

COMMENTARY

Al Sharpton Just Won't Let Racial Wounds Heal

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The Rev. Al Sharpton's status with Washington's Democratic elite just keeps on rising. Last Friday, he commanded an audience with Attorney General Janet Reno and White House aides to demand a federal monitor for the New York City Police Department.

Mr. Sharpton has also demanded, and won, meetings with Al Gore, Hillary Clinton, Sen. Charles Schumer of New York and former presidential hopeful Bill Bradley. Last year he shared the stage with President Clinton at a Justice Department conference on police misconduct. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission glorified him as an expert on policing in its recent report attacking the NYPD. Mr. Sharpton's transformation from racial agitator to "statesman" appears complete.

But it's time for a reality check. If Mr. Sharpton's highplaced admirers are indifferent to his history of racial rabble rousing and character assassination (exemplified by the neverrepudiated Tawana Brawley hoax), they should visit New York to see what their ambassador for minority rights is doing for racial harmony and policecommunity relations there.

New York has a new police commissioner—Bernard Kerik, a decorated former narcotics detective and, most recently, head of the city's jails, where he

engineered a 90% drop in inmate violence. Mr. Kerik faces two challenges: to keep the crime rate falling and to improve policecommunity relations. Mr. Sharpton is determined to see him fail at both.

From the moment Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced Mr. Kerik's appointment, Mr. Sharpton has been on the attack. At a series of frantic press conferences, he denounced Mr. Kerik as the "unquestioned puppet of the mayor," whose appointment would "begin reopening old wounds." (This was news: Has Mr. Sharpton ever allowed an old wound to heal?) Mr. Sharpton scoffed that Mr. Kerik's "primary qualification is that he does not question the mayor"—a remarkable judgment, from a man with little job history, against someone who brought the Rikers Island jail back from anarchy while slashing overtime costs and resuscitating employee morale.

Mr. Sharpton's ire has only redoubled as Mr. Kerik has shown every intention of repairing policeminority understanding, badly frayed by the Giuliani administration's mishandling of two fatal police shootings and by Mr. Sharpton's own racial exploitation of those unfortunate incidents.

On the morning he was sworn in, the new police commissioner attended a Baptist church in Brooklyn and announced the message he will send to the city's police: "If you do something by accident . . . I need to be able to go to the community and say, 'I need help.' In order for me to do that, they've got to believe in you. They've got to trust you. You've got to show them respect." Mr. Sharpton struck back with a news conference calling Mr. Kerik's church visit a "bogus trip" and a "counterfeit effort" to demonstrate concern for black New Yorkers.

Mr. Sharpton's attempt at defamation hasn't been made easier by the outpouring of support from Mr. Kerik's former prison department employees, of whom 75% are minorities. The president of the Hispanic Society, an organization for jail employees, told the Daily News that Mr. Kerik was "probably the best commissioner we've ever had in dealing with the Hispanic officers." The head of the Guardians Association of black jailers praised Mr. Kerik for his flexibility in

resolving employee problems. Rankandfile workers applaud him for finally prosecuting prisoner assaults against them.

Let's imagine, for a moment, how Mr. Sharpton might behave if he were indeed the statesman his Washington allies pretend he is. If he had even a scintilla of interest in actually improving policecommunity affairs, he would seize this moment to restart the dialogue between the NYPD and minority New Yorkers. He would welcome Mr. Kerik's commitment to reach out to an everbroader base of citizens and to hold precinct commanders accountable for civilian relations. He would urge his supporters to keep an open mind about the new commissioner and to take him at his word until he betrays it.

He would also start telling the truth about the NYPD. This would include accepting that the department has scaled down its use of force to the lowest level in decades; that there were 73% fewer fatal shootings by the police in 1999 than in 1990, under Mayor David Dinkins; and that the NYPD is among the most restrained big city departments in the nation.

But Mr. Sharpton has no intention of calming New York's racial climate. When Mr. Giuliani tried to meet the mother of Amadou Diallo, the Guinean street vendor killed by four street crime officers last year, Mr. Sharpton went into overdrive. He snatched Mrs. Diallo away from under the mayor's nose, and made sure that Mr. Giuliani could never speak to her thereafter. Early in Mr. Giuliani's first term, Mr. Sharpton pressured black churches to retract invitations to the mayor, thus perpetuating the distance from the black community of which Mr. Sharpton has so profitably accused his foe.

Mr. Sharpton's campaign against Mr. Kerik will harm all New Yorkers. Most negative citizenpolice encounters are provoked by hostility on the part of the citizen. The more Mr. Sharpton fills young black men with hatred of the police, more tensions there will be on the streets, and the greater the likelihood of enforcement actions going astray. All this adds up to more business for the reverend, and more trouble for the police. The antipolice animus Mr. Sharpton

foments makes public safety and the successful prosecution of crime more difficult to achieve.

Each time the Clintonian clique confers honors on Mr. Sharpton, it sets in motion waves of civil tension that hurt the city. Most New Yorkers have never been fooled by Mr. Sharpton's political feints, or by his attempts at respectability. His scramble to discredit Mr. Kerik shows him, once again, as a brazen racial provocateur—just the sort of character, apparently, in whose company the Clinton White House feels entirely comfortable.

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