

The New York Times

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

Giuliani Documentary Seeks to Get Beyond Heroic 9/11 Image

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

Fairly or not, it was a phrase that came to symbolize an era thick with accusations of police brutality against minorities, artists and other residents of New York City: "Giuliani Time."

Now it is the title of a new documentary about the political life of the mayor who presided over those years — and who, it is safe to assume, would not include the film on his campaign Web site if he were to decide to run for president in 2008.

The two-hour feature is nothing less than a full frontal assault on the civic deification of Rudolph W. Giuliani that occurred in the days after Sept. 11, 2001, when much of the news coverage shined a spotlight on his steady hand. The film is scheduled to have its premiere at the Sunshine Cinema on the Lower East Side on May 12; the distributor, Cinema Libre Studio, is aiming to release it in cities like Los Angeles, Seattle and San Francisco as well.

If the film does not take a wrecking ball to Mr. Giuliani's pedestal, it at least serves as a reminder of all the controversy, all the fighting and all the dirty laundry that defined him before the halo effect set in after the terrorist attacks. If nothing else, the filmmakers say they want to define his public image for voters and the news media before he can define himself as a possible presidential candidate — an approach that prompts the former mayor's aides to call the film a hatchet job.

Mr. Giuliani's role in 9/11, for instance, gets about as much time as his war against the squeegee men, those windshield-washing extortionists who seemed to be treated like Public Enemy No. 1 after his election in 1993.

The director, Kevin Keating, who has principally worked as a cinematographer on documentaries like "Harlan County, USA," said he was seeking to fill in the blanks for people who know Mr. Giuliani only because of the terrorist attacks. As he sees it, he is fighting 9/11 propaganda with his own brand of agitprop.

"We want to provoke heat and debate and a closer look at the man and leader in full, not just the leader who has been raised to secular sainthood," Mr. Keating said.

With rare exceptions like "Fahrenheit 9/11," political theater can be a tough sell commercially. Regardless of how many Americans wind up seeing "Giuliani Time," the film does point up a number of controversies that the news media would also surely explore if Mr. Giuliani were to run for president. Less clear is whether, in such a presidential race, voters would care about his political record before 9/11. Many political analysts believe that a Giuliani bid in 2008 would be complicated more by his support for abortion rights and gay rights than by strong-arm tactics by the New York Police Department a decade earlier.

Mr. Keating said he was initially drawn to the idea of making a film about Mr. Giuliani by the mayor's record on free speech issues, which the director saw as hostile to artists, political protesters and institutions like the Brooklyn Museum. When he began shooting in 1999, Mr. Keating delved into the mayor's policies of cutting welfare and toughening police tactics, while also focusing on his attacks on public financing for the Brooklyn Museum after he took umbrage at the "Sensation" exhibition there.

Throughout the film, the Giuliani administration is rendered as a heartless and heavy-handed police state that mistreated minorities, the poor and sick, artists, people on welfare and victims of crime. The title, "Giuliani Time," is a phrase said to have been uttered by a police officer involved in the beating and sodomizing of Abner Louima in 1997.

The film also includes anti-Giuliani commentary by two onetime city officials with whom he clashed: William J. Bratton, the former police commissioner, and Rudy Crew, the former schools chancellor. At one point, Mr. Crew describes a voucher program supported by Mr. Giuliani as "racist" and "class biased."

Mr. Keating said his repeated requests for an interview were denied by Mr. Giuliani's office.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Giuliani, Sunny Mindel, who was Mr. Keating's point of contact at City Hall, said in an interview that the documentary seemed slanted from the get-go and that participating did not seem as if it would be fruitful for the former mayor. The distributor, Cinema Libre, is known for its slate of leftish films, like "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism" and "Uncovered: The War on Iraq."

Ms. Mindel said that even if the documentary were to build an audience, she doubted it would change many minds about Mr. Giuliani.

"People know him as the man who was the leader of an urban renaissance of the city that was deemed to be ungovernable," Ms. Mindel said. "His legacy is sustained by the accomplishments as leader of New York City for eight years."

George Arzt, a political and communications consultant in New York City, said the documentary was a reminder that Mr. Giuliani is a far more complicated leader than the post-9/11 hagiography suggests.

"In the second term he was fighting with a lot of people, he had tense relationships, his marriage was falling apart, nothing was going right, and he was headed for political oblivion when 9/11 happened," said Mr. Arzt, once the press secretary for Mayor Edward I. Koch.

Robert Polner, a former Newsday reporter and the editor of a 2005 book of essays and articles about Mr. Giuliani, said that many Americans did not know the same man New Yorkers may recall: one who wanted to win every battle, who lashed out at his critics and who rarely ceded ground (at least in public).

"I wasn't that surprised with him in 9/11 because he was always good in a crisis," said Mr. Polner, whose book, "America's Mayor: the Hidden History of Rudy Giuliani's New York" (Soft Skull Press), was published last year. "When it was quiet in the room or a problem needed finesse, it was almost like he couldn't exist. He almost existed to manage a crisis. But there is far more to him than that."