

**Book World****RFK's Anti-Crime Time****PERFECT VILLAINS, IMPERFECT HEROES****Robert F. Kennedy's War Against Organized Crime**

By Ronald Goldfarb

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By Robert Sherrill

Ronald Goldfarb, a Washington lawyer, literary agent and filmmaker, says he set out to write a book only about Attorney General Robert Kennedy's dramatic revival of the Justice Department's organized-crime division. He says he did not intend to include a theory about the Kennedy assassinations—who did them and why.

But in fact most of "Perfect Villains, Imperfect Heroes" seems constructed for the very purpose of supporting an assassination theory, which Goldfarb gives us at the end. Held by many others, including investigators for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, the theory is a variation on the Faust legend: John and Robert Kennedy took favors from the Devil, who expected their souls in return. They rejected the deal, so he killed them.

In more worldly terms, the theory goes like this: Old man Joe Kennedy, while building the family fortune by rumrunning during Prohibition, had worked closely with the mob and owed it plenty of favors. It's rumored that members of the Mafia twice saved him from a gangland execution. He and son Jack were also indebted to the mob for manipulating enough votes (especially in Illinois, a crucial state) and contributing enough money (especially in West Virginia) to squeeze Jack into the White House. Once there, Jack—or the smart alecks at CIA, with his approval—called on the mob to try to "get" Fidel Castro. It's likely that Bobby, who really hated the Cuban revolutionary, may have had some dealings along those lines, too. Anyway, the top executives of organized crime understandably thought the Kennedys were in their debt.

And the mobsters were riled to murderous rage, feeling totally betrayed, when President Kennedy appointed brother Bobby to be attorney general and Bobby transformed the moribund Organized Crime and Racketeering Section into an army of belligerent, seemingly relentless crime fighters.

Goldfarb, fresh out of Yale Law School, was a middle-rank officer in that army. He had led a particularly sticky prosecution in Newport, Ky., one of the most corrupt little cities in the United States. Roughly one-fourth of the book is devoted to the Newport episode. I would have welcomed a bit less. But it does give him a chance, as an insider, to show the department's philosophy and tactics.

The spirited effectiveness of Robert Kennedy's crusade surprised even his friends, seeing as how he (1) didn't want the job of attorney general and was virtually shanghaied by President Kennedy into taking it; (2) had never been in a courtroom as a trial lawyer; and (3) could claim, as his experience in ferreting out mobsters, only his service as counsel to Sen. John McClellan's rackets committee. What made his time at Justice dramatically unique was that he whipped previously inert agencies—even the FBI—into acknowledging the existence of national crime syndicates and into joining the fight.

The most reluctant recruit and sometime saboteur of the anti-Mafia crusade—as numerous books have shown and Goldfarb shows once more—was FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who believed or pretended to believe that there was no such thing as organized crime. Could he really have been so ignorant? Goldfarb accepts Anthony Summers's disclosures in "Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover" that major racketeers had enough dirt on Hoover to blackmail him into acquiescence. Nevertheless, for one brief, shining moment Kennedy was able to force Hoover into significant law enforcement.

Kennedy's anti-crime lawyers preferred to

bring down their quarry with heavyweight charges of narcotics trafficking, political corruption, big-time organized gambling and particularly labor racketeering (Kennedy's running feud with Teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa was legendary). But if they couldn't dig up enough for those charges, they would circle around and nip them from behind for such relatively rinky-dink crimes as making false statements on home improvement loans or on telephone-operator license applications.

Did Kennedy and his colleagues sometimes stretch the net so far as to violate civil liberties? Some critics thought so. In his landmark study, "Kennedy Justice," which came out 25 years ago, Victor Navasky gave these critics far more room to speak than does Goldfarb. But Goldfarb does admit "we were excessive at times." And, yes, occasionally the process by which his "imperfect heroes" administered justice was "at least in hindsight subject to serious questioning." But he would have us remember that many, if not most, of those they went after were "perfectly villainous."

The plus side of Robert Kennedy's career far outweighed the sum of all minuses, and the greatest plus was his political incorruptibility. Goldfarb—like Navasky before him—recounts several poignant cases to show that just because somebody had helped the Kennedy family politically didn't mean he could escape prosecution for his crimes. If Bobby was that unrelenting with family friends, he was of course much more so with members of the mob. He kept his accounts in two sets of books—one for politics and the other for justice—and he never confused the two.

The Mafia hated him for it. And so in these pages we hear again New Orleans crime boss Carlos Marcello saying to his peer Santos Trafficante Jr. nine months before the president was killed in Dallas: "Bobby Kennedy is making life miserable for me and my friends. Someone ought to kill all those Kennedys," and Trafficante responding with assurance: "You wait and see, somebody is going to kill those sons of bitches. It's just a matter of time."

*The reviewer is the author of "The Last Kennedy" and corporations correspondent for the Nation.*