thought would be standing by your side, they vanish, and other guys turn out to be the best friends you ever had." Of King Abdullah and his younger brother Prince Ali, he says: "These guys are like brothers to me now." In fact, Kerik appears to have transferred to Jordan's monarchy the bulldog loyalty that famously marked his long friendship with Giuliani. And they, in turn, have gone out of their way to signal their trust in him.

I meet King Abdullah in the young monarch's private suite at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington D.C., a few days before his March address to a joint session of Congress. He is a polite and affable man of 45, the oldest son of the late King Hussein, who was America's staunchest Arab ally in the Middle East for decades. He's dressed in jeans, a loose-fitting sweatshirt, and loafers. Educated in Great Britain, Abdullah speaks softly, in precise and measured sentences. I ask him directly about his affinity—and his kingdom's need—for a man like Kerik.

"We got to a point of crisis in Jordan," he says, "and here is a man who showed extraordinary leadership in the greatest crisis New York City ever faced, with years of experience managing prisons, from whom we can learn. There was an initial friendship that grew out of the period he was in Iraq. One project has grown into another, from our prison and corrections concerns to our emergency crisis-management issues."

When I ask him to talk about Kerik's past legal troubles, the king declines politely. So I ask for his take on Kerik's character. "What I look for in an advisor is someone who will not feel awkward telling me what he thinks," he says. "*Nothing* makes that man feel awkward."

Back home, Rudy Giuliani, now the front-running Republican candidate for president, has been keeping Kerik at a distance. In interviews this spring, Giuliani called his recommendation of Kerik for homeland security a "mistake." Asked about his ex-partner's fast-track promotions as a member of the mayor's inner circle, the candidate fell short of defending Kerik's record, allowing only that he should have vetted him more carefully. A Giuliani spokesman declined comment for this article. So did Assistant U.S. Attorney Elliott Jacobson, reportedly a prime mover in the ongoing federal investigation and potential prosecution of Kerik.

"I accept the distance created by Giuliani," Kerik writes me one morning in an e-mail. "And I understand it, but inside it's killing me. It's like dying a slow death, watching him have to answer for my mistakes."

Kerik stays up at night sifting the possibilities. If his past mistakes could cause a complete break with Giuliani, the godfather to his two little girls and his close friend of 15 years, then what will new federal indictments do to his lifeline here in Jordan? Late one night over coffee in the lobby of the hotel in Amman, I ask Kerik what he will do if he loses the confidence of the king. He waves away the very thought of it. "I have to just try to put it out of my mind," he says.

During our week in Amman, Kerik lets me know that things are looking up for his business in other parts of the world. A few weeks before, a politician in Trinidad and Tobago, a crime-ridden Caribbean democracy, petitioned the Kerik Group to direct a local citizens' commission on crime. Not to be outdone, the president of the Republic of Guyana, where illegal drug trafficking amounts to the equivalent of 20 percent of gross domestic product, announced that he wants to hire the ex-commissioner to lead an overhaul of the country's police system.

These projects hold the promise of vaulting Kerik back into the crime-fighting arena closer to home. Excited at the prospect, he says he might even begin to wield a new kind of influence with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, albeit through the back door. "What I have in mind is to connect Guyana with the [American] DEA," Kerik tells me in Amman, "possibly get some funding for them from the U.S. and other countries to stop the drug flow—kind of a holistic program."

In the Middle East, Kuwait's government has solicited two proposals from the Kerik Group for homeland security projects there. "Another thing about this hole we're digging," says Kerik. "When we're done with it and we've built the thing in two years, 10 other countries are gonna want one just like it." The Al Maktoum family that rules in Dubai has hosted Kerik for a weekend, thanks to an introduction by the Jordanian royals, who are related to the Al Maktoum family by marriage. Kerik is fielding requests from senior Iraqi officials to broker the payment of millions of dollars in grant aid from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to Baghdad's interior ministry. The funds would back an automated national identification system and new border control measures, seen as components of the struggle against jihadists in Iraq.

Kerik is even becoming a trusted back-channel diplomat in the region. An Orthodox priest, traveling overland from Damascus to Amman, dropped in on Kerik at the Four Seasons, carrying direct orders from President Bashar Al-Assad, of Syria. The message: Would Kerik kindly intervene with President Bush to consider a high-level dialogue on matters related to terrorism and Iraq? The priest then provided specific information about Assad's forthcoming travel plans to Switzerland and Spain, offering invitations to meet at the U.S. embassy of either country.

Kerik took the overture to Deputy National Security Advisor Elliott Abrams (this was nearly a year after Kerik's homeland security debacle). The meeting with Assad never took place, but this did nothing to tarnish Kerik's reputation in the region. "Bernie understands the nature of the Arabs and speaks to them in their mentality," says retired Jordanian lieutenant general Ghazi Musa al-Tayyib, who heads a counterterrorism institute in Amman, where Kerik has lectured security officials from more than a dozen Arab countries. "He understands our nature, and we appreciate his character."

He is also known to do his homework. At an afternoon meeting, he joins Brigadier General Al Btoush, Jordan's top military man on the crisis-center project, and retired U.S. brigadier general Kenneth Bergquist, formerly an assistant secretary of the U.S. Navy. Kerik talks through a list of personnel changes he wants to make to the Jordanian prison staff. He confidently cites each official's tribal affiliations and loyalties within the army and intelligence apparatus—and Al Btoush nods his acquiescence each time. It feels as if the only foreigner in the room is Bergquist; the Jordanian's body language and hand gestures seem interchangeable with the NYPD commissioner's. Al Btoush lobbies Kerik to raise a few matters with the king when they breakfast together over the weekend; Kerik promises to advocate on the general's behalf. The meeting ends.

The secretive nature of the region's governing style allows insiders like Kerik to negotiate sweeping decisions with rulers, potentially affecting millions of people, without the bruising public debate over his past that appears par for the course in a democracy. "It's a cultural thing that goes beyond a simple media blackout,"

KEEPING HIS DISTANCE Of Giuliani, Kerik says, "It's like dying a slow death, watching him answer for my mistakes."

PASCAL PERICH

DANA LIXENBERG

observes Sameer Baitamooni, a well-connected travel agent who frequents the Four Seasons Hotel. "When a man is on a mission for the king, in this region that's a private mission. People understand that they should not be asking questions."

The Caribbean nations have no kings. They are thriving messy democracies where authority is routinely questioned. In Trinidad, Kerik's initiative quickly draws fire in the media. In Guyana, President Bharrat Jagdeo's critics scorn the decision for entrusting national security to a foreigner with a criminal record. The deals have gone through for the moment, but there is a new sense of the ground shifting.

And then on March 14, to Kerik's horror, the story breaks on New York's *NewsChannel 4* that his long-anticipated federal indictment may be imminent. Prosecutors apparently leaked the news that Kerik and his attorneys had rejected their offer of a felony plea deal. "When plea negotiations fail," a *New York Times* story points out the same day, "federal prosecutors nearly always seek an indictment." A *Washington Post* follow-up two weeks later predicts that the indictment "could set the stage for a courtroom battle that would draw attention to Kerik's extensive business and political dealings with...Giuliani."

The implications of the news will hardly be lost on Kerik's clients—and prospective clients—in the developing world. A federal court battle would inspire heightened public scrutiny of all Kerik's endeavors, including his security work for foreign regimes. In the event of his conviction, leaders who had consulted him on crime-fighting and prison reform would be vulnerable to the charge that their consultant was a convict. One terrible possibility: Kerik is arraigned and the terms of his bail prevent him from leaving the United States. The worst case: He stands trial and loses, and the ensuing sentence puts him behind bars for years.

The morning the story broke, Kerik sent me an e-mail at 8:36 A.M. He was back in the United States, and I phoned him at home. "It's killing me," he says sullenly. "The prosecutors know what they're doing. They're trying to destroy me one attack at a time."

In the days following, the bad news turns worse. Both Caribbean democracies bow to domestic pressure and bid Kerik farewell. "My client in Trinidad called me and said the media attention based on the *Washington Post* story was just overwhelming," he recounts. "It's creating all kinds of negativity. There are stories saying I'm gonna be arrested, like, tomorrow, so he said he doesn't know if it's a good idea that we continue." Then Guyana starts to crumble. "They start saying 'If Kerik's not going to be there [in Trinidad], why should he be here?'" In April, Kerik fell on his sword and backed down from both commitments.

The big question now for Kerik, the one on which his future fully depends, is the Jordan assignment. Damage control—a principle Kerik knows well from his Giuliani days—sometimes obliges a loyalist to bow out to protect his boss. And no boss is impervious to popular pressures. In an interdependent world, even monarchs may be swayed by government actions and public opinion in distant lands, particularly an Arabian king without oil, whose rule is never certain and whose country depends on U.S. aid.

At home in Franklin Lakes, Kerik taps out an e-mail to Prince Ali, the king's younger brother. It is early in the afternoon of April 7, and Kerik has been mulling over the wording of this message for weeks. In his den, he is surrounded by photographs of bosses past and a boss who might have been—this one taken at New York's Gracie Mansion, that one in the Oval Office—each image offering a public story of achievement ending in disgrace brought about by Kerik's own failings. Seated at his computer, he composes a short letter formally apprising the royal family of the implications of his legal difficulties. He offers his full cooperation in mitigating any fallout to them. It's the sort of blank check he has offered in the past to Giuliani, to Bush, to officials in Trinidad and Guyana—only to see it cashed each time.

Prince Ali usually replies within a couple of days to e-mails from his friend in Franklin Lakes. On the night of April 7, however, Kerik telephones to tell me that the response came back to him in 30 minutes.

As Kerik reads—he has asked me not to quote the prince directly—he stumbles over the first few words, and I hear a deep breath and a muffled thud as the phone drops. In the background, I can faintly hear him breaking down in tears.

He picks up the phone again. "I need a minute," he says. By my watch it takes him two and a half minutes to regain his composure. The letter contains the news he has been hoping for. The royal family, quite explicitly, assured Kerik that as long as he continues to do good things for their country, their country will stand by him.

More revealing than the rousing words of support that follow is the cadence of Kerik's delivery as he reads them aloud. His voice halts and stutters; he manages to catch and subdue a sudden sob and go on momentarily, but then the emotions behind the fear and calamity of the past few months simply outrun his control, and the commissioner weeps and weeps for his self-inflicted sorrows. ■