

# *When Clients Draw the Spotlight, He Basks*

By Lynda Richardson

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## **Correction Appended**

WHEN the nomination of Bernard B. Kerik for homeland security secretary unraveled in December, Joseph Tacopina became an extremely busy lawyer. He logged 316 calls on his cellphone on Dec. 11 and 12 after his client abruptly withdrew his nomination, saying he had not paid taxes for a nanny and did not know her immigration status. Mr. Tacopina was quoted all over defending Mr. Kerik.

Yet even in Mr. Kerik's dark moments, Mr. Tacopina seemed to shine as he displayed his talent for the law and for public relations. Mr. Tacopina is to the defense bar what Donald Trump is to real estate, those who know him say, clever but focused on his image.

The other morning, he makes it clear how much appearances matter. He unearths an unflattering photograph of himself with Mr. Kerik on Christmas Eve that was published in The New York Post -- Mr. Tacopina is stooped and scowling like the hunchback from Notre Dame. He is appalled by that shot. Looks matter to him. Most of the time when he appears on television or in a newspaper, his thick hair is swept back and his athletic frame is decked out in custom suits.

With Mr. Kerik, he has had his work cut out for him. There were all those reports detailing alleged legal, personal and ethical lapses, including romantic entanglements and accusations that Mr. Kerik spoke up for an employee of a construction company that had been accused of ties to organized crime. Mr. Kerik, who was also accused of receiving thousands of dollars in cash as gifts from the employee, has denied any wrongdoing.

"It was literally two weeks of my phone being sewn onto my ear, literally 24 hours a day," says Mr. Tacopina, who is 38. Lately, the Kerik coverage has subsided, though the city's Department of Investigation is looking into possible financial and ethical misconduct when Mr. Kerik was police and correction department commissioner during the administration of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

"There's going to be some closure finally," says Mr. Tacopina, relaxing in his Madison Avenue office and expressing the confidence any defense lawyer would. "I'm very glad because Bernie Kerik now is going to be vindicated and he's going to be cleared of these allegations." Whatever Mr. Kerik's fate, Mr. Tacopina certainly believes he has good legal representation.

On [tacopinalaw.com](http://tacopinalaw.com), his Web site, a flashing version of him appears in court with the words, "hottest criminal defense lawyer in New York." Readers are directed to notable cases and loads of press on him. A bit of ego? "Every criminal defense lawyer has to be confident to some degree, egomaniacal," he says. Mr. Tacopina calls himself a "regular guy from Brooklyn," but he has an office in Milan. He represents a branch of Ferrari North America. As a perk, he was given a \$110,000 metallic gray Maserati. He tools around in it in Westport, Conn., where he lives with his wife, Tish, and their five children, ages 11 to 4.

Behind his desk is an artist's rendering of the police brutality trial involving the torture of Abner Louima. Mr. Tacopina, a former assistant district attorney in Brooklyn, came to prominence as the lawyer for Officer Thomas Wiese, who was accused not of the attack but of giving false statements to investigators. Officer Wiese's conviction for conspiracy to obstruct justice was overturned by a federal appeals court.

Mr. Tacopina's client roster is, in a word, eclectic. He represents one of Michael Jackson's associates, Frank Tyson, who was charged with conspiring to cover up for Mr. Jackson. There is the Brooklyn State Supreme Court judge, Gerald P. Garson, who was indicted on bribery-related charges. And there was an assistant deputy warden at Rikers Island, Benny Nuzzo, who was acquitted of charges that he masterminded the theft of a Salvador Dalí drawing from one of the jails.

HE has handled mob cases, but insists not many. "I've had two or three guys in 10 years," he says. "As a business and personal decision, I have turned down clients because I don't feel I'm the right lawyer for clients alleged to be members of Italian organized crime."

The son of Italian immigrants, he is fluent in Italian. When he was growing up, his father designed and sold commercial packaging for a company. His mother was an accountant. Mr. Tacopina graduated from Poly Prep High School in Brooklyn and Skidmore College. At 18, he knew his future was in trial law after reading "Fatal Vision," the nonfiction book by Joe McGinniss about an Army doctor who killed his pregnant wife and two daughters. Mr. Tacopina studied law at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.

He enjoys being on a roll. "Over the last couple of years, I've had the knack of getting these cases that seem to be in the limelight and I've got to tell you I don't dislike it," he says. "I get a certain adrenaline rush knowing your every move is going to be evaluated. I like the high stakes."

**PUBLIC LIVES** Correction: February 21, 2005, Monday The Public Lives profile on Thursday, about Joseph Tacopina, the lawyer representing Bernard B. Kerik in an ethical and financial investigation, referred imprecisely to Mr. Tacopina's legal education. He received his law degree from the University of Bridgeport; at the University of Connecticut in Storrs he participated in a brief trial advocacy program.

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