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Allies Could Cause Alarm for Rudy

By Tom Brune
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It had been a few years since Richard Tollner last publicly accused his former teacher Msgr. Alan Placa of groping him in high school, but Tollner recently repeated the charges -- raising an awkward issue for Rudolph Giuliani's run for president.

Tollner, now a mortgage banker, appeared at a Feb. 8 Manhasset meeting of Voice of the Faithful of Long Island, a Catholic group concerned about priest-abuse cases, and told how Placa used to corner him.

After the accusations first surfaced in 2002, the Diocese of Rockville Centre placed Placa on administrative leave, barring him from priestly duties and from wearing the collar. Placa, who insists he is innocent, has not been charged with a crime.

Yet despite the controversy, Giuliani gave his old friend Placa a job at Giuliani Partners, and Michael Hess, a partner at the firm and the ex-mayor's corporation counsel, handled Placa's legal matters.

Placa is one of several close allies of Giuliani who have faced trouble, controversies or even criminal convictions -- and experts say they could come back to haunt Giuliani's campaign for the White House.

"Rudy Giuliani has never undergone the intense scrutiny that all presidential candidates must. In his case, such scrutiny will almost certainly prove difficult and troubling to his candidacy," said Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution.

Questions of judgment

"The ethical and legal problems of a number of his close associates -- Bernie Kerik being the most prominent -- raise legitimate questions about his judgment and his ethical sensitivity," Mann said.

The Giuliani campaign declined to comment.

"Everyone has some skeletons in his closet," said Eric Davis, a political scientist at Middlebury College.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), for example, was implicated in the "Keating Five" savings and loan scandal. Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) entered into a real estate deal with a political fundraiser later indicted in a kickback scheme. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) as first lady faced scandals involving the travel office and the Whitewater real estate investment.

These controversies are well known, but Giuliani's past is just now emerging nationally.

The most prominent

Take Bernard Kerik.

Giuliani promoted his former campaign driver from detective to a series of jobs ending with police commissioner, and later included him as a founder of Giuliani Partners.

Kerik imploded in scandal after being nominated in December 2004 to head the U.S. Homeland Security Department. He withdrew, citing his failure to pay nanny taxes.

But Kerik also had problems as city correction commissioner, a job given him by Giuliani. Last year, Kerik pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor corruption charges, one of them for letting an allegedly mob-tied firm renovate his apartment at no cost. He was fined \$221,000.

And there are others.

One is Russell Harding. Giuliani in 2000 elevated Harding, son of a key political ally, at age 34, despite his lack of a college degree or expertise, to head the New York City Housing Development Corp.

"Tammany Hall had higher standards than this," urban historian Richard C. Wade complained at the time, referring to the corrupt political machine that once ran New York City.

In office, Harding took nearly half a million dollars in agency money, giving himself raises and bonuses, spending it on lavish meals and vacations, and buying a friend a \$38,000 car.

In 2005, Harding pleaded guilty to charges he defrauded his agency and downloaded child pornography. Two of his aides also pleaded guilty in the scheme. Harding is serving 5 years and must pay back \$366,000.

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There is Louis Carbonetti, a longtime friend and father of Anthony Carbonetti, Giuliani's City Hall chief of staff and now a partner at Giuliani Partners.

Community Assistance Unit commissioner under Giuliani, Louis Carbonetti pleaded guilty in 2004 to perjury in a probe of a contract with a business improvement district he led after leaving City Hall. He is on 5 years' probation and must pay \$17,500 in fines and restitution.

These and other figures run counter to the image Giuliani has cultivated: the tough federal prosecutor and mayor who cleaned up New York City.

They also tap into heartland America's stereotypes about New York, said Colby College scholar G. Calvin Mackenzie.

"His opponents in the primaries are going to do everything they can to emphasize that negative valence of New York," he said. "All they have to do is drop some names."

Giuliani's campaign staff is well aware of this potential bump in the road to the White House. In a list of potential problems, a campaign memo that surfaced last month included the entry: "Kerik."

Giuliani is trying out a formula to head off the attacks. When CNN's Larry King last week asked about Kerik, Giuliani responded, "I think the answer is I made a mistake and I took responsibility for it."

Loyalty a priority

Critics say Giuliani often selected little-known people like Kerik, groomed them and advanced them as far as they could go in their careers, making loyalty to him the priority.

Some analysts say most of his aides were competent and upstanding, and he had no more scandals than other mayors. One Democratic analyst said Giuliani's public presence after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks trumps his scandals: "9/11 cleansed Rudy of his sins."

Yet Giuliani won't be able to control when controversial figures from his past re-appear.

Kerik, for example, re-emerged in October in stories about his role in wiretapping the husband of a New York candidate at her request. And the city's correction department under him is still being probed.

Then there was Tollner's talk a week ago in Manhasset.

In it, he described how Placa sought to isolate him from others so he could touch him. Placa stopped, Tollner said, only after he threatened the priest when he approached him at his father's funeral.

Placa has denied the story.

After Placa stepped down from his church posts, a Suffolk County grand jury report in 2003 cited his three accusers and said he used his position as vice chancellor of the diocese to stifle priest-abuse complaints.

Placa, who was not charged with a crime, is in a church process to clear his name. He lives at a parish where many support him despite protests.

Placa, a once powerful and now polarizing figure on Long Island, is an old Giuliani friend who was best man for his first marriage, baptized his children, helped him annul his first marriage and buried his mother.

Giuliani walked away from Kerik and others but has stood by Placa, an attorney who still works at Giuliani Partners.

Tollner said his speech had nothing to do with Giuliani, but some priest-abuse activists are puzzled by Giuliani's loyalty to Placa.

Terry McKiernan, of Bishop Accountability in Massachusetts, said it could be "a surprising case of a politician standing by an old friend even though the old friend is inconvenient."

But Barbara Blaine, president of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, in Chicago, offered a different take.

"It certainly begs the question of whether Giuliani is going to be tough on sex offenders and tough on crime if he is willing to employ someone with allegations like that."

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