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February 17, 2003

Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor of the City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor Bloomberg:

I write you today to comment on the handling by the City and by the Police Department of this weekend's peace rally.

It is the right—some might say the obligation—of citizens of a democracy to protest peacefully when they disagree with the policies of their government. Unfortunately, it seems, the City did nearly everything in its power to deny the nearly half-million protesters on Saturday that right.

As you are aware, United for Peace and Justice, the rally's organizers, applied for a permit to march past the United Nations. The City, citing vague "security" concerns, wasted taxpayers' money successfully fighting this permit.

This would have been bad enough, but the Police Department's behavior on Saturday was truly reprehensible. Many protesters were unable to attend the rally due to barricades which were placed at every intersection in the eastern part of midtown. Officers stationed at these barricades, when asked how to move east towards the rally, lied—either intentionally or because they were given misinformation by their superiors. The stated goal of allowing traffic to flow was clearly not achieved; indeed, because protesters were not able to move to the rally site, streets as far west as Third Avenue were blocked.

Despite the fact that the demonstrations were nonviolent, reports indicate that some protesters were sprayed with pepper spray or trampled by horses. This is the sort of behavior one expects to read about perhaps in Iraq, but not in the United States!

Many of the protesters who were arrested were held overnight, in clear violation of the City's July 2001 promise to end this practice. Many were held overnight in busses, bound in plastic handcuffs. Most of those arrested were charged with disorderly conduct, a charge that normally is met with a desk appearance ticket. When the conditions suffered prior event to formal charging are greater than the maximum penalty even if convicted, one is forced to wonder about the justice of the process.

As a citizen of this City, I hope that the City and Police Department will reconsider their practices for any future protests. Further, I await hearing your response on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Michael Castleman

cc: Raymond W. Kelly, Commissioner, NYPD