

Bobby Kennedy's War on the Mob

A long overdue inside look at RFK's crackdown on organized crime

BY ANTHONY R. DOLAN

Perfect Villains, Imperfect Heroes: Robert F. Kennedy's War Against Organized Crime

Ronald Goldfarb, *Random House*, \$25

In 1960, the arrest of George Ratterman in a Newport, Kentucky bordello made national news. A reform candidate for sheriff in a town notorious for its corruption, Ratterman claimed the arrest was a set-up. Still in his twenties and a lawyer in the Kennedy Justice Department's organized crime section, Ronald Goldfarb became the lead prosecutor in the government case against those accused of drugging and framing Ratterman—an effort that spun out to include a more general effort to clean up Newport.

Towards the end of his work in the town, an elderly woman stopped the federal attorney in the street: "You're the prosecutor of the Ratterman case, Mr. Goldfarb, aren't you?" she asked. "Well, I want you to know, Mr. Goldfarb, that I've lived in Campbell County for 75 years and we good people here go to bed each night thanking God for sending us a good Christian boy like you to clean things up."

Goldfarb's experience in Newport is two chapters in this important, engrossing, chronicle of the Justice Department's crackdown on organized crime in the early 1960s. But in addition to a brief history of Robert Kennedy's war on the mob, the legal issues it raised, and the obstacles overcome, the book offers something else: Not infrequently, à la the Newport lady, we get a hoot. I laughed out loud when the Kennedy prosecutors get a mafioso for violating the Migratory Bird Act. (With few federal racketeering laws, they had to be imaginative.) And Robert Kennedy's prodigious wit is ev-

erywhere—what he said when journalist Charlie Bartlett told him not to become Attorney General; how he teased his assistant Henry Petersen; the times he complained about the number of Democrats his department was indicting.

In his memorable RFK biography, Arthur Schlesinger shows a breathless awe at Kennedy's humor. "He made jokes," he writes, with a sense of wonder not unlike a Ukrainian peasant seeing his first tractor. Clearly, Arthur did not grow up in an Irish household. Bobby did though and a gift for mirth was essential to his make-up—something Goldfarb, who grew up in a Jewish household (almost as good), knows and uses to his advantage.

Goldfarb also gives readers something unexpected—a portrait of the younger Kennedy that even those well-versed in the RFK literature will find intriguing. As good an account as possible is here of the family back-and-forth over Bobby's appointment to Justice; so too are glimpses into the interior of the relationship between brother and president. And we get into meetings in the attorney general's office for a look at the problems—the bureaucratic infighting, the timid officials—that went with launching the first serious effort to undo the American mafia.

But if glimpses into the Kennedy wit and will are there, so is the flipside. There are the personal premonitions of tragedy and a vivid, moving description of the afternoon at Hickory Hill when the news came in from Dallas. Most of all, there are vivid, moving anecdotes that explain the affection, indeed, the love those who worked for

Anthony R. Dolan, former chief speechwriter for President Reagan, won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of organized crime and political corruption.

Kennedy had for him. Bessie Davis's story is one example. A long time Justice clerical worker, she had gone unnoticed by five of Kennedy's predecessors. When he did her one of his kindnesses, she wrote him a note: "This is what sets you apart from other men; you have a heart and you use it."

There is also an emotional meeting between Kennedy and Gary, Indiana Mayor George Cacheris, a loyal supporter and the administration's ambassador-designee to Greece whom the Kennedy prosecutors were about to ruin with an indictment. And there is Bobby's backchannel efforts to console Congressman Eugene Keough as Justice indicts his brother.

The Kennedy portrait is captivating, even though it is incidental to Goldfarb's larger purposes. Describing himself as a New Yorker moving to Alexandria, Virginia where it is hard to get a bagel or watch the Yankees, Goldfarb recounts engagingly his accidental hiring into the youth brigade at Justice and observes "somebody was always handing out cigars, arriving at work red-eyed after a long vigil in a maternity ward." It's a good analogy for the Kennedy team's fertility in other areas, especially indicting and prosecuting gangsters.

The personal stuff, though, is a narrative vehicle, a way of getting at the real business of the book. Sometimes obscured by the attention given other Kennedy-era episodes like the civil rights struggle or the missile crisis, Robert Kennedy's attack on organized crime, which, next to slavery may well have been America's worst social evil, at last gets the attention it deserves. In seeing the extraordinary power of the mob and its immunity from justice, Robert Kennedy was quite right in saying flatly, "Either we are going to be successful or they are going to have the country." We can be grateful Goldfarb has recorded the names and deeds of those like Walter Sheridan, Bob Blakey, Clark Mollenhoff and many others who joined Kennedy in this struggle against our own evil empire. And much of it, from San Giancana's doings to why Hollywood didn't make a movie of Kennedy's exposé of labor racketeering, *The Enemy Within*, also seems new.

Some complaints, relatively minor, should be noted. Goldfarb engages in the annoying, all-too-common practice of reconstructing quotes from decades ago. The treatment of J. Edgar Hoover, that great liberal bugaboo, is also too simple, too

dismissive; one gets tired of hearing that Hoover and his G-men weren't doing much about the mob, then reading a few pages later about the exploits of FBI agents in the fifties and sixties. Finally, Goldfarb talks almost regrettably about Robert Kennedy as Cold Warrior, not realizing RFK's anti-communist and anti-mafia inclinations had the same origins: a moral vision that permitted him to recognize institutionalized evil when he saw it and a generous anger that drove him to seek its destruction.

Curiously, the Republican Ronald Reagan was the next leader to share these concerns. Working in the White House, I had the privilege of participating in this effort. Prior to that, as a reporter in Stamford, Connecticut, I had investigated organized crime and municipal corruption and was startled by the federal government's indifference to the web of bribery and mob influence in six city departments. One police force, besides running guns to Northern Ireland, also had a commander who took \$1,800 a week in mob payoffs and a deputy commander who ran the largest drug ring in Southern Connecticut out of headquarters. The point was that Stamford's story was not at all unusual; too many American cities and towns had seen such traumas.

Reagan launched "the most intensive onslaught against organized crime since Bobby Kennedy had taken on the mob in the early 60s," author John Davis noted in a recent history of the Gambino crime family. Davis was not the only one to make the connection. On entering office, Reagan moved quickly to hold a Rose Garden ceremony—something the Carter administration had declined to do—for the formal presentation of a special Congressional Gold Medal to Robert Kennedy's family. In his remarks that day, Reagan emphasized RFK's war on organized crime. In later speeches, Reagan repeated his call to finish the work begun by Robert Kennedy and others.

For some Kennedy loyalists, of course, it may be a source of irony or even annoyance that those who could hardly be called his political heirs or supporters carried on a struggle he was singularly identified with. Yet for those of us who were part of that effort, who had read once as students *The Enemy Within* and been inspired, and remembered, it only seemed a tribute to a man and legacy that went beyond easy political boundaries or partisan categories. □

The Impoverished Debate on Poverty

Herbert Gans's book would take liberals in the wrong direction in the welfare debate

BY DANTE RAMOS

The War Against the Poor

Herbert J. Gans, *Basic Books*, \$22

When Phil Gramm visited Louisiana this past July, he stopped off in Metairie, a well-appointed white-flight suburb of New Orleans, to woo local Republicans and plug a tough welfare-reform bill. He drew cheers with his now-familiar soundbite: Welfare recipients should get out of the wagon and help the rest of us pull.

For most journalists and public policy analysts, speeches like Gramm's are just political boilerplate. Yet Herbert J. Gans imputes much darker motives to politicians who attack welfare dependency. In *The War Against the Poor*, Gans interprets such attacks as part of a centuries-long conspiracy to demonize the poor and keep them from improving their situation.

Gans, an eminent Columbia University sociologist, has chosen his title and central metaphor to tweak the War on Poverty. He also has chosen it to claim a patch of moral high ground in the current welfare-reform debate. After all, a politician who would actively plot against poor people seems much more disreputable than one who merely argues that public aid erodes work incentives. And, in truth, Gans's style of attack on welfare critics has been a standard device in social policy debates for more than three decades. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, reviled as a racist in the late 1960s for his report on the black family, was the first victim.

Hysteria is a terrible way to defend welfare programs—especially when other defenses would be more sensible and more effective. Take Gramm's stump speech, for example. He depends implicitly on at least two specious propositions: All poor

families are able to help pull the wagon, and welfare is a bigger drain on the budget than corporate subsidies, the mortgage-interest tax deduction, freeloading cattle ranchers and so on. Unless these issues are engaged, defenders of anti-poverty programs will be powerless in the face of treacly anecdotes about Gramm's once-destitute momma, who always told young Phil that welfare checks never got anyone out of poverty. You can hear the voters now: "Gramm's not evil. He's just folksy!"

Gans does make some strong points. Most employers are *not* clamoring for new workers. Welfare recipients *are* less morally suspect than defense contractors who grossly overbill the government. And some critics of welfare—Gramm comes to mind—who insist they want to *help* the poor are very clearly disingenuous.

It's also quite obvious that the biggest difference between poor people and rich people is money—not some weird disdain for social norms. As Gans writes, "There are no middle class muggers." Welfare critics are often right for emphasizing the role values play in perpetuating poverty. But they too seldom acknowledge the simple truth that it's easier to devote attention to education and child rearing if you have some financial security.

Unfortunately, Gans is much less convincing on the central thesis of his book—that conservative critics of welfare are waging a "war." If people are plotting a campaign against the poor, Gans needs to document the battles, body counts and strategy meetings. Instead, he talks only about name-calling. Labels such as "welfare dependent," "substance abusers," and "the homeless," he says, char-

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