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## ***Mob Lawyer* by Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Mob Lawyer*. By Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab. Foreword by Nicholas Pileggi. New York. 1994. Charles Scribner's Sons. 372 pp. Index. Cloth. \$22.00.

Reading books about organized crime poses difficulties for someone studying history. Mobsters are noted for their anecdotal information, sometimes painting sensational pictures of their endeavors and lending little in the way of verifiable evidence for a topic important in historical discourse. Nevertheless, organized crime is an indelible fact of life for many cities in the United States.

Tampa has very seldom been mentioned in either journalistic or historical mob literature, but 1994 changed that with the publication of *Mob Lawyer*. When Tampa attorney Frank Ragano's memoir and narrative about organized crime reached bookshelves across the country, a new and alternative awareness of Florida life became possible.

In reading attorney Frank Ragano's book, one is haunted by the same caveat regarding story credibility learned from studying the Mafia through other books. However, Ragano's story is different. It has surprising credibility and won an endorsement from no less an authority on organized crime than former Justice Department and House Select Committee on Assassinations legal counsel Robert Blakey. Blakey years ago aptly pointed Ragano out as a "house counsel to organized crime figures." Ragano's book also received praise from several legal journals such as the *New York Law Review*.

Among Ragano's clients was former Tampa mob boss Santo Trafficante whose crime empire extended from Tampa to Miami and pre-Castro Havana. Ragano traces Trafficante's ascension into national organized crime stature and mentions investigations such as the Kefauver committee in the early 1950s, the McClellan committee, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy's forays into organized crime which incensed Trafficante and two of his proteges, New Orleans crime boss Carlos Marcello and Teamster Union President Jimmy Hoffa. Ragano also served as Hoffa's lawyer. Tampa's image was not spared by the crime investigations. One unflattering early 1950s national magazine article described the cigar city as "Hellhole of the Gulf Coast."

Ragano gives the reader a bird's-eye view of Tampa, covering the Italian-American lawyer's childhood in Ybor City, his early days as an attorney and law clerk in Tallahassee, and his entrance into private practice in Tampa. Ragano's own Ybor City neighborhood and other Tampa locations provide backdrops throughout the book. Included in his narrative are several Tampa landmarks. He and his all important client Santo Trafficante dined at the Columbia Restaurant, the Tampa Terrace Hotel, and the International Inn. Also introduced are local law enforcement officers such as Sheriff Ed Blackburn who campaigned against organized crime.

One the most important and interesting parts of *Mob Lawyer* is Ragano's explanation of Trafficante's status in the world of organized crime. Once thought to be just a small-time gambler and mobster strictly involved with the bolita rackets in Tampa, Trafficante exercised power and influence that were grossly underestimated, according to Ragano. Trafficante's

connections to Cuban exiles and the CIA attest to this. Also telling are Trafficante's ties to other organized crime figures in New York and the extensiveness of the Tampa don's crime empire.

Another famous client Ragano discusses is Teamster Union head Jimmy Hoffa. Ragano attributes his national reputation as a criminal lawyer to the celebrity of this client. His narrative on several key Hoffa-related cases is engaging, and Ragano describes a world of illegally skimmed Teamster pension funds, and the trials and investigations related to them. One gets the feeling that this is what organized crime is really about when reading these sometimes tedious accounts.

If there is any weakness in this book, it is the description of Santo Trafficante's activities related to the so-called Mafia/CIA plots to eliminate Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Ragano claims Trafficante worked for the CIA through an intermediary. However, CIA documents from a 1993 National Archives release mention Santo Trafficante pointedly as "Joe the courier." Trafficante and mob figures from Los Angeles and Chicago were utilized by the CIA for the elimination of Castro.



**Frank Ragano (right) and Jimmy Hoffa.**

*Mob Lawyer* also contains information about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that the assassination was probably a conspiracy accomplished by organized crime. The chief counsel for committee, Robert Blakey, went even further by referring to the organized crime aspect of Kennedy's murder as an "historical fact." Blakey named three of Frank Ragano's clients and associates (Trafficante, Marcello, and Hoffa) as the most likely to have carried out the plot. *Mob Lawyer* touches upon conversations Ragano and Trafficante had related to these allegations.

A study into the Kennedy assassination is a highly speculative exercise with much government information still inaccessible and much other information anecdotal. Problems arising for students of the assassination parallel those experienced by students of organized crime. *Mob Lawyer* should be read carefully and critically, but Ragano's word should not be dismissed, even though much of what he says has not been proven. The book still serves as a landmark for local history and some of its lesser known aspects.

Frank DeBenedictis