

2/14/96 Hey. Harold - who's he? - your

3/10/96 NYT mob Mob Hit?

A former Federal prosecutor tells why he thinks the Mafia killed J.F.K.

PERFECT VILLAINS, IMPERFECT HEROES

Robert F. Kennedy's War
Against Organized Crime.
By Ronald Goldfarb.
Illustrated. 357 pp. New York:
Random House. \$26.

By Selwyn Raab

FOR half a century one of the nation's premier growth industries was the Mafia. Virtually ignored by Federal and local law-enforcement agencies, America's adaptive mobsters always found new commercial enterprises to enrich themselves. When Prohibition ended in 1933, the dons and godfathers blithely switched from bootlegging into even more lavish rackets: prostitution, gambling, loan-sharking, labor racketeering and narcotics trafficking, to name just a few.

But the Mafia's golden era was disturbed when John F. Kennedy entered the White

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House in 1961. Kennedy surprisingly appointed his brother, Robert, as United States Attorney General, and fighting the mob became Robert Kennedy's top priority, perhaps bordering on an obsession.

One of the first prosecutors to enlist in Robert Kennedy's campaign was Ronald Goldfarb, who believes that the crusade may have led to a tragic casualty: in "Perfect Villains, Imperfect Heroes," Mr. Goldfarb, now a Washington lawyer, concludes there is strong probability that leading mobsters plotted the assassination of President Kennedy. (I should clarify a possible conflict of interest here: in presenting his theory, Mr. Goldfarb cites disclosures and views expressed in "Mob Lawyer," a book I wrote in 1994 with Frank Ragano, the lawyer who represented two major mob bosses and the corrupt Teamsters' Union chief, James R. Hoffa.)

Mr. Goldfarb was a 27-year-old rookie lawyer when he landed a prize job in 1961 on Robert Kennedy's nascent Organized Crime and Racketeering Section. Using new tactics, Kennedy

began his assault on the mob by establishing elite investigative units that coordinated the efforts of Federal law-enforcement agencies. Because of his background as a counsel to Senate investigation committees, Mr. Goldfarb asserts, Kennedy understood, as few other officials did at the time, the true nature of the mob. It was not a loosely knit band of nonviolent criminals who served the public's harmless appetite for gambling and casino flings. It was, on the contrary, an enormously powerful organization that threatened the nation's well-being.

After three years of trial and error, Mr. Goldfarb says, Kennedy's strategy was beginning to reap results and convictions. But the death of President Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, and the ascension of Lyndon B. Johnson to the White House, signaled the end of Robert Kennedy's tenure at the Justice Department.

Mr. Goldfarb's account of how Robert Kennedy laid the groundwork for future successful campaigns against the Mafia is occasionally repetitious, and it is laced with minor historical errors. (He misspells Santo Trafficante's first name and mistakenly places Frank Ragano at an infamous mob meeting in Queens.) But his analysis implicating prominent mobsters in John F. Kennedy's assassination is engrossing.

There is abundant evidence from wiretaps, bugs and witnesses, Mr. Goldfarb maintains, to demonstrate that several dons were bent on revenge, convinced they had been double-crossed by the Kennedy Administration after surreptitiously supporting John Kennedy in the 1960 Presidential election and aiding the C.I.A. in conspiracies to kill Fidel Castro. Instead of rewarding the godfathers, Mr. Goldfarb tells us, the Kennedys enraged them by cracking down on their rackets

and by prosecuting Hoffa, who was an important source of illegal wealth for many mobsters.

Mr. Goldfarb concedes that the passage of time may have made it impossible to construct an ironclad case that the Mafia used Lee Harvey Oswald or someone else to fire the fatal shots. But, he sums up: "There is a haunting credibility to the theory that our organized crime drive prompted a plan to strike back at the Kennedy brothers, and that Robert Kennedy went to his grave at least wondering whether — and perhaps believing — there was a real connection between the plan and his brother's assassination." □