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He Served and Protected

The former commissioner says the mayor won City Hall by propagating a false narrative that the police were discriminating by race.

By Edward Kosner

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TEXT

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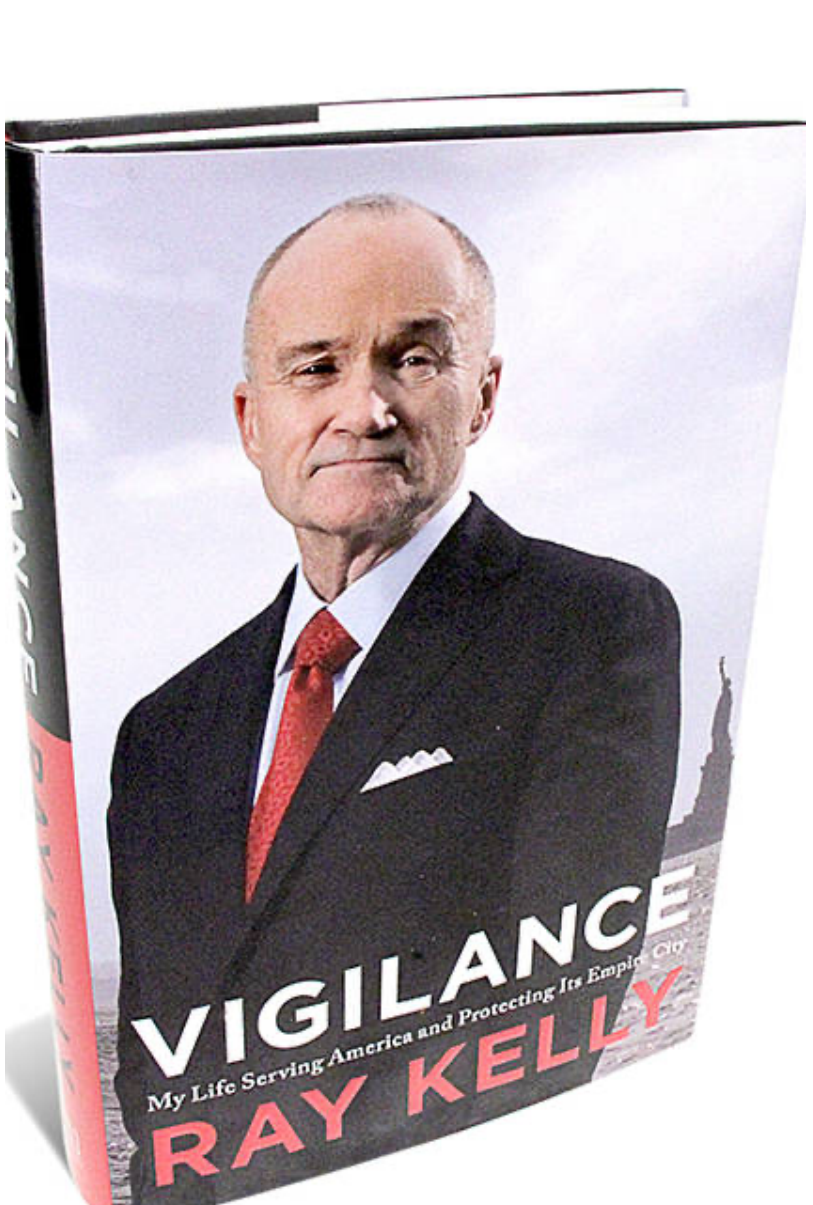


Is New York under “progressive” Mayor Bill de Blasio descending into the scarifying old days of rampant murder and rape, with homeless people using the streets as toilets and Times Square reverting to a casbah of hustlers and worse? Or are the ingenious tabloids with their startling front pages of urinating vagrants and topless painted ladies stampeding New Yorkers into a false sense of insecurity?

Ray Kelly, the Irish bulldog who served as police commissioner longer than any top cop in New York City history, diplomatically doesn’t commit himself on that question in “Vigilance.” But that’s about the only law-enforcement issue he sidesteps in this blunt, proudly unapologetic memoir.

Mugged in Central Park as a third-grader, Mr. Kelly has spent a half-century protecting Americans, first as a Marine officer, then as a New York cop with two stints as a federal security official in the mix. He is a champion of imaginative and aggressive policing, especially the tactic known as “stop-and-frisk,” which has become a flash point in the current furor over police conduct in New York and around the country.

Mr. Kelly has indelible memories of the bad old days. His first stint as police commissioner came in the waning months of David Dinkins’s term as New York’s first (and so far only) African-American mayor. Fueled by the crack plague, murders in New York hit 2,245 in 1990—three times the toll in 1967. With Mr. Kelly devising the strategy, City Hall found the money for more cops, changed tactics and the crime wave began to ebb.



VIGILANCE

By Ray Kelly
Hachette, 328 pages, \$28

bureau. He posted detectives in foreign capitals to work with local authorities and began to monitor social media for leads. He beefed up New York’s participation with the standoffish feds in joint operations.

Justly proud of his department’s record, he devotes nearly 50 pages of the book to a meticulous reconstruction of 16 terror plots against the city that were thwarted on his watch. And he details how NYPD security concerns pressured developers and politicians to radically redesign the glass-sheathed skyscraper built to replace the fallen World Trade Center.

Still, the most compelling part of Mr. Kelly’s book is his chesty defense of his force’s street tactics against criminals and his attack on Mayor de Blasio for what he sees as a craven surrender to politically motivated anti-cop activists.

Stop-and-frisk—or, as Mr. Kelly likes to call it, “street inquiries”—is a common police tactic, sanctioned, he says, by several Supreme Court rulings over the years. If a cop sees someone acting suspiciously, he can stop and question the person, and, if he thinks appropriate, pat down the subject for weapons.

No one can say for sure how much credit stop-and-frisk should get for falling crime rates. Starting in the mid-1990s, major and minor crime began falling in New York and other big cities in the U.S. and Western Europe whether cops emphasized the tactic or not. But the dramatic increase in the use of the approach coincided with an equally vast drop in crime in New York. By 2011, Commissioner Kelly’s cops were making more than 685,000 stop-and-frisks a year. By 2013, New York’s murder rate was down to four per 100,000 citizens, the lowest since the 1960s.

Mr. Kelly is nearly apoplectic over New York federal Judge Shira Scheindlin’s 2013 ruling that street stops amounted to unconstitutional racial profiling. The NYPD had argued, based on a Rand Corp. study commissioned by Mr. Kelly, that victims identified their assailants as black in 69% of reported crimes, but African-Americans constituted only 53% of street stops. Judge Scheindlin’s ruling was eventually overturned on appeal, but the damage, as Mr. Kelly sees it, was done.

Mr. Kelly reserves his greatest scorn for Mayor de Blasio. Using his mixed-race son in commercials and capitalizing on the “transparently cynical” Scheindlin ruling, the mayor, he says, won City Hall by using a “false narrative” that the police were discriminating by race.

True to his word, the new mayor drastically reduced street stops and other aggressive police tactics. “De Blasio,” writes Mr. Kelly, “shrugged and walked away from a routine and useful policing tool. . . . People will lose their lives as a result.”

In the first months of 2015, the most serious violent crime—murders and rapes—increased significantly in New York, although less than in Chicago, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and other big cities. Even so, last week Bill Bratton, who last year succeeded Mr. Kelly as commissioner for the second time, proclaimed the summer the safest overall in decades. You can imagine what Ray Kelly thinks of that.

Mr. Kosner was editor of New York magazine during the first World Trade Center bombing and editor of the New York Daily News on Sept. 11, 2001.

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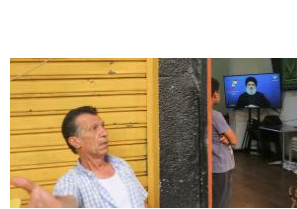
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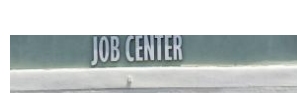
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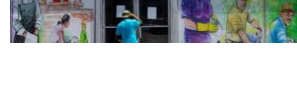
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