

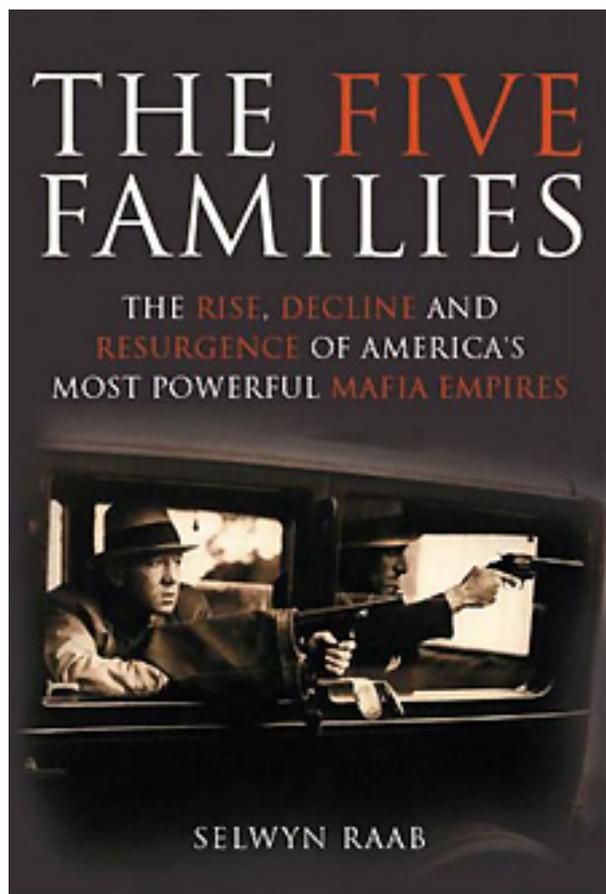
## Mafia: Rise, Fall and Resurgence

by {ga=ggstaff}

Monday, May 08, 2006 12:00 AM

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Selwyn Raab recently met with Gotham Gazette's Reading NYC Book Club to discuss his book *Five Families: The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of America's Most Powerful Mafia Empires*, a history of the Mafia from its origins in Sicily to the present day. The following is an edited transcript of the event.



**GOTHAM GAZETTE:** Mr. Raab, your book focuses largely on the fall of the New York crime families, but the title includes the phrase "resurgence." What's going on with the Mafia in New York City right now?

**SELWYN RAAB:** Up until 9/11, there had been a 20-year long, concentrated attack against the Mafia, based on the Racketeer Influence Corruptions Act, popularly known as RICO. What was important about RICO was that for the first time it gave prosecutors an effective tool to go after the big shots in organized crime. At the attack's peak, there were 200 people working full time on just investigating the five Mafia families in New York -- the Gambino, the Bonano, the Colombo, the Lucchese, and the Genovese. The FBI had a specific squad following each family, and were able to bust John Gotti, Vincente "The Chin" Gigante, and other bosses, even though they didn't pull a trigger or shake anyone down themselves.

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[This prosecution was coupled with a] concentrated effort to knock the Mafia out of some industries. Waste collection and construction were two immense moneymakers for them, and they've been hurt in both industries, especially commercial garbage collection. There is now some oversight by city agencies, licensing etc. The Mafia has been severely wounded in some of these big industries " but not mortally.

As soon as 9/11 occurred, terrorism justifiably became a prime concern and objective for the FBI and most police departments, including New York's. This created a reprieve " suddenly you had this tremendous diminution of people investigating the mob.

Today, the Mafia is still making money in gambling and loan sharking. The penalties for these crimes are very small, nobody goes away for a long time, and bosses are never brought up on charges. Still, this is terrific seed money to keep them going.

The Mafia is still very big on Wall Street, counterfeit credit cards, and phone scams. But a lot of the most recent action has been in the suburbs, where the theory is the local police departments don't have the expertise to stop them.

### FORMING THE MAFIA

**GOTHAM GAZETTE:** Is there a fundamental difference between the Mafia and other types of organized crime?

**SELWYN RAAB:** We've always had organized crime groups " you had Irish and German gangs on the Bowery, Jewish bootleggers, the Italians, and so on. To oversimplify, prohibition changed all these gangs from street thugs to executives. The money was so big that they could expand, and when prohibition ended, they had big organizations to go into different things like labor racketeering.

But the Italians had a business genius named Charles "Lucky" Luciano. Luciano saw the handwriting on the wall " prohibition was going to end, and what were gangs going to do for loot? He also saw the lack of a central organization. Luciano had a major convention [of Italian gangs] in Chicago in 1931, and said we can't have fights among ourselves anymore, because

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it's bad for business. He turned the Italian gangs into a semi-military organization based on what had been going on in Sicily, where each family had a boss, underboss, consigliere, and soldiers.



*Charles "Lucky" Luciano*

If you knocked out the leaders of the Jewish or Irish gangs, they dissolved, because there was no military setup. But Luciano set up the Mafia so that the individual is secondary to the organization; the theory was that the organization had to survive at any cost. If the boss died or was arrested, the organization replaced him, and he set up another hierarchy.

To stop disputes between families, Luciano created something called the Commission comprised of representatives from each of the five New York families. Immediately, they had more power than anyone else in the country.

Luciano also urged the Mafiosi to diversify their activities. Instead of having just gambling or loan sharking as other gangs did, they went into labor racketeering. They were a mirror image

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of capitalism: whatever works.

That distinction still exists today. The Mafia has such a lot going for it. The Latin Americans â€“ Columbians and Mexicans â€“ are into one thing: narcotics. They don't have the know-how to do these other kinds of crimes. Same thing with the Asian gangs, the Chinese. They may be involved in smuggling immigrants, or do shake down rackets on stores or restaurants in Chinatown and Queens. But they're not involved in other things.

### THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZED CRIME ON NEW YORK CITY

**GOTHAM GAZETTE:** Why did New York City's Mafia families have such a disproportionate amount of power within the nationwide Mafia right from the beginning?

**SELWYN RAAB:** We can thank Benito Mussolini partly for this. The Mafia had always been very strong since it started out in Sicily in the 18th century, where people once thought of them as liberators because they fought against the foreign invaders, protecting the small farmers, peasants, and businessmen. They developed into a tyrannical organization, and they grew very powerful both politically and financially. When Benito Mussolini came into power, he saw them as a threat and started a crackdown. He rounded people up and put them in cages, sent them away for life, or killed them.

Because of this, a lot of the young Mafiosi in the 1920s emigrated to the United States, and the major place they went was New York City. They liked New York. It was very profitable. There was a big Italian American population, bigger than anywhere else. They settled into New York because they were welcomed here.

The curse of New York is that there are still five powerful Mafia families here. In the rest of the country it wasn't that hard to combat the Mafia â€“ you just had to knock off one family and there would be no one around to fill their shoes. Here, if there is a devastating blow to one family, that vacuum can be filled by one of the others. They know if it's a good opportunity, and they'll take advantage of it.

**PHILIP ANGELL:** In New York City organized crime families were involved in a lot of very public rackets â€“ the trash business, the construction business, the ready-mix concrete business. These were pretty open secrets for a long time. Do you have any sense of why this

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was tolerated by the political, financial, and law enforcement establishment?

**SELWYN RAAB:** Well, one major reason was that J. Edgar Hoover didn't want the FBI to do anything with the mob. They didn't do anything until after his death in 1972.

I started as a reporter in New York in the 1960s on the education beat. I was working for a year when there was a big scandal: schools were falling apart. I was assigned to the story and found so many connections. There were secret Mafia partners to all these construction firms that were allowing ceilings to collapse, and building shoddy buildings. There was a big investigation, and eventually the city got rid of some of the people who worked for the Board of Education and banned some of the contractors. But they never went after the Mafia.

So I started asking around: Why don't you do anything about the Mafia? "It's too hard," I was told. But the real reason was that the Mafia was paying off the politicians and the judges. Every stone you turned up in this town had to do with the Mafia. Garbage, the fish market, you name it.

Also, when you talked to mayors off the record they'd say: 'everything runs smoothly now. If you fool around with the construction industry, there will be a strike. If you do anything about trying to regulate the garbage industry, they won't pick up the garbage. If you try to do anything about the fish market, restaurants won't get any fish. Leave well enough alone. They're not bothering anybody.'

**GOTHAM GAZETTE:** Can you point to any industries that the Mafia ruined or ran out of town?

**SELWYN RAAB:** I used to speak to people in the garment center, and they said you had a choice: either you get protection from the mob, or you sign up with the union and pay the union dues. The union will let you be non-union, but you have to be hooked up with some family. In fact, the corrupt unions were getting part of the payoffs.

There were mob families running all the trucking in the garment center — the Colombos and the Luccheses. You couldn't be an independent trucker and go into the garment center. You'd

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have flat tires, and your drivers would be beaten up. These weren't the only reasons " there were runaway industries for cheaper labor elsewhere, too" but they added an extra inducement. Why bother?

It wasn't just the garment industry. Garbage haulers wouldn't come into New York because they knew it wasn't worth the effort. If you came in you'd be shaken down, and if you didn't pay them off there would be a strike, because they controlled the Teamsters on the garbage locals.

A lot of fish wholesalers wouldn't come into New York for many years. They would rather go to New England, or the big fish markets in Baltimore, where they wouldn't have this trouble.

**PHILIP ANGELL:** And the important thing to remember is that it was underwritten by violence, no matter what industry.

### ROMANTICIZING THE MOB



**GOTHAM GAZETTE:** Why do people have such a romantic view of this?

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**SELWYN RAAB:** Well, that's Hollywood. American entertainers have always had a vicarious love affair with criminals. They're interesting people; you're more interested in rogues than good guys. Do you want to do a story about the founder of the Red Cross or Salvation Army? No one is too interested in that.

One of my pet peeves is a movie like the Godfather, where we set up the idea that there are good Mafiosi and bad Mafiosi. Don Vito Corleone, played by Marlon Brando, he's a white hat, a good guy cowboy. At one point, he's opposed to narcotics, and as a result there's an attempt on his life by the bad Mafiosi. But who wins? The good guys.

They try to create this image that it's not so simple, that you can identify with them.

I don't watch the Sopranos every week, but when I do watch what I see is a soap opera not about a mob family, but a dysfunctional suburban family. If you're a middle-aged man, you can easily identify with Tony Soprano. His kids are rebelling against him, his wife is smarter than him and wants to leave him, he doesn't have the old time loyalty when he goes to the office anymore. He has all these midlife crises, even though he lives in a mini mansion, has a harem of beauties throwing themselves at him, and he's got big cars and all the money in the world. Yet he's got these crises; you can sympathize with him. You don't see him for the most part killing people.

You get a vicarious kick out of watching these people. Look at the great lives they lead: they sleep late, they don't have to go to work, they make a lot of money, they have a lot of woman friends. It looks good.

There's one other aspect which I think is a subtext to all of this, which makes these movies popular and is why people romanticize the Mafia: they're antiestablishment. In the Godfather, they talk about how the Italian Americans couldn't get a break. They had to become a government onto themselves, because the WASP establishment wouldn't allow them to become bankers or big businessmen. You can see it also in the Sopranos. His father was a laborer. What a choice: drive a truck for a living, or could he work for the mob and make a lot of money, be comfortable, take care of your family?

**GOTHAM GAZETTE:** But how much of that is true?

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**SELWYN RAAB:** Well, I've talked to a few made men. They always rationalized what they did and why they did it. But they have always been into anything that will bring them money.

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