

Fifty years investigating institutional corruption and organized crime: an interview with Selwyn Raab

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Abstract This email interview with Selwyn Raab was conducted during 2014. It discusses Raab's background, influences, career and current thinking and activities from his experiences as a student journalist during the 1950s through to his establishment as one of America's foremost investigative journalists. During the 1960s he played an important role in exposing the fabricated evidence surrounding the convictions of George Whitmore Jr. and the top boxer, Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, in two prominent murder cases. He worked for *The New York World-Telegram and The Sun* and later for *The New York Times* and a number of television stations. In addition to his newspaper and broadcasting career, Raab has also published several books. The first of these was *Justice in the Back Room* (1967) which covers the Wylie-Hoffert ("Career Girls") murders of 1963 and the corruption surrounding the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of George Whitmore Jr. for these crimes. The book formed the basis for the CBS television series *Kojak*. In 1994 he co-wrote *Mob Lawyer* with Frank Ragano—a lawyer who represented, among others, Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa and mafiosi Santo Trafficante. In 2006 Raab's history of New York's mafia families was published—*Five Families: The Rise, Decline, and Resurgence of America's Most Powerful Mafia Empires*.

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Michael Woodiwiss: Can you start by explaining a little about your upbringing and where you were raised?

Selwyn Raab: I belong to a generation known as "Depression Babies" born in 1934 in the depths of America's Great Economic Depression. I grew up in New York's Lower East Side, long a working class neighborhood in downtown Manhattan among a mixture of Jewish, Italian, Irish and Puerto Rican first and second generation immigrant

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families. The environment was heavily influenced by the Depression's hardships that affected almost all families and the patriotic upsurge of World War II.

Michael Woodiwiss: Your early experience as a student at City College of New York brought you into conflict with the university's authorities. Can you describe the experience and what lessons you learnt from it?

Selwyn Raab: City College—CCNY—was a tuition-free, scholarship institution that prided itself in being known as “The Harvard for the Poor” with an enviable record of producing Nobel prize winners in the sciences and arts. I attended the college in the early 1950s at the height of Senator Joe McCarthy's unprecedented mania against leftists and liberals. The CCNY administration, extremely sensitive to its reputation as a hotbed of student radicalism, and widespread knowledge that Julius Rosenberg, the “Atomic Bomb Spy,” was an alumnus launched a crackdown against faculty members who had declined to testify before various legislative committees about their political leanings. The administration also imposed restrictions that discouraged students from joining controversial campus political clubs. I was an editor on a student newspaper, *Observation Post*, that was viewed by college officials as critical of the administration's policies. I was suspended twice from classes and participation on the newspaper. The first episode was for an editorial denouncing an attempt to force the newspaper to discontinue independent publishing and merge with another student publication, supposedly to save college funds. The second suspension resulted from an editorial that I wrote, entitled, “Jumping On The Bandwagon,” criticizing the school's president for praising the dismissal of several faculty members who had cited The Fifth Amendment in refusing to testify before legislative committees investigating suspected Communist teachers.

At the time, I realized the risks I was taking at later journalism jobs but I was naive enough to believe that Academic Freedom and Freedom of the Press meant that faculty members and students should have the right to express political views regardless of how objectionable they might be to conventional political attitudes. Ironically, I was largely influenced by several CCNY faculty members who had the courage to speak out against the administration's policies and by the strong positions taken by the American Civil Liberties Union and other liberal-minded groups.

Michael Woodiwiss: Who were your main influences as a young journalist? How did your working methods develop?

Selwyn Raab: As a high school student I was impressed by Lincoln Steffens's autobiography about journalists exposing political corruption and by the careers of the early 19th century muckrakers, especially Upton Sinclair, and by the French author Emil Zola. Another important figure was A.J. Liebling's “Wayward Press” columns in *The New Yorker* and his books on journalism and his reporting techniques. Even if I had wanted to attend graduate “Journalism School” I lacked the funds for tuition and I was eager after graduating college for practical experience as a working reporter. In effect, I learned on the job how to dig up facts, the art of probing interviews and the necessity of persistence in chasing important stories, regardless of the obstacles. Good journalism and good writing are instinctive arts that are impossible to be taught in postgraduate and theoretical classes.

Michael Woodiwiss: As I understand it your first main area of expertise was in the institutional corruption that resulted in such miscarriages of justice as the cases of George Whitmore Jr. and Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter. What are your reflections on the

relationship between the media and law enforcement and criminal justice systems in the United States?

Selwyn Raab: In my early days as a reporter in the 1950s and 1960s, even the most obtuse observer assigned to cover the police, the prosecutors and the courts in New York and New Jersey was aware of the racial injustices and double standards that permeated the criminal justice systems. At that time, most newspapers and television news channels—with rare exceptions—declined to expose police and prosecutorial corruption or misdeeds. The rationale was that investigative journalism was expensive, corruption stories were difficult to document and failed to attract audiences. Another factor was that news organizations relied on the police, prosecutors and government officials for inside information and editors and publishers feared antagonizing their traditional news sources.

Michael Woodiwiss: When and why did you first become interested in mafia organized crime?

Selwyn Raab: Growing up in Manhattan's Lower East Side, adjacent to Little Italy, gave me an early, although cursory, introduction to the Mafia's culture. Even as a boy, through Italian-American friends on the streets and in school, the Mafia's importance was evident. For the most part, however, at that time in the 1940s and 1950s, the prevailing view in the Italian and mixed neighborhoods was that the Mafia was essentially a group of local criminals whose main interest was benign gambling—running card games, the daily “numbers” or lottery bets and bookmaking on sporting events. And because gambling was also part of the fabric of other prominent ethnic groups, the Irish and Jews, the Mafia was viewed by most residents as simply a non-violent accepted aspect of life on The Lower East Side. In no manner, were the Mafia operations pictured as threats to non-Italians. From conversations with Italian teenagers and adult neighbors, it was evident that the “made guys” were admired and envied as success stories. My Italian friends and school colleagues considered the Mafia recruits as models for being tougher, smarter and more courageous in teenage turf wars for dominance in street fights and in baseball, football, basketball and other games. It is safe to say that while the Italians in New York had a criminal element known as the Mafia, the Jews and the Irish had similar criminal organizations or gangs and Italian mobsters were considered no more threatening to law-abiding residents than other ethnic predators.

My youthful, innocent eyes were quickly opened as a newspaper reporter in New York in the 1960s. Digging underneath the stones on almost every important story uncovered a dangerous Mafia angle. Many of New York's vital industries—construction, garbage removal, the Garment Center, the major meat and fish market operations—were controlled or dominated by five entrenched Cosa Nostra families, often through infiltration of labor unions, usually by heavy-handed violence. Besides white-collar crimes, there were the old money generating standbys: illegal gambling, narcotics trafficking, extortions of small and large businesses. Immunity for most kingpins and their key operators came through protection payoffs to police. Similarly, crackdowns were averted by campaign contributions and support to compliant politicians. The backroom political deals corrupted the criminal justice system through the election of judges who could be bought off by “connected” mob defense lawyers. It was clear, even to a young reporter, that in the 1960s, the Cosa Nostra in New York was a thriving, multi-million dollar enterprise. Law-enforcement agencies hardly impeded the

Mafia and the press was equally negligent. Editors were reluctant to undertake complex investigations of the mob's harmful effects on the city's economy and work force. They portrayed the Mafia as simply another colorful aspect of the area's life style and generally limited coverage of organized crime to unavoidable stories, the rare arrest of a major mobster and internal murders.

It took perseverance and by scrupulously documenting the economic implications of the Mafia, I got numerous television stories broadcast and later reported in *The New York Times*.

Michael Woodiwiss: What authors and/or interviewees would you describe as particularly influential on the development of your thinking on organized crime?

Selwyn Raab: When I began seriously researching America's Mafia in the 1960s I soon learned to rely more on eyeball to eyeball conversations with experienced detectives and a handful of "made men" and "wanabees" than with the views of academic researchers. Fortunately, I was able to plumb the historical knowledge of New York City detectives with extensive knowledge, dating back decades, especially Ralph Salerno and Remo Franceschini. These two veterans were especially helpful in explaining their frustrations over the indifference shown by the city's police officials and federal agencies—especially the FBI—in refusing to tackle the mob until the 1980s. I was also helped in New Jersey by organized crime intelligence experts in the State Police Department, Frederick Martens, (who later was the executive director of the Pennsylvania Crime Commission) and Justin Dintino. Contacts with prosecutors and investigators in Italy were essential in understanding the historical links and sociological roots of the Sicilian and American Mafia "borgatas" or families.

Other insight on the culture and day-to-day life styles and attitudes of American mafiosi were gleaned from trial transcripts and from listening to electronic eavesdropping tapes of unguarded conversations by mobsters.

Probably my biggest breakthroughs in penetrating the collective mindsets of Mafia bosses and their troops came from three individuals with first-hand insight.

1: Frank Ragano was a Florida based lawyer who for decades represented and befriended Santo Trafficante, the Florida Mafia grandee. Additionally, Ragano defended and was close to other mobsters, including Carlos Marcello, the Louisiana Mafia boss. Ragano played a key role for southern mob titans as an admitted courier in deals between Trafficante and Jimmy Hoffa, the corrupt Teamsters' union leader. I spent two years collaborating with Ragano on publishing *Mob Lawyer*, his revelations about associations with mobsters from 1950s to the 1990s.

2: Pellegrino "Butcher Boy" Masselli, was a Genovese Family soldier in New York, who confidentially confided with me on his experiences. The rare cooperation by an active Mafia player stemmed from what Masselli considered my "fairness" in reporting on a criminal trial in which he was acquitted.

3: Anthony "Tumac" Accetturo, the former capo of the Lucchese's Family's operations in New Jersey. After being marked for death by new leaders in the family, Accetturo became a prosecution witness in the 1990s. After defecting, Accetturo agreed to be interviewed and provide his rationale for having joined the Mafia and later denouncing it. He provided extraordinary accounts and insights of prospering and surviving in the Lucchese family and how the gang functioned during the Mafia's "golden years" from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Michael Woodiwiss: The idea that Lucky Luciano centralized the Mafia has been discredited by a number of sources, such as Alan Block, *East Side West Side: Organizing Crime in New York, 1930–1950*, (1979) and David Critchley, *The Origin of Organized Crime in America: The New York City Mafia, 1891–1931* (2009). Nonetheless, Joseph Bonanno in his book *A Man of Honor: The Autobiography of Joseph Bonanno* (1985) (co-written with Sergio Lalli) speaks about Luciano and his role in the Americanization of the Mafia. As you know, Bonanno was subpoenaed to court by US prosecutor Rudolph Giuliani in 1987 but refused to testify. What are your thoughts on the history of the Mafia based upon government sources the likes of which were the Tom Dewey's who exploited the idea that he had convicted the man who 'Americanized' the Mafia in order to boost his chances for higher office? (Thomas E. Dewey's publicist Hickman Powell was the first to popularize the idea of Luciano as founding father of organized crime in a series of magazine articles and then in a book - *Ninety Times Guilty* (1940). Do you think that government sources are credible "historians" to describe the Mafia's ascent and decline? Are not what the Giuliani's, the Chris Christie's, and other former US Attorney's who rose to political positions have to say simply "political spin" as opposed to credible research?

Selwyn Raab: Confident that Luciano was primarily responsible for creating the framework for the American Mafia in 1931–2. My view is based on conversations with authoritative experts including Ralph Salerno, Remo Franceschini (both veteran NYPD detectives) and other detectives who I interviewed in the 1950s and 60s, who were familiar with events of the 1930s and who had had contacts with mobsters who had been around at the birth of the Commission and the creation of the modern families. Another expert and Mafia historian Howard Abadinsky introduced me in the 1970s to veteran Chicago investigators who supported the theory of Luciano's key role in the early 30s. Skeptical about the views of Giuliani and other recent prosecutors who may have political advancement or self-aggrandizement opinions about past and current aspects of the mob. In my reporting I rely more on street people and street investigators rather than "scholarly" analysts who portray themselves as historians. My research is based on interviews with veteran detectives, mobsters and associates (friends, lawyers and victims) of known Mafiosi and unguarded, bugged conversations of these characters. These sources led me to the conclusion that Luciano could have crowned himself Boss of Bosses. He apparently declined the title in favor of the framework that he devised along with other less dominant bosses at the time. Another supporting block for Luciano's role was provided by Anthony "Tumac" Acceturo, the head of the New Jersey wing of the Lucchese family in the 1980s and 90s. Acceturo's view came from conversations he had in the 1960s and 1970s with Anthony "Ducks" Corallo, then the boss of the Luccheses, and knowledgeable New Jersey mobsters about the Mafia's history. I interviewed Acceturo extensively in the 1990s after he became a government witness. Acceturo was exceptionally bright, had a keen interest in the Mafia's origins and also had been the liaison for many years with Sicilian members who came to the U.S. for various purposes.

Michael Woodiwiss: Do you believe that Luciano was framed as Bonanno claims on that prostitution rap (p.165, *A Man of Honor: The Autobiography of Joseph Bonanno*)?

Selwyn Raab: Luciano profited from the prostitution ring but the evidence against him from questionable "eye-witnesses" was flimsy and probably perjury. Again, Ralph Salerno and other NYPD detectives came to this view based primarily on their

conversations with detectives who investigated the NY Mafia in the 1930s and 1940s. Much of the most damaging prosecution evidence came from a prostitute and a “madam” who claimed they were present when Lucky discussed fees and other mundane matters about the ring. All thought it highly unlikely that a top Mafia “executive” with numerous rackets would concern himself with such nitty gritty. They stressed that the pivotal witnesses made deals with Dewey to escape prison time after they were arrested. I quoted in *Five Families* Dewey’s puzzling remark about authorizing, when he was New York State governor, Luciano’s release as a proper sentence and deportation in 1946 after serving about 10 years. Was Dewey reflecting doubts about the validity of the verdict he had obtained and a minimum sentence of 30 years?

Michael Woodiwiss: Do you agree with Gay Talese’s judgement in his 1972 book on the Bonanno family, *Honor thy Father*, that the Mafia was ‘just a small part of the organized crime industry’?

Selwyn Raab: Talese is dead wrong. The Mafia outlasted other ethnic-based organized groups—the Jews, Irish, Black and Latin American narcotics gangs—and continues to survive as a formidable criminal empire because of its inherent structure. This framework or table of command, modeled on the Sicilian game plan, was installed by Lucky Luciano and the other leaders in the 1930s. The main pillar upholds the concept that the individual is subordinate to the survival of the family. Unlike other ethnic crime groups, there is a succession plan for the replacement of the boss and his lieutenants, and for a national set of regulations overseen by the Commission, the so-called board of directors. Over the decades, rival crime groups disintegrated as soon as the boss or strongman was arrested or died. Witness the collapse of major Jewish gangs, like Dutch Schultz’s in the 1930s and Lepke’s group in the 1940s when their leaders were ‘whacked’ or executed after trial. And the notorious Meyer Lansky and Bugsy Siegel never led formidable units but instead served as valuable for Cosa Nostra chiefs. They carried out orders and Lansky was unable to save Siegel’s life when the bosses decided he had misspent their investments in the first major casino in Las Vegas. The Irish mob organization vanished in the 1930s when Owney Madden, once considered the paramount crime boss in New York, decided to relocate to Hot Springs, Arkansas rather than combat the newly formed Mafia outfits. The black and Latin American drug traffickers come and go without any consistency.

A Mafia asset is its understanding of American culture. From its inception, as a multi-faceted conglomerate, it has never depended on a single crime like other contemporary gangs who rely mainly on drugs or extortion of fellow ethnics for their continued existence and prosperity. The relatively new Russian crime gangs in New York and Florida face the same survival problem of being ad hoc criminals preying mainly on fellow Russian immigrants. The American Mafia thrived because it was a carbon copy of American capitalism and cashed in on numerous possibilities: exploiting labor unions to shake down industries for labor peace; bookmaking and loan sharking by understanding American gambling habits; partnering with Wall Street brokers on stock manipulations; pioneering in internet gambling. In addition to standard predatory crimes, including drug trafficking, robberies and violent shakedowns, the Mafia are masters at diversification, seizing on shifting white-collar opportunities.

Michael Woodiwiss: The Kaufman Commission was appointed in the early 1980s to examine the problem of organized crime and its control. What is your judgment on the Kaufman’s Commission’s work?

Selwyn Raab: As far as I can determine, the Kaufman Commission had zero effect on influencing legislation or investigations.

Michael Woodiwiss: You reported on the Mafia ‘Commission’ trials and those of other mafiosi such as John Gotti and Vincent Gigante. Can you elaborate a little on your understanding of the structure, extent and degree of centralisation of the Mafia/Cosa Nostra?

Selwyn Raab: Testimony at the trials of Mafia bosses in the 1980s and 1990s clearly demonstrated the similar organizational frameworks for individual families and for the Commission. The boss as the supreme leader reigned as an autocrat with absolute power of life and death and the authority to appoint his main “regime” or “administration” subordinates as underboss and consiglieri. The loot from the family’s businesses flowed upward with the boss entitled to a share of almost every crime committed by the crews, led by capos, and composed of inducted soldiers—“made men” and wanabees and associates who worked for the family. The functions of the Commission, made up mainly by representatives of the five New York families—the largest Mafia organizations in the country—were also detailed. The so-called board of directors were empowered to resolve disputes among families and to impose general rules and codes of behavior—dos and dont’s including membership only for men of Italian heritage—for all Mafia families throughout the United States. The formation of the commission in 1931, mainly the inspiration of Lucky Luciano—is a prime example of the Mafia’s distinction from other organized crime groups. It has served as a method of preventing bloody wars between families, arranging profitable alliances between them and in coordinating relations and international criminal deals with Sicilian Mafia families.

Michael Woodiwiss: My understanding is that the 1980s witnessed the beginning of what’s been called ‘the administrative approach to organized crime control’ in New York. Can you comment on the rolling out of this approach to other parts of the city’s economy such as the waste disposal industry, the garment industry, and the Fulton Fish Market?

Selwyn Raab: Rudy Giuliani, the former New York City mayor and high ranking U.S. Justice Department official, deserves credit for implementing the concept of combating the Mafia’s economic interests with an administrative strategy. Giuliani understood that imprisoning high-ranking mobsters who controlled multimillion dollar business assets such as garbage hauling and the Fulton Fish Market were strategically worthless. There might be a temporary pause in the Mafia’s control of these assets but thanks to its replacement policies, another talented mobster would be promoted and moved into the role of the ousted colleague. Searching for long-range success, Giuliani imposed—for the first time in New York—licensing and background checks to determine not only who could operate companies in two mob-infested industries but everyone who worked there. The crackdown, begun in the 1990s, so far has been largely successful in dismantling mob domination at the fish market and the private garbage removal industry. Not only were mobster-affiliated companies ousted but the rules encouraged the entry of companies that previously feared competing because of Mafia threats. The unanswered question is how long will the city maintain these tough sanctions and vigilance. One example of the difficulties of monitoring mob infiltration of legitimate business targets was Giuliani’s failure to impose similar supervision in the construction industry—undoubtedly one of the Mafia’s richest bonanzas in New York.

The politically powerful real estate developers and construction companies lobbied and defeated the plan for background checks and licensing. And the mob, from reliable reports, remains as a player in the billion-dollar construction industry. A major defeat for the reformers.

Michael Woodiwiss: In your opinion are Mafia/Cosa Nostra members still significant in the labor movement, the city government and the local economy of New York City?

Selwyn Raab: Mafia influence has been severely weakened by government crack-downs and court imposed monitoring of unions representing teamsters and construction workers throughout the country. For half a century, alliances with the teamsters and construction workers unions had been two of the mob's strongest bases for pillaging employee welfare funds and for kickbacks from companies in return for guaranteeing labor peace. Nevertheless, these historical links have not been entirely severed in the construction industry in New York. Occasional indictments of union officials and mobsters for "no-show" jobs and corruption are clear signals of the Mafia's continued presence. Moreover, many construction companies that were banned for mob affiliations have simply been reconstituted with former owners replaced by their children or other relatives. To my mind, these ownership changes are distinctions without real change. The Mafia still has its sights set on this lucrative industry and the various unions vital to the industry.

Michael Woodiwiss: The government accounts tend to characterize professionals such as lawyers, bankers and accountants as rather passive 'facilitators' of organized crime. Based on your knowledge of Frank Ragano, a self-confessed 'mob lawyer' and others, does the description 'facilitator' accurately capture their involvement in your opinion?

Selwyn Raab: Blessed with the ability to pay handsomely, the Mafia still has the ability to obtain the best legal and accountant talent to protect its interests. Double standards are a long known aspect of the American criminal justice system. It is a fuzzy ethical area and well-paid lawyers and accountants continue to provide aid to keep mobsters out of legal trouble and to defend them when indicted. Unlike most defendants in American criminal courts, "made men" never rely on public defenders.

Michael Woodiwiss: Since the 1980s, and particularly since 9/11, there seems to have been very little debate over the structure of organized crime and the best means to control it. Any thoughts/comments on this?

Selwyn Raab: The success of RICO—the federal Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organization Act—gave the FBI and the Justice Department the powerful legal tool needed to effectively challenge and undermine the American Mafia. RICO was responsible for eliminating or reducing the Mafia's power in most of its strongholds. But the 9/11 terrorist attacks abruptly changed the scenario. Before 9/11, the Mafia was the FBI's second priority after guarding against Soviet bloc espionage. The mob is now off the main priority list, replaced by terrorism as understandably the nation's most important threat. FBI and local law-enforcement personnel assigned to Mafia investigations have been cut by more than 75 %. The terrorists gave the mobsters a reprieve. Even though many of the Cosa Nostra's lucrative areas are gone or reduced, its perennial bread and butter—bookmaking and loan sharking—remain largely intact and generate millions in loot ever year. Illegal sports gambling and usury continue to thrive, allowing the mobsters to function and survive. The Mafia is severely injured but not fatally.

Michael Woodiwiss: The problems associated with your two main areas of expertise—institutional corruption and organized crime—are still with us. What is your assessment of the US government’s current responses to these problems?

Selwyn Raab: While the government has reduced its vigilance against the Mafia and other organized crime groups, it has increased surveillance over institutional corruption. The real estate “bubble,” the economic recession and distrust of government unleashed criticism over Wall Street and political shenanigans. The prosecutorial spotlight now is on insider trading, banking frauds and political payoffs rather than the latest “boss of bosses” and his criminal empire.

Michael Woodiwiss: You point out in your book with Frank Ragano that Ralph Salerno, who you mention earlier, believes that Vito Genovese was framed by a low level mobster who could not have had access to Genovese (similar to Bonanno’s claim about Luciano). Is it your experience that many mob informants are fed stories by the police and prosecutors that are merely repeated on the witness stand? Does not this then become the law enforcement ideology that governs the official versions of history?

Selwyn Raab: Unfortunately, deals with witnesses—not limited to mob trials—to lie or tailor their testimony in order to gain convictions is all too common in America’s criminal justice system. The use of coerced confessions (note the Central Park Five rape case) and perjured testimony has been standard procedures in many jurisdictions since the Salem witch trials of the 17th century. Investigators, convinced of the guilt of the suspects, rationalize that the ends justify the means. Examples of getting defendants and jail birds to testify falsely in return for lenient sentences are legion in the US.

Michael Woodiwiss: In your book with Ragano, you state that Ragano and other mobsters were elated when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. You state that with Lyndon Johnson becoming President, they believed that Attorney General Robert Kennedy would be fired. Do you believe the Mafia was behind the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and even Robert Kennedy, who may have become the President had Sirhan Sirhan not assassinated him in 1968? What were Ragano’s thoughts on whether Carlos Marcello, Sam Giancana, and/or Santo Trafficante (being the architects of the *Plot To Kill the President* (as RICO author G. Robert Blakey alleges)? Salerno, who you cite as a mob expert, does not agree. Where lies the truth in your opinion?

Selwyn Raab: Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin. Despite Trafficante’s death bed statements to Ragano, Frank eventually concluded that Trafficante probably was boasting and trying to take credit for the murder in a pathological attempt to demonstrate the power of the Mafia. Frank agreed with me that mob leaders wanted JFK eliminated and profited immensely from his death because it ended Bobby Kennedy’s crackdown. Half a century after the assassination, conspiracy theories sell books but there is not one solid fact to support the theory that the Mafia was involved.

Michael Woodiwiss: So who was responsible for the disappearance and obvious murder of Jimmy Hoffa? You suggest in your book with Ragano that Salvatore Provenzano killed Hoffa. How does this comport with Frank Sheeran’s, *I Heard You Paint Houses: The Biggest Hit in Mob History* (2010) representations that the Bufalino Family was involved with the murder of Hoffa?

Selwyn Raab: Sheeran’s supposed involvement, according to the author of the book, has never been substantiated despite the scientific attempt to find blood stains and other evidence in the house where Sheeran said he killed Hoffa. No doubt Sheeran was a hit man. I buy Ragano’s recollections of what Trafficante told him about the

reasons the Mafia wanted Hoffa dead. Ragano believed that Provenzano hated Hoffa, considered him “a loose cannon” who was about to co-author a book exposing Mafia secrets, and campaigned for the Commission to sanction the killing. Even if Sheeran was involved he had no idea where or how the corpse was removed. The most important element was the reasons for Hoffa’s murder and Ragano got an explanation from Trafficante that rings true.

Michael Woodiwiss: You’ve covered more recent cases that demonstrate that the problems associated with organized crime in New York are still very much with us. These include those involving Louis Eppolito and Stephen Caracappa—two New York Police Department detectives who became known as the “Mafia Cops” because of their associations with the Gambino and Lucchese crime families—plus the office of the former District Attorney of Brooklyn, NY, Charles Hynes, and its indictment of an FBI agent, Lindley DeVecchio.¹ Could you provide some insight into these cases?

Selwyn Raab: The DeVecchio indictment stems partly from a bitter dispute between the US Justice Department and Hynes’s office over the Mafia Cops. Hynes and company believed they had uncovered the key evidence and primary witness against the corrupt cops but the glory had gone to federal prosecutors and the FBI. Note that the indictment of DeVecchio came in the middle of the federal trial of the rogue detectives—and the timing was intended to embarrass the FBI and the U.S. Attorney’s office in Brooklyn. Almost all of the alleged evidence against DeVecchio had been introduced in previous federal trials of Colombo family members but the Justice Department had not considered the statements and actions DeVecchio had made to be criminal. From the start, Hynes’s case was tawdry and he was influenced by staff members who felt double crossed by federal prosecutors involved in the Mafia Cops trial and convictions. Hynes’s indictment of a former FBI supervisory agent is a rare public exposure of law-enforcement feuds and competition for public glory. There is no question that Eppolito and Caracappa were guilty of murders on behalf of the Mafia. The evidence was overwhelming.

Michael Woodiwiss: What is your verdict on Hynes and his office?

Hynes’s problem was being in office too long, three decades, relying on an incompetent, ambitious staff dedicated to winning convictions rather than justice. Unlike the UK, New York State prosecutors are elected and often are ambitious for higher office. Hynes, almost from the day he took over as Brooklyn DA, sought more prominent elected positions including campaigns for nomination as the Democrat party candidate for Governor and Attorney General of New York. His record as DA was replete with questionable actions, using his prosecutorial latitude, to ingratiate himself with Jewish and Russian voters in Brooklyn. Convicting an FBI agent would have been an outstanding accomplishment, boosting his prominence and prospects for reelection. Hynes, clouded by resentment against federal officials used his prosecutorial prerogatives to embarrass the FBI and the Justice Department and to exhibit his independence. Remember the line: In the US, “a prosecutor and a jury have the power to indict a ham sandwich.” No doubt Hynes ran an incompetent, overly ambitious office, obsessed with convictions at any price.

Michael Woodiwiss: Earlier in the interview, you cite the George Whitmore case and the Rubin Carter case. Both involved the police and prosecutors framing innocent

¹ The charges against DeVecchio were dismissed in 2007.

men. Whitmore, through a false confession; Carter with an informant who was not credible and evidence being with-held by the prosecutor. Was corruption of this sort widespread in the 40's, 50's, 60's and even up till now as we witnessed with the Hynes cases or are these merely aberrations in the American criminal justice system? What did you encounter when you re-investigated the Whitmore case? Did the police or prosecutors challenge you or discredit you? Or when you confronted the police and prosecutors with the false evidence that convicted Carter? Were you ever in fear of being framed by the police or even killed?

Selwyn Raab: In the Whitmore case, he was confronted by a morass of indictments arising from two prosecutorial jurisdictions, Manhattan and Brooklyn, which compromised the proper handling of his defense. Frank Hogan, the Manhattan DA at the time, was a legendary figure, widely regarded as running the most efficient and incorruptible prosecutorial office in the country. When I uncovered evidence of Whitmore's alibi in the Manhattan case involving the notorious and widely publicized murders of two young women from fairly prominent families (known as "The Career Girl Murders") the top editor of my newspaper, *The New York World-Telegram and the Sun*, became hesitant about how prominently to run the stories. He acknowledged being swayed by personal calls from Hogan and concern that I had reported another earlier story critical of Hogan's office in a police brutality case—which suggested that Hogan's office had refused to seek an indictment of a drunk detective shooting an innocent young man the detective mistook for a robbery suspect. Thus, the editor downplayed the Whitmore alibi story, running stories buried in the back pages, until the case against him exploded when the real killer was arrested. My paper then tried to take credit for exonerating Whitmore, citing my stories. Except for being persona non grata with Hogan's office for years afterward there were no threats or abuse. Hogan, however, intervened with *Harper's Magazine*, a highly respected national publication, to kill a critical story by me about Hogan's role in the case. The *Harpers* incident was another example of Hogan's influence and the awe that he exerted at the time. To counter skeptics, Hogan maintained that his aides were responsible for clearing Whitmore. I refuted that contention in my book, *Justice in the Back Room* by demonstrating how Hogan's long silence and cover up of Whitmore's alibi led to Whitmore's wrong convictions in Brooklyn for attempted rape and a near conviction on false charges of murder. For Whitmore, three coerced confessions destroyed his life and resulted in imprisonment for nine years.

The DA and prosecutors in the Brooklyn DA's office always were polite and respectful despite critical stories. There were verbal insults from detectives involved in obtaining Whitmore's false confessions but I never felt threatened.

In the Carter case, the chief detective involved in the murder indictments once reached for his gun when I interviewed him, remarking that if he had a heart attack there might be another simultaneous death. He then unleashed a volley of epithets concerning me and *The New York Times*, where I was then a reporter. Perhaps, I was too trusting and confident but I was unconcerned and left his office. Who would kill a reporter, conducting an interview, in the Passaic County prosecutor's office? The prosecutor, himself, was much more venal, subpoenaing me as a witness, to prevent me from covering Carter's last trial. Later, the same prosecutor publicly threatened me with possible indictment for obstruction of justice because of my attempts to interview witnesses who recanted their identifications of Carter and his co-defendant, John Artis,

as the black gunmen who killed three whites in what the prosecution suggested was a racially motivated crime.

Michael Woodiwiss: Your book *Five Families* makes a compelling case for the significant presence of the Mafia in American politics. Was it as powerful throughout America as it was in New York City? Or is much of this an American legend that has become an historical fact?

Selwyn Raab: In the Mafia's golden era from the 1930s to the 1980s, the Mafia's unseen power was extensive in many cities besides New York. The mob's behind-the-scenes influence through financial contributions and voter turnout, were substantial. Political machines, mainly Democrats, in big cities, including New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Kansas City, Providence, Cleveland, Detroit, New Orleans, Tampa and the state of Nevada, were beholden to mobsters and families. One electrifying example: mayoral candidates and judges in New York seeking Frank Costello's private endorsement—and almost certain election—for Democrat party nominations in New York. Difficult to forget JFK's father quietly asking Mafia acquaintances to support his son in the 1960 campaign.

Michael Woodiwiss: In conclusion, would you agree that there has been much written about organized crime and the Mafia that historically is incorrect and represents political and bureaucratic agendas that are designed to propel the propagators to higher office?

Selwyn Raab: History is always subject to interpretations and because the Mafia for the most part has been a secret organization, the field is ripe with inaccuracies, distortions and self-serving exaggerations. What a shock? Politicians, especially prosecutors, running for higher office by uncovering the sins and depredations of organized-crime leaders and boasting about it. Advice to journalists and historians in reporting and writing about the Mafia—concentrate on documented records, secretly recorded conversations and, if possible, multiple-sourced recollections.

Selected Publications of Selwyn Raab

Justice in the Back Room (World Publishing Company, 1967)

Mob Lawyer (with Frank Ragano) (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994)

Five Families: The Rise, Decline, and Resurgence of America's Most Powerful Mafia Empires (Thomas Dunne Books, 2005)