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Giuliani: Worse Than Bush

He's cashing in on 9/11, working with Karl Rove's henchmen and in cahoots with a Swift Boat-style attack on Hillary. Will Rudy Giuliani be Bush III?

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Early Wednesday, May 16th, Charleston, South Carolina. The scene is a town-hall meeting staged by GOP presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani, only a day after he wowed a patriotic Republican crowd at a nationally televised debate with a righteous ass-kicking of the party's latest Hanoi Jane, terrorist sympathizer Ron Paul. A bump in the polls later, "America's Mayor" is back on the campaign trail -- in a room packed with standard-issue Adorable Schoolchildren, in this case beatific black kids in elementary school uniforms with wide eyes and big RUDY stickers pinned to their oblivious breasts.

Giuliani has good stage presence, but his physical appearance is problematic -- virtually neckless, all shoulders and forehead and overbite, with a hunched-over, Draculoid posture that recalls, oddly enough, George W. Bush, the vestigial stoop of a once-chubby kid who grew up hiding tittie pictures from nuns. Not handsome, not cuddly, if he wins this thing it's going to be by projecting toughness and man-aura. But all presidential candidates have to play the baby-kissing game, and here is an early chance for Rudy to show his softer side.

"So," he whispers to the kids. "What do you all want to be when you grow up? Do any of you know?"

A bucktoothed boy raises his hand.

"I wanna be a doctor," he says, "and a lawyer."

The crowd laughs, then looks at Rudy expectantly. The obvious line is "A doctor and a lawyer? Whaddya want to do, sue yourself?" and you can see Rudy physically straining for the joke. But this candidate's funny bone is a microscopic thing, like one of those anvil-shaped deals in the ear, and the line eludes him.

"A doctor *and* a lawyer, huh?" he says, grinning nervously. "Uh . . . whaddya want to do, sue the doctor?"

My notes from that moment read: *Chirping crickets.*

Rudy moves on. "How about you?" he says to the next boy.

"I want to be a policeman!" the kid says.

Rudy smiles. Then the next boy says he wants to be a fireman, and the crowd twitters: Wow, a fireman and a policeman, in the same room! Rudy is beaming now, almost certainly aware that every grown-up present is suddenly thinking about 9/11.

His day. As he leans over, the room is filled with popping flashbulbs. Then, instead of capitalizing on the sense of pride and shared purpose everyone is feeling, Giuliani utters something truly strange and twisted.

"A fireman and a policeman, huh?" he says. "Well, the first thing that I want to do is make sure that you two get along."

Huh? Amid confused applause, Rudy flashes a queer smile, then moves on to the heart of his presentation, a neat little speech about how the election of a Democratic president will result in certain nuclear attack and the end of the free market as we know it. I'm barely listening, however, still thinking about the "make sure you get along" line.

Although few people outside of New York know it yet, there is an emerging controversy over Giuliani's heroic 9/11 legacy. Critics charge that Rudy's failure to resolve the feuding between the city's police and firefighters prior to the attack led to untold numbers of deaths, the most tragic example being the inability of firemen to hear warnings from police helicopters about the impending collapse of the South Tower. The 9/11 Commission concluded that the two departments had been "designed to work independently, not together," and that greater coordination would have spared many lives.

Given all that, why did Rudy offer this weirdly unsolicited reference to the controversy now? Was he joking? And if so, what the fuck? It was a strange and bitter comment to make, especially right on the heels of his grand-slam performance in the previous night's debate. If this is a guy who chews over a perceived slight in the middle of a victory lap, what's he going to be like with his finger on the button? Even Richard Nixon wasn't wound that tight.

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Rudy giuliani is a true American hero, and we know this because he does all the things we expect of heroes these days -- like make \$16 million a year, and lobby for Hugo Chávez and Rupert Murdoch, and promote wars without ever having served in the military, and hire a lawyer to call his second wife a "stuck pig," and organize absurd, grandstanding pogroms against minor foreign artists, and generally drift through life being a shameless opportunist with an outsize ego who doesn't even bother to conceal the fact that he's had a hard-on for the presidency since he was in diapers. In the media age, we can't have a hero humble enough to actually be one; what is needed is a tireless scoundrel, a cad willing to pose all day long for photos, who'll accept \$100,000 to talk about heroism for an hour, who has the balls to take a \$2.7 million advance to write a book about himself called *Leadership*. That's Rudy Giuliani. Our hero. And a perfect choice to uphold the legacy of George W. Bush.

Yes, Rudy is smarter than Bush. But his political strength -- and he knows it -- comes from America's unrelenting passion for never bothering to take that extra step to figure shit out. If you think you know it all already, Rudy agrees with you. And if anyone tries to tell you differently, they're probably traitors, and Rudy, well, he'll keep an eye on 'em for you. Just like Bush, Rudy appeals to the couch-bound bully in all of us, and part of the allure of his campaign is the promise to put the Pentagon and the power of the White House at that bully's disposal.

Rudy's attack against Ron Paul in the debate was a classic example of that kind of politics, a Rovian masterstroke. The wizened Paul, a grandfather seventeen times over who is running for the Republican nomination at least 100 years too late, was making a simple isolationist argument, suggesting that our lengthy involvement in Middle Eastern affairs -- in particular our bombing of Iraq in the 1990s -- was part of the terrorists' rationale in attacking us.

Though a controversial statement for a Republican politician to make, it was hardly refutable from a factual standpoint -- after all, Osama bin Laden himself cited America's treatment of Iraq in his 1996 declaration of war. Giuliani surely knew this, but he jumped all over Paul anyway, demanding that Paul take his comment back. "I don't think I've ever heard that before," he hissed, "and I've heard some pretty absurd explanations for September 11th."

It was like the new convict who comes into prison the first day and punches the weakest guy in the cafeteria in the teeth, and the Southern crowd exploded in raucous applause. Coupled with yet another implosion by aneurysm-in-waiting John McCain a few days later ("Fuck you! I know more about this than anyone else in the room!" McCain screamed at a fellow senator during a meeting about immigration), the Ron Paul ass-whipping revived Giuliani's standing among conservatives who lately had begun to abandon him over his pro-choice status.

The Paul incident went to the very heart of who Giuliani is as a politician. To the extent that conservatism in the Bush years has morphed into a celebration of mindless patriotism and the paranoid witch-hunting of liberals and other dissenters, Rudy seems the most anxious of any Republican candidate to take up that mantle. Like Bush, Rudy has repeatedly shown that he has no problem lumping his enemies in with "the terrorists" if that's what it takes to get over. When the 9/11

Commission raised criticisms of his fire department, for instance, Giuliani put the bipartisan panel in its place for daring to question his leadership. "Our anger," he declared, "should clearly be directed at one source and one source alone -- the terrorists who killed our loved ones."

Whether Rudy believes in this kind of politics reflexively, as the psychologically crippled Bush does, or as a means to an end, as Karl Rove does, isn't clear. But there's no question that Giuliani has made the continuation of Swift-Boating politics a linchpin of his candidacy. His political hires speak deeply to that tendency. Chris Henick, formerly Karl Rove's most trusted deputy, is now a key aide at Giuliani Partners, the security firm set up by the mayor to cash in on his 9/11 image. One of his top donors, Richard Collins, is a longtime Bush supporter who was instrumental in setting up "Stop Her Now," a 527 group modeled on Swift Boat Veterans for Truth that will be used to attack Hillary Clinton. And the money for the smear campaign comes from the same Texas sources behind the Swift Boaters, including oilman T. Boone Pickens and Houston home builder Bob Perry.

To further emulate the Bush-Rove model, Giuliani has recruited some thirty Bush "Pioneers," the key fund-raisers who served as the president's \$100,000 bagmen. In addition, he hired the woman who spearheaded the Pioneer program to be his chief fund-raiser. "Rudy definitely got some of Bush's heavier hitters, including all the Swift Boater types," says Alex Cohen, a senior researcher at Public Citizen, who tracks the president's top donors.

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Rudy's stump speech on the trail these days is short and sweet. He talks about two things -- national security and free-market capitalism -- and his catchphrase for both is "going on offense." When he talks about "economic offense," Giuliani is ostensibly communicating the usual conservative contempt for taxes and big government. But he means more than that. Like the Bush-Cheney crew, Rudy believes everything should be for sale, even public policy -- particularly when he's in a position to do the selling.

In his years as mayor -- and his subsequent career as a lobbyist -- Rudy jumped into bed with anyone who could afford a rubber. Saudi Arabia, Rupert Murdoch, tobacco interests, pharmaceutical companies, private prisons, Bechtel, ChevronTexaco -- Giuliani took money from them all. You could change Rudy's mind literally in the time it took to write a check. A former prosecutor, Giuliani used to call drug dealers "murderers." But as a lobbyist he agreed to represent Seisint, a security firm run by former cocaine smuggler Hank Asher. "I have a great admiration for what he's doing," Rudy gushed after taking \$2 million of Asher's money.

As mayor, Rudy had a history of asking financially interested parties to help shape important government policies. At one point, he allowed a deputy mayor who was on the payroll of Major League Baseball to work on deals for the Yankees and Mets; at another point he commissioned a \$600,000 report on privatizing JFK and LaGuardia from a consultant with ties to the British Airport Authority, Rudy's handpicked choice to manage the airports.

And let's not forget Bernie Kerik, Rudy's very own hairy-assed Sancho Panza, who was nixed as director of Homeland Security after investigators uncovered a gift he received from a construction firm with alleged mob ties that wanted to do business with Giuliani's administration. It is a testament to the monstrous breadth of Rudy's chutzpah that he used his post-9/11 celebrity to push his personal bagman for a post that milks the world's hugest security-contracts tit -- at the very moment when he himself was creating a security-services company.

Then there's 9/11. Like Bush's, Rudy's career before the bombing was in the toilet; New Yorkers had come to think of him as an ambition-sick meanie whose personal scandals were truly wearying to think about. But on the day of the attack, it must be admitted, Rudy hit the perfect note; he displayed all the strength and reassuring calm that Bush did not, and for one day at least, he was everything you'd want in a leader. Then he woke up the next day and the opportunist in him saw that there was money to be made in an America high on fear.

For starters, Rudy tried to use the tragedy to shred election rules, pushing to postpone the inauguration of his successor so he could hog the limelight for a few more months. Then, with the dust from the World Trade Center barely settled, he went on the road as the Man With the Bullhorn, pocketing as much as \$200,000 for a single speaking engagement. In 2002 he reported \$8 million in speaking income; this past year it was more than \$11 million. He's traveled in style, at one stop last year requesting a \$47,000 flight on a private jet, five hotel rooms and a private suite with a balcony view and a king-size bed.

While the mayor himself flew out of New York on a magic carpet, thousands of cash-strapped cops, firemen and city

workers involved with the cleanup at the World Trade Center were developing cancers and infections and mysterious respiratory ailments like the "WTC cough." This is the dirty little secret lurking underneath Rudy's 9/11 hero image -- the most egregious example of his willingness to shape public policy to suit his donors. While the cleanup effort at the Pentagon was turned over to federal agencies like OSHA, which quickly sealed off the site and required relief workers to wear hazmat suits, the World Trade Center cleanup was handed over to Giuliani. The city's Department of Design and Construction (DDC) promptly farmed out the waste-clearing effort to a smattering of politically connected companies, including Bechtel, Bovis and AMEC construction.

The mayor pledged to reopen downtown in no time, and internal DDC memos indicate that the cleanup was directed at a breakneck pace. One memo to DDC chief Michael Burton warned, "Project management appears to only address safety issues when convenient for the schedule of the project." Burton, however, had his own priorities: He threatened to fire contractors if "the highest level of efficiency is not maintained."

Although respiratory-mask use was mandatory, the city allowed a macho culture to develop on the site: Even the mayor himself showed up without a mask. By October, it was estimated, masks were being worn on site as little as twenty-nine percent of the time. Rudy proclaimed that there were "no significant problems" with the air at the World Trade Center. But there was something wrong with the air: It was one of the most dangerous toxic-waste sites in human history, full of everything from benzene to asbestos and PCBs to dioxin (the active ingredient in Agent Orange). Since the cleanup ended, police and firefighters have reported a host of serious illnesses -- respiratory ailments like sarcoidosis; leukemia and lymphoma and other cancers; and immune-system problems.

"The likelihood is that more people will eventually die from the cleanup than from the original accident," says David Worby, an attorney representing thousands of cleanup workers in a class-action lawsuit against the city. "Giuliani wears 9/11 like a badge of honor, but he screwed up so badly."

When I first spoke to Worby, he was on his way home from the funeral of a cop. "One thing about Giuliani," he told me. "He's never been to a funeral of a cleanup worker."

Indeed, Rudy has had little at all to say about the issue. About the only move he's made to address the problem was to write a letter urging Congress to pass a law capping the city's liability at \$350 million.

Did Giuliani know the air at the World Trade Center was poison? Who knows -- but we do know he took over the cleanup, refusing to let more experienced federal agencies run the show. He stood on a few brick piles on the day of the bombing, then spent the next ten months making damn sure everyone worked the night shift on-site while he bonked his mistress and negotiated his gazillion-dollar move to the private sector. Meanwhile, the people who actually cleaned up the rubble got used to checking their stool for blood every morning.

Now Giuliani is running for president -- as the hero of 9/11. George Bush has balls, too, but even he has to bow to this motherfucker.

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