



'Big Men' Behind Capone



While flamboyant Italian-American Al Capone won all the headlines and the media attention through his exploits in Chicago, his real sponsors, New York-based Meyer Lansky (above left) and Lansky's bootlegging partner, Montreal-based Sam Bronfman (above right), were the real powers behind the throne. Although Lansky and Bronfman are long dead, the influence of their successors remains a major influence in organized crime and world politics today. Bronfman's son, Edgar (right), is president of the World Jewish Congress. Below, January 1, 1931: Mobster Al Capone looks over Uncle Sam's \$50,000 bail bond in the Federal Building in Chicago.



Al Capone: The Man and the Myth

By Michael Collins Piper

The real bosses of organized crime in America have found the legend of Al Capone a convenient cover to redirect public attention from their activities. Even the most cursory examination of any substantial scholarly literature on the topic of organized crime suggests that the story of organized crime in America remains largely unknown. Forget about the legend of “the Mafia.” Here are the facts.

Fuggeddaboutit. That’s supposed to be lingo of “Mafia wiseguys” that sometimes means “forget about it” and, well, sometimes not. In any event, as far as everything you think you know about legendary mob figure Al Capone: forget about it.

Capone was a big man and a colorful one, quite worthy of attention. But the Chicago mob boss was never as big as history—and Hollywood (which, in many respects, writes—or re-writes—history) suggest he was.

Despite all the hoopla over Capone’s purported “rule” over Chicago, at no time ever did Capone control more than one-fourth of the rackets in the Windy City. And what’s more, as famed independent crime writer Hank Messick has pointed out in his classic study, *Secret File*, (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1969) Capone—powerful and wealthy though he was—never held a title higher than “capo” (or “captain”)—head of a crew of ten men—in the ranks of the formally-organized Italian-American “Mafia” crime network in Chicago.

Another point often forgotten in the legend of “the Mafia,” is that Capone was only permitted to become a formal member of the Mafia after Italian-American crime bosses in Chicago relaxed Mafia membership rules to permit certain selected non-Sicilians such as Capone (who was born in Naples on mainland Italy) to join.

If fact, if truth be told, Capone was ultimately answering to much bigger, more secretive bosses behind the scenes who were based “back east”—part of the “elite” group surrounding Russian-born New York-based Jewish crime chief Meyer Lansky (who ultimately switched his operations to Miami and, for a brief period—

many years later—to Israel).

It was the Lansky group—including Lansky’s Jewish partner Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel and his Italian-born partners, Frank Costello and the legendary Charles “Lucky” Luciano—that sent Capone (a distant Luciano cousin) to Chicago in the first place.

In their notable Lansky biography, *Meyer Lansky: Mogul of the Mob* (Paddington, 1979)—written in cooperation with Lansky, Israeli writers Dennis Eisenberg, Uri Dan and Eli Landau—fill in some of the missing elements left out by Capone’s biographers.

Lansky himself told his Israeli biographers that “It was Bugsy Siegel who knew him well when Capone lived and worked on the Lower East side . . . a close enough friend of Capone’s to hide him out with one of his aunts” when Capone got in trouble for murder.

To get him out of the line of law enforcement fire, Lansky and company sent the young Capone to Chicago to act as a tough in the gang of Johnny Torrio, another ex-New Yorker who had gone West and who was moving to unseat his own uncle, old-time gangster “Big Jim” Colosimo, as leader of the Italian-American Mafia in Chicago. Essentially, Torrio was Lansky’s Chicago pointman and Capone quickly moved up the ranks and became Torrio’s right-hand man.

Hank Messick writes that Capone’s positioning “delighted” the Lansky crowd “because Capone was very much their man.” Although Capone eventually became his own master in Chicago, running scores of rackets and criminal operations, his loyalty to his New York friends was so firm that Lansky and [Luciano] knew they could always count on him.

And it is worth pointing out that Capone’s immediate “boss” in Chicago, Torrio, was also the Chicago point man for the liquor

interests of the Canadian-based Bronfman liquor empire which was shipping its legally-produced products over the border for illegal consumption by Prohibition-era American drinkers. Sam Bronfman and his family worked closely with the Lansky syndicate from the beginning. Therefore, the Torrio-Capone link brought the connection full circle.



Meanwhile, Chicago's ruling boss, Colosimo, was doing nothing to endear himself to either Bronfman, Lansky or Siegel, whom he was known to refer to as "dirty Jews." Colosimo proclaimed that he couldn't understand why Luciano dealt so closely with Lansky and Siegel, saying "I sometimes have a suspicion that he must have some Jewish blood in his veins," a suspicion that—in light of Luciano's subsequent fate, as we shall see, is highly unlikely.

In addition, Colosimo asserted that there was "no future in bootlegging" and showed little interest in patronizing the Bronfman liquor supply. Colosimo wanted to focus on drugs, prostitution and loan-sharking. His boycott of Bronfman booze was cutting into the Lansky syndicate's profits.

Needless to say, when the time was ripe, Lansky (via Torrio and Capone) moved against Colosimo who was gunned down by a New York Jewish gangster sent in to do the job. The biggest wreath at Colosimo's lavish funeral featured a card that read: "From the sorrowing Jew boys of New York." Soon enough, the Bronfman liquor came flowing into Chicago, courtesy of Lansky's henchman, Torrio and his right-hand, Capone.

Two relatively recent writers—both Jewish, incidentally—who have put forth what purport to be "definitive" Capone biographies notably give short shrift to the Lansky-Capone axis.

Robert J. Schoenberg's *Mr. Capone* (William Morrow & Company, 1992) mentions Lansky only once in passing in the text, but Lansky never merits even the inclusion in the 480-page volume's otherwise detailed index. Even Lansky's Sicilian partner, Capone's cousin, Luciano, ranks mention only twice.

Laurence Bergreen's *Capone* (Simon & Schuster, 1994) mentions Lansky only twice (in passing) over the course of 700 pages and suggests that there was a rivalry between Lansky and Capone, that Lansky and his associates felt Capone was becoming a bit "too big for his britches."

In any case, Capone's high-profile conviction and imprisonment in 1931 on tax charges brought Capone's very brief reign as so-called "boss" of Chicago to an end. Historian Stephen Fox, writing in *Blood & Power: Organized Crime in Twentieth Century America* (William Morrow and Company, 1989) summarized the situation succinctly: "Al Capone was the only Italian gangster who could match the power of the New Yorkers and his fortuitous removal at this critical point helped establish the national authority of the five New York gangs. Actually Capone always had more reputation than influence."

But Lansky and company were ready to take charge of Chicago and their chosen Capone successor, Paul "The Waiter" Ricca, only moved into power after it was made clear that the Lansky faction would only deal with Ricca. So the deal was cut.

It is thus for good reason that Meyer Lansky's friendly biographer, Robert Lacey writing in *Little Man* (Little, Brown and Company, 1991) noted that a major fallacy about organized crime was that "the early 1930s saw America's gangsters become overwhelmingly Italian." Lacey notes that Lansky's partner, "Bugs" Siegel and other New York Jewish gangsters such as Dutch Schultz,

Lepke Buchalter and Jake Shapiro "were responsible for more deaths between them than [Lansky's Sicilian partner] Lucky Luciano and all the padrones" who fought in the inter-mob wars between the various Italian crime factions. He notes likewise that Jewish crime factions also rose to power in Philadelphia, St. Paul-Minneapolis and Cleveland.

In the meantime—in mid-century America—the media promoted the myth of Italian predominance in organized crime. While Lansky remained quietly behind the scenes—following even the sensational 1947 assassination of his longtime friend and partner Siegel who was found to be embezzling mob funds from the syndicate's Las Vegas casino construction enterprises—his two Italian partners Luciano and Frank Costello were capturing the headlines.

In 1935 even *Fortune's* investigative report on mob gambling made what Lansky biographer Lacey described as the "ill-informed picture of Luciano as an underling of Capone." Later, in 1949, both *Time* and *Newsweek* (just weeks apart) promoted the legend of "the Mafia"—focusing on Costello—by featuring Costello on their much-read covers.

Costello himself was forced into early retirement in the late 1950s after a high-profile assassination attempt by a rival Italian faction, but Lansky himself continued to remain a major power behind the scenes.

Indeed, Lansky eclipsed even "Lucky" Luciano himself who was deported from the United States in 1946 after serving a prison term on charges of white slavery and prostitution. Even most organized crime historians tend to believe were largely trumped-up charges in the first place.

In his own posthumously-published memoirs, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (Little Brown & Company, 1974), Luciano provided a convincing account of how he was, in fact, framed on the charges that resulted in his imprisonment.

Luciano didn't ask the reader to believe that he (Luciano) wasn't engaged in extensive criminal activity. He did present a very cogent case, however, that he was not guilty of the crimes for which he was convicted. The truth is, though, Luciano was never brought to trial for any of the crimes in which he was engaged with Lansky.

In any case, it is quite possible Lansky did have some role in framing Luciano on the prostitution charges which smoothed the way for Lansky's rise to the top.

The fact is that, upon his deportation, Luciano actually named Lansky as his official spokesman. According to Luciano, "I worked it all out with Lansky and that's the point where Meyer became the real treasurer of the outfit. I put him in charge of my money and later on he started to take care of the finances of quite a few guys."

So despite his Jewish origins, Lansky was effectively acting as the *capo di tutti capi* ("boss of all bosses") in Luciano's absence. Lansky could never be a "member" of the Mafia, but he certainly ranked higher than even "made" members who had been inducted into the so-called "honored society."

Luciano later rued the day that he had placed so much trust in his early gangland associate. In 1961, Luciano reflected upon his relationship with Lansky. "In [Shakespeare's] *Julius Caesar*, you remember a guy by the name of Cassius? He was a pain in the ass. It seems like everybody's got a Cassius in his life."

According to Luciano, his Mafia associate Vito Genovese was his own Cassius. However, upon further thought he added, "Come to think of it, I even had two Cassiuses in my life, the other one bein' a guy by the name of Meyer Lansky. But I didn't get on to him for a long time."

In his waning days Luciano considered offers from Hollywood producers who wanted to film his life story. However, Luciano—in exile in Italy—got word from home that there were “orders” that he not participate in any such venture. It was then that Luciano saw the whole picture—the whole truth about what “the Mafia” had really become:

When I realized that Meyer Lansky was right in the middle of this, that’s when I knew he had us all by a string. Why should Lansky, bein’ a Jew, give a [expletive deleted] whether or not some [expletive deleted] movie had a bunch of Italian names in it? Because he was pullin’ the wires and everybody was dancin’ to his tune on the other end, like a bunch of puppets.

Lansky held the purse strings, too; he was the treasurer and he was really tryin’ to be the boss of everythin’. He was so hungry for power behind the scenes he’d kiss anybody’s [expletive deleted] and do anythin’ he had to do so that in the end, he—Meyer Lansky, my old partner and a Jew—would wind up the real boss of bosses of all the Italians and the Jews—and without a single [expletive deleted] vote on the [organized crime syndicate] council.

I never really knew what it meant when we was kids and I used to call him the Genius. But at the age of sixty-four, I finally got wise.

So it was that Luciano—like Capone and Costello before him—was relegated to the sidelines and the Jewish crime syndicate came to the fore. And even though organized gambling in Las Vegas—pioneered by Meyer Lansky and his partner Benjamin Siegel—has (for better or worse—many would say worse) become quite an accepted and largely respectable family affair and a part of the American scene, most Americans believe that “The Mafia Runs Las Vegas.”

The truth is quite the opposite. All scholarly research into the history of organized crime in Nevada demonstrates—beyond question—that the predominant interests in Las Vegas were part of the Jewish-dominated crime syndicate of which Meyer Lansky was the primary instigating figure.

As recently as 1995, two professors of criminal justice at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, Ronald A. Farrell and Carole Case, dared to put forth the controversial contention, in their book *The Black Book and the Mob: The Untold Story of the Control of Nevada’s Casinos* (The University of Wisconsin Press), that enforcement of gambling laws and regulations in Nevada has largely been targeted against relatively small-time Italian Mafia figures. In contrast, they noted, the “regulatory reaction to Jews” has “been somewhat at variance with that to Italians.”

In short, the primary big-time casino owners and controllers—many of whom were Jewish in origin and indeed tied to organized crime—were relatively unhindered by law enforcement in their operations. This, Farrell and Case suggested somewhat gingerly, may have to do with the fact that political interests (and Americans in general) were, as they put it, “becoming sensitized to the persecution of Jews.”

Farrell and Case also added an interesting twist to the picture. They note that the strong Mormon religious influence in Nevada may have something to do with the bias in favor of Jewish gangsters and against Italians since, they say, “Mormons doctrinally identify with Jews” and that “Jews may thus be buffered from the more negative assessments that members of out-groups face more generally.” The Jews—Farrell and Case—seem to have not only avoided being censured “but also to have obtained major inter-



AP/ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Mob advisor Jack “Greasy Thumb” Guzick (left) is seen conferring with an associate in the 1930s. Born to Jewish parents in 1887, Guzick became the most trusted counselor in legal and financial matters to Al Capone and subsequent Chicago crime bosses. Guzick earned the nickname “Greasy Thumb” as a result of dirtying his hands counting piles of mob money and greasing a large number of palms with hush money.

ests in the [gambling] industry.”

Actually, as Roger Morris noted in *The Money and The Power*—his landmark history of the untold story of Las Vegas—the city in the Nevada desert was “a world center of finance long before many knew its name,” precisely because of “that secret, indirect revolving traffic” of international capital—Lansky syndicate gambling money—that flowed between Las Vegas and the mob’s secret bank accounts in Switzerland. Morris added, too, that “of the many fictions blanketing the city, none was more insidious than the myth that the Mafia built Vegas”—a myth that ignored the role of Lansky and his Jewish colleagues. There is no doubt, concluded Morris,

“that Meyer Lansky was the founding father of Las Vegas, his power enormous and his legacy still to be reckoned in the twenty-first century.”

Reviewing the real history of organized crime, Meyer Lansky’s critical biographer, Hank Messick summarized it well: “The real leaders of crime have remained hidden while the nation’s law enforcement agencies have chased minor punks. And naïve is he who believes this development is accidental. Research reveals that non-Mafia leaders of crime have been hiding behind the vendetta-ridden society [the Italian Mafia] for decades. . . . Attempts to frame me have been made and I’ve been smeared as anti-Semitic from coast to coast by gangsters who used religion as a cloak.”

Even Lansky’s Israeli biographer, Uri Dan (who became his friend), admitted that he realized that his own book about Lansky had the potential to “break the back of the myth that organized crime in America is the sole province of people of Italian descent.”

Yet, despite all the facts which point away from the legend of “the Mafia,” popular media in America largely continue to promote the idea that organized crime is an Italian-American production. Hollywood films such as *The Godfather* series and the wildly-promoted television drama, *The Sopranos*, have captured the public imagination and earned the ire of Italian-Americans.

So it is that the legend of Al Capone lives on. Though it is by no means generally known—and later histories would often fail to acknowledge it as well—by the late 1930s the heroin trade in the United States was already one of the nation’s largest businesses, accounting for more than \$1 billion annually and almost entirely monopolized by the Lansky Syndicate. When the prevailing heroin routes from Europe and Japan were cut off by World War II, Lansky financed a new connection via Mexico, with Siegel overseeing the trafficking and often smuggling himself.

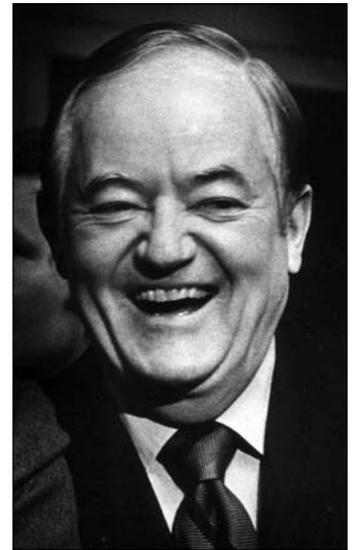
The one American politician who did try to make some effort to expose the Lansky syndicate was Tennessee populist Sen. Estes Kefauver.

The televised hearings of Kefauver’s widely-publicized and hotly controversial 1950 Senate inquiry into nationwide organized crime—a virtual traveling spectacle holding hearings in cities across the country—was one of the major events in the early history of television, capturing large and enthusiastic audiences that gathered to watch televised testimony by major mob figures—Lansky among them.

Kefauver critics later noted—quite correctly—that Kefauver’s hearings ignored some gambling kingpins and crime syndicates in his home state that were friendly to Kefauver, but—on the whole—Kefauver’s efforts to expose organized crime were a genuine contribution to a little-understood but very prevalent factor in American life that had a direct impact on American political and economic affairs. Until then, perhaps, few Americans had realized how deeply organized crime had found roots in everyday life.

Although Kefauver liked to gamble himself, he frankly told Lansky to his face that he didn’t want “you people” running gambling. What “you people” meant is up to interpretation: Lansky later claimed that Kefauver meant Jews, although Kefauver could have just as easily meant that he didn’t want criminals running gambling.

However, when Kefauver made a spirited bid for the 1952 Democratic presidential nomination, Lansky’s political friends inside the Democratic Party struck back and denied Kefauver the nod at the party’s national convention.



Although Sen. Estes Kefauver (D-Tenn.) was a gambler, but he took his much-publicized inquiry into organized crime in America quite seriously and offended Meyer Lansky and the crime syndicate in the process. When Kefauver made a strong bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1952, a number of politicians who had been on the receiving end of money and favors from the Lansky syndicate—notable among them a young Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.)—went to great lengths to destroy Kefauver’s candidacy.

Roger Morris notes that “Only afterward would it be known how much these men who now turned on Kefauver owed their own political fortunes to the same forces he had dared or happened to expose and they officially deplored as well.”

Of particular note is one of those who played a part in sabotaging Kefauver on behalf of the Lansky syndicate: then-Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.), the former mayor of Minneapolis and later vice president of the United States (1965-1969) and Democratic presidential candidate in 1968.

Although Humphrey called himself a “crime buster,” the truth is that the Jewish crime syndicate thrived in Minneapolis during Humphrey’s tenure as mayor. Lansky’s chief Minneapolis partner—one Isadore Blumenfeld, popularly known as “Kid Cann”—was one of Humphrey’s financial benefactors.

Roger Morris points out that “over his career” Humphrey would “accept generous campaign financing from Meyer Lansky and others like him”—a point that those who like to remember Humphrey as a “crusading liberal” might prefer to forget. Actually, Humphrey’s Jewish mob ties were quite intimate. When in 1965 Humphrey stood on the steps of the Capitol and took the oath of office as vice president of the United States—before a nationwide audience of television views—few people knew that the man who held the Bible for Humphrey was Fred Gates, described by Morris as Humphrey’s “old patron, Minneapolis vice lord Fred Gates.” ❖

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