

New York City During The Republican National Convention: A Look Behind Police and Security Efforts To Insure Guest Safety

Preparation by New York City hotels (*see the special report beginning on page 5 of the August 2004 issue*) to deal with actions of demonstrators and possible terrorism at the Republican National Convention (RNC) seems to have paid off, according to police and security officials. Unlike the Democratic National Convention in late July in Boston, MA, which saw a minimum of protest activity, the RNC attracted an estimated 250,000-400,000 activists who staged a major day-long demonstration. That was followed by the taunting of delegates and other disruptions for three days in Midtown New York venues where the delegates were housed and where parties and gatherings were held. Some 3,000 persons were arrested by the New York Police Department (NYPD) on various charges early in the convention and detained while their cases awaited processing.

In this report, we'll describe some of the protest activities which took place and present some advice and tips you can use from three experts whom New York hoteliers called upon to handle protests. The three experts are: Detective Kevin Czartoryski, NYPD, who worked with hotels on security during the convention; Joseph Sordi, CEO, Strategic Security Corporation (SSC), whose firm provided security for many convention events and public figures; and Richard Hudak, director of corporate safety and security at Loews Corporation, whose New York hotels housed large numbers of delegates.

THE PLAZA HOTEL CAPER AND OTHER INCIDENTS

The only major incident at a hotel during the convention, according to Det. Czartoryski, took place at the high-profile Plaza Hotel where several activists, who had checked into the hotel as guests a few days earlier on an upper floor, rappelled down the side of the building and unfurled a huge banner promoting their cause. The banner was featured in all of the local newspapers and on television. A police sergeant seeking to remove the banner "fell through a glass window, and got 60 stitches in his leg, so the participants were charged with felony assault," says Czartoryski.

While organized protests drew thousands of people, there were also smaller scale incidents in which anarchists and other radicals tried to harass delegates at their hotels.

"Jack McManus, chief of the NYPD, coordinated his security plan with many parts of the New York community, including hotels," says Hudak. "Their intelligence picked up where protestors were staying, and how they would be moving to the different events. So we were able to discuss, early on, what we would do on our end, and what they were going to do on their end, which was to pre-position four uniformed officers at our hotel."

Commenting on a demonstration in front of the Regency, a Loews hotel, Hudak reports: "They had about 35 young people dressed in Bermuda shorts and ragged T-shirts, who marched down and created some noise for about 15 minutes. They had dildos and sexual items hanging around their necks, so they weren't very credible demonstrators. And when the NYPD Reaction Team showed up and told them to cease and desist, they simply dispersed."

The worst encounters between delegates and protesters occurred when large groups of demonstrators moved through the theater district while delegates were attending shows under arrangements prepared by convention planners. At the same time, several protesters were arrested for trying to block hotel entrances.

CELL PHONE MESSAGING PLAYED KEY ROLE IN ACTIVIST PLANNING

According to police reports, activist efforts were aided by a support network that used cell phone text messaging. Text messaging was also used extensively in a bike protest and during demonstrations in Times Square. Reportedly, some messages read as follows: "CT delegation breakfast everyday @ Maison (7th ave & 53rd) from 7-8:30. Can we get some dissenters?" It allegedly referred to the Connecticut delegation's plan to gather at a Midtown restaurant. Another read: "Maison has outdoor buffet. It would be direct contact with delegates."

One Internet discussion list allegedly used by protesters posted an advisory about where some delegate buses would be idling in Midtown every morning. Another message included phone numbers and e-mail addresses for convention officials, and advised that delegate hotels would be busiest in the morning and evening. Czartoryski warns, however, that some of the content was intentionally misleading. "We took a look at everything, and then sifted out what we thought would not be probable. They'd say they planned to have 10,000 people show up somewhere, and then, of course, only 1,000 showed up, but we'd rather be over-prepared than under-prepared, anyway," he says.

The majority of the protestors stayed at friends' homes or in public parks, Czartoryski adds.

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE SECURITY DURING THE RNC

Although New York City officials — joined by the FBI and the Secret Service, which were both concerned about potential terrorist action — deployed a huge police presence, private security firms and venue security also played an important role in providing protection.

According to Sordi: "Providing a high level of security today is far more demanding than it was pre-9/11. Our company must depend on intelligence gathering, reconnaissance, building command centers for each venue and developing a communications network. We know the drill. We provided the same services for companies and individuals in Boston during the Democratic National Convention."

SSC provided security for several major corporations during the RNC, including a major technology and a tobacco company as well as individual congressmen and other VIPs, Sordi says. "We had 13 high-ranking officials who we were responsible for. With this, came a number of threats, so we would go and meet with the security director of a hotel, perform a site assessment of the property, and then based on its strengths and weaknesses, we would post additional staffing where we thought holes existed. [Protesters] tried to exploit service entrances dressed as new hires; some dressed as business people; others used diversionary tactics."

The firm also provided security services to the Washington-DC-based production company which created a party at the Tunnel Night Club for four consecutive evenings, touted as the most prestigious and highly attended satellite event of the convention. In addition, SSC provided protection for Gotham Hall during an evening hosted by the Bush twins, as well as events at the New York Yacht Club, Battery Park Gardens and several other venues.

WORKING WITH HOTELS

During the RNC, Sordi says his firm provided:

--Advice. "As an independent consultant, we worked with the New York Hotel Association Security and Safety Committee," Sordi says.

--Added scrutiny. "We had stringent hotel check-in policies and procedures that verified who the people were. At the hotels near signature targets, you may run an actual background check on all the people who will be staying in the hotel, for instance," Sordi explains.

--Security officers. "We had over 200 people working during the day," Sordi reports.

--Support. "Everybody is bound by budgetary constraints, and many hotels would not be able to maintain the necessary level of protection for such an event for a long period of time, so we were available to supplement what they do have," Sordi comments.

--Post-event analysis. "This determined that the reason protesters were able to gain access to the convention floor was due to holes in the credentialing process. It could have been someone who was sensitive to [the protesters'] cause. They could have stolen it. They could have bought it," Sordi says. (Czartoryski says the situation could have been minimized if credentials contained photos. "That aspect was controlled by the Secret Service.")

--Infiltration. "Law enforcement agencies can be somewhat inhibited as to what they can and can't do by First Amendment rights and civil liberties, but as a private contractor, we are uninhibited by departmental bureaucracy and can maintain data bases of individuals who may target individuals or hotels," Sordi explains.

--Research. "A lot of our work was done before the RNC even took place, so we were able to deploy our resources properly. My firm has in-depth data on the ring leaders of these [protest] groups, so we knew which protesters were going to target which principals at which locations at what times," Sordi reports.

--Command and control. "We actually converted a hotel room into an operational center, where we monitored all of our clients," Sordi says.

--Intelligence gathering. "We also monitored all movement of protesters, and as intelligence came in, we analyzed it, and determined whether or not it posed a threat to the hospitality industry, where our principals were staying," Sordi says.

--Counter-surveillance. This was designed to throw off any protester reconnaissance, Sordi says. "An entire team--some in plainclothes and some in uniform--was deployed to all signature events."

--Logistics. "We plotted the movement of our clients in relation to the protests in order to ensure hassle-free movement," Sordi reports.

--Preparation for a terrorist threat. "What are you going to do if an envelope filled with white powder comes to your hotel?" Sordi says. "Rest assured, that if this happened during the RNC, that hotel would have been shut down displacing hundreds of people until the substance could be analyzed. Therefore, we had mutual aid agreements with other hotels to provide up to 50 rooms for the displaced."

IS YOUR HOTEL A TARGET?

Whether hosting a convention or other high-profile event, or simply conducting day-to-day business, hotels should be aware of conditions that would make them a special target, Sordi says. "Know the hotel's relationship with protest groups," he advises. "Is there some reason they would want to target your hotel? Does the corporation donate or provide money to controversial research organizations ... those which activists may be against, for instance?"

Think globally, he adds. "Is the hotel on anyone's grid nationally, or even internationally? If one hotel company 'accommodates' a fur association event, it can make any property a target."

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