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The Powerful Mythology Surrounding Bugsy Siegel

Larry Gragg

Journalists, authors, filmmakers, and historians have been interested in Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel for over six decades. Collectively, they have crafted a cohesive mythological narrative of Siegel’s life one focused upon “rags to riches” success and his contributions to the development of Las Vegas, Nevada. Most attribute to Siegel the inspiration for not only the Flamingo Hotel-Casino, but also for the glamorous, classy, flashy resort city Las Vegas became after World War II. This paper describes the development of the myth since Siegel’s murder in 1947 as well as how it has been sustained.

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At 10:45 on the evening of June 20, 1947 a gunman rested a 30-30 carbine on the lattice work of a trellis outside a Moorish-style mansion at 810 North Linden Drive in Beverly Hills, California. Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel sat on a sofa just inside the French windows. Conveniently, the curtains had been drawn. Siegel, the handsome gangster who had just a few months before opened the hotel portion of his “fabulous” Flamingo Hotel-Casino in Las Vegas, was thumbing through a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* he had picked up upon leaving a restaurant called Jack’s on the Beach. Just fifteen feet away from his target, the gunman squeezed the trigger and nine rounds broke through

the window. Two of the shots hit Siegel in the head and two hit him in the chest. One round knocked out his left eye. He died almost instantly. Ironically, the paper from Jack’s had a small slip of paper inside which read, “Good night, sleep well.”

Despite an intensive police investigation following Siegel’s murder, the identity of his killer remains unclear. Some argue that Frankie Carbo, who had assisted Siegel in a 1939 “hit” was the shooter while others argue that Eddie Cannizzaro, a low-level operative for California gangster Jack Dragna, pulled the trigger. Most, however, have no idea although there are frequent efforts to “solve” the Bugsy “hit.” One recent book, for

example, argues that a World War II veteran named Bob McDonald murdered Siegel to eliminate a gambling debt he owed Jack Dragna.¹

While the police scrambled to identify his killer, Siegel's gruesome murder captured the nation's attention. Hundreds of newspapers published a photo of his bullet-riddled and bloody body slumped on the sofa in the Beverly Hills mansion. An article in *Time* magazine noted "the tabloids of Manhattan, the sensational papers of Los Angeles and, to a lesser degree, papers all over the U.S. played it high, wide & handsome."² More importantly, Siegel's murder triggered a six-decade long fascination with the mobster's path to his death, one that began in New York slums, led through Hollywood and, ultimately, to Las Vegas. The collective result of the work of novelists, filmmakers, journalists, and biographers has been a remarkably cohesive life story one that became a parody of the classic American "rags-to-riches" tale similar to many of the gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s. The central message offered by the mythmakers is that Siegel had a vision of what Las Vegas could be, one that anticipated the flash, risk, glamour, luxury, and edgy entertainment of the twenty-first century.

Films of the early 1930s, notably *The Public Enemy*, *Little Caesar*, and *Scarface*, defined the gangster film genre. These movies portrayed gangsters as men, often second generation immigrants, who rose from poor urban neighborhoods. They were ambitious, talented, and ruthless who saw no future in following traditional paths to success in Depression-era America. Against the backdrop of gang wars, bootlegging, and the rackets, gangsters as portrayed by James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Paul Muni gained wealth and status, but inevitably they met a violent end. As Robert Warshow, in his classic essay "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," explained the theme of these stories, "the typical gangster film presents a steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall."³

Depictions of the life of Bugsy Siegel in print and on film mimic that of the classic movie gangster. The son of Russian immigrants, Siegel, in these accounts, grew up in a very poor Brooklyn neighborhood, dropped out of school, and by age eleven had joined a gang of street toughs, young men who later emerged as leaders in organized crime. The film *Mobsters* and the documentary *Don't Call Me Bugsy*, have him joining up with Frank Costello, Lucky Luciano, and Meyer Lansky largely out of necessity. It was a question of survival. Life on the Lower East Side was a Darwinian struggle among very tough street gangs. In most depictions of his early life, this milieu was critical in shaping his character. Surviving the gang violence of his neighborhood required Siegel to become fearless. Siegel fought so savagely that contemporaries said he was crazy as a "bedbug" hence the nickname he always hated.

Films like *Mobsters*, *Lansky*, and *Gangster Wars* and the A&E *Biography* of Bugsy Siegel, as well as innumerable print accounts, contend that the success of this alliance of young gangsters attracted the attention of some of the kingpins of organized crime like Arnold Rothstein, Joe "the Boss" Masseria, and Salvatore Maranzano. Besides rum running and gambling, Rothstein was a "bank" for many in the underworld. He financed drug operations and shady securities deals, bought judges, and even provided the funds to fix the 1919 World Series. Always on the alert for new talent, Rothstein became a mentor for young men like Lansky, Costello, and Luciano.⁴

In the mythological Siegel narrative, Rothstein's murder in 1928, apparently because of his gambling debts, led to open warfare in New York to control the bootlegging empire. Masseria and Maranzano were the main combatants. Lansky and Luciano, with the support of Siegel, skillfully manipulated the growing interest these bosses had in their organization. Yet, they carefully plotted the elimination of both Masseria and Maranzano and Bugsy Siegel was on the "hit" squads that murdered the

two men in 1931. Siegel's role in the dispatch of the Mustache Petes, as the old-guard Sicilian gangster bosses were called, was critical because their deaths led to a restructuring of organized crime. Most accounts have Maranzano conceiving the "syndicate" or "national commission," including most of the leading families from New York and Chicago, but he did not live long enough to see its implementation. It fell to Luciano to lead in the development of a syndicate with regular national meetings and an enforcement arm known as Murder, Incorporated created to carry out authorized "hits" and end indiscriminate murders. Italians, first through Luciano and then Frank Costello with important Jewish allies like Meyer Lansky, led the syndicate which was characterized by policies reached by consensus and subordination of the individual to the group. By 1940, about a dozen men had emerged as most influential in a system with no single, dominant "Boss" and one of them was Bugsy Siegel. Siegel's most important role was as one, along with Albert Anastasia and Louis "Lepke" Buchalter, of the three special assassins of Murder, Incorporated who eliminated those foolish enough to challenge the will of the syndicate.⁵

By the time he reached his early twenties, Siegel and his associates were managing an operation of nearly one hundred men and became wealthy through fencing operations, providing "insurance" for nightclub owners, burglaries, gambling, and illegal trafficking in liquor. Profits from these endeavors provided Siegel with sufficient means to purchase a Tudor-style home in a New York City suburb for his family and an apartment at the Waldorf Astoria. He dressed ever more elegantly and enjoyed the vibrant night life of New York City.

In the mid-1930s, Siegel moved to the West Coast where, in the mythological view of his career, he demonstrated extraordinary entrepreneurial skills. He invested in real estate and night clubs, ran a prostitution ring, and managed the heroin traffic from Mexico while emerging as a critical figure in gambling in California from the Clover Club in Los

Angeles and the Agua Caliente race track in Tijuana to dog racing and the gambling ship the *S.S. Rex*. Beyond all this, the syndicate leaders expected Siegel to gain control of the race wire service in the West. These national services, dominated by James Ragen's Continental Press Service, provided betting odds as well as changes in track conditions and race results. Drawing upon the connections of local mobsters Jack Dragna and Mickey Cohen, Siegel soon had most of the race wire business in California, Arizona, and Nevada with the Trans-American wire service. He even found time to organize the movie "extras" in order to "shake down" movie producers and top film stars. These many ventures, which would have been extraordinary challenges for the most sophisticated entrepreneurs of the era, according to the master narrative about Siegel, seemed easy to master for the largely uneducated thug. The revenue from all this activity, according to Siegel biographers, provided him an income easily exceeding \$20,000 a month.

These enterprises also gave Siegel entrée to the Hollywood scene which he embraced. The glamour and attractive women of the movie industry appealed to him and his good looks and his gangster chic style appealed to many in Hollywood. Screenwriter Charles Bennett explained, "Bugsy was so smooth, so charming, he was accepted in Beverly Hills society." Beyond his mystery and charm, for many "there was a certain glamour attached to a real mobster."⁶ Obviously familiar with the gangster look of movie stars like his good friend George Raft, Siegel became known for his stylish attire. Journalists Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris, in their muckraking attack on Las Vegas and its connections to organized crime called *The Green Felt Jungle*, wrote that he enjoyed "sharp clothes: broad snap-brimmed hats . . . pin-striped suits with high-waisted trousers and narrow pegged cuffs; rakishly tailored overcoats with fur-lined collars; hand-crafted shoes with pointed toes, and handmade silk shirts."⁷

Though married until 1946, Siegel had affairs with a number of stars including Jean

Harlow, Wendy Barrie and Marie “the body” McDonald before his long-term relationship with mob moll Virginia Hill. With substantial wealth, he sought, as had so many of the movie gangsters, respectability not only by associating with the Hollywood elite, but also by building a thirty-five-room mansion in Beverly Hills where he entertained the likes of Cary Grant and Betty Hutton. Young actors like Phil Silvers and Frank Sinatra “adored Bugsy Siegel.” Silvers’ wife, Jo-Carroll, explained the fascination, “Bugsy was handsome, charming, and very pleasant, but he also had an aura of danger about him that Frank would later cultivate.”⁸

This narrative of a self-made man, albeit one given to extraordinarily violent outbursts and one who found it easy to dispatch anyone who blocked his rush up the ladder of success, inevitably followed the story arc of the classic gangster picture. The gangster films ultimately are often morality tales and must, then, lead to the fall of the mobster. In Siegel’s case, his decision to seek greater fortune and legitimacy in Las Vegas, Nevada led to his demise. When the scene of his life story shifts to the gambling city, those who build his mythical life find it essential to make him a prophetic figure, one who sees a glorious future for a scarcely known desert town. There must be an element of tragedy, a sadness for a man who sought to become legitimate through an extraordinary vision for a city that would become the gambling and entertainment center of the world.

That Las Vegas appear as an obscure place before Siegel pursues his dream of building a fabulous hotel-casino is central to this element of the Bugsy myth. In Dean Jennings’ biography of Siegel, entitled *We Only Kill Each Other*, he describes Las Vegas as “a sort of cowpoke town where gambling was just another Saturday night diversion for ranchers, toothless and bearded prospectors, workers from nearby Boulder Dam, or tourists.” Similarly, in his novel *Solomon’s Palace*, Sam Ross essentially borrowed Jennings’ description adding “sometimes there would be more Paiute Indians wandering around the hot, dusty streets than

white inhabitants.” Max Allan Collins, in *Neon Mirage*, followed their lead: “Mixed in among the tourists, many of whom wore dude-ranch style Western clothes, were occasional real westerners: men with the weathered faces of the true rancher or ranch hand; an Indian woman with a baby cradled on her back; a toothless old prospector who made Gabby Hayes look like a Michigan Avenue playboy.” *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History*, the recent documentary released in the city’s centennial year, characterized Las Vegas as “a one-horse town. A train depot and a row of gaudy gambling joints.”⁹ These are only four of the many characterizations from authors, journalists, documentary film makers, and movie producers who presented a remarkably similar picture of Las Vegas before Bugsy Siegel’s Flamingo Hotel-Casino.

The most influential version of early Las Vegas, however, is that depicted in the critically and commercially successful 1991 movie *Bugsy* starring Warren Beatty as Siegel. In the movie, Siegel, along with Virginia Hill and gangster Mickey Cohen drive from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to see how the mob’s investments are faring in the small southern Nevada town. They drive down a dusty street with a few storefronts, dilapidated pickups along the curb, and some horses tied up out front. They enter a forlorn looking casino. James Toback’s script for the film offers a vivid description of the “glorified shack.” There is “utter shabbiness: a couple of card tables, a few slot machines, a counter that passes for a bar, a tired bartender with five customers and two employees.” Virginia Hill dismisses it as “a canker sore” that should be burned. Given these descriptions, it is beyond belief that anyone could have a vision of a future for this tired undeveloped desert town in an obscure location.¹⁰

Yet, the myth makers have Bugsy seeing a remarkable future for Las Vegas as a luxurious playground of gambling and entertainment that would attract the wealthy and the middle class. In several accounts, he simply stares into the desert and has a vivid epiphany. As film critic Richard Schickel argues, Siegel “really does see this. It is all in

his mind. He can see the Las Vegas of the future . . . in his mind before he's dug the first foundation for the Flamingo." James Toback agreed. "Bugsy," he contended, 'was not just prescient. He was almost oracular."¹¹

Siegel's alleged vision truly was grand. In the film entitled *The Neon Empire* a Bugsy-like character named Junior Moloff explains that he will build a place with the finest casino, hotel, restaurants and "the greatest comedians, singers, dancers, bands, you name it." Another Bugsy knockoff named Benji Danzig, in the novel *Chance Elson* written by W.T. Ballard, announces he will "build a big, fancy place, the best—restaurants, bars, floor shows, nice lawns, the biggest swimming pool in the world." Yank Karkov, a third variation on Bugsy, proclaims in Morris Renek's *Las Vegas Strip* that he will offer guests "the poshest rooms, the juiciest steaks, the biggest drinks for practically nothing. All they have to do is gamble."¹²

It fell to Warren Beatty's delivery of James Toback's version of Bugsy to give the character genuine insight. Toback's script has the leaders of the "Syndicate" drop by Siegel's home in Scarsdale, New York where they hear his pitch for the construction of a hotel-casino in Las Vegas. As Meyer Lansky, Frank Costello, Vito Genovese, Gus Greenbaum, Joe Adonis, and Moe Sedway listen intently, an excited Siegel proclaims that when he is finished explaining his vision, they will "understand for the first time the meaning of the word transcendent!" He tells these men upon whom he will depend for funding, "I found the answer to the dreams of America." "Let me ask you," he continues, "what are people always having fantasies about? Sex, romance, money, adventure. I'm building a monument to all of them." Screenwriter Toback inserted these lines to illustrate his argument that Siegel saw "how gambling could seize the entire nation and a city could become a metaphor for it." "Now a theme park city," Las Vegas's mentality, in Toback's judgment, "basically has taken over every state and local government."¹³

Historians and Las Vegas-based journalists know that most of the accounts of

Siegel are more myth than fact. This is due in large part because there are so few reliable sources on the gangster's life. As Thomas Repetto explained in *American Mafia: A History of Its Rise to Power*, criminal organizations kept no records "nor were its business dealings well reported. In addition, many popular accounts tend to follow the rule of 'Never let the facts get in the way of a good story.'"¹⁴ The clearest way to address the problem of the mythology surrounding Siegel's achievements is by closely examining the sources that are available. Specifically, it is possible to assess the assertion that Las Vegas was little more than "a stupid patch of desert" prior to Siegel's inspiring vision. Many journalists actually visited Las Vegas in the decade prior to the opening of the Flamingo in December 1946 and their characterizations of the gambling center are at odds with the dismissive descriptions critical to those who argue that Siegel had a remarkable vision.

Newspapers and periodicals as varied as the *New York Times*, the *Fresno* (California) *Bee*, *Collier's*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Modesto* (California) *Bee*, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, *Time*, the *Reno Evening Gazette*, the *Port Arthur* (Texas) *News*, and the *Los Angeles Times* published articles about Las Vegas or printed syndicated columnists' views of the city between 1936 and 1946. A few examples illustrate how little the myth makers relied upon contemporary journalists' descriptions of Las Vegas in framing their portrayal of the city before and during World War II.

Los Angeles Times columnist Chapin Hall, in his "What Goes On?" column reported on his ventures to Las Vegas in 1939. While he found that Las Vegas was in many ways "still a frontier town," Hall was impressed that it had evolved "from a wide spot on the desert only a few years ago" and had now "taken on metropolitan airs," a town with "good hotels and restaurants." Two years later, articles in the *Modesto Bee* and *Reno Evening Gazette* noted the city's "fashionable hotels" and the "swanky Apache Club" downtown. In a 1942 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* Wesley Stout noted the construction of the resort hotels El Rancho Vegas, the Nevada Biltmore,

and Hotel Last Frontier as well as the recently opened Colony Club which he contended was “as modernistic, as chi-chi, as sophisticated in décor as anything in New York.” A 1945 *Chicago Daily Tribune* article described the “high class lodging houses,” particularly the “tony joints” just outside the town along the Los Angeles Highway. Significantly, journalist Alex Small claimed, “in the resort hotels of Las Vegas you will find a lavish and refined luxury hard to match anywhere.”¹⁵ The next year, Hollywood columnist Erskine Johnson explained, “the swank, million-dollar hotels—El Rancho Vegas, Last Frontier, El Cortez and Nevada Biltmore—are jammed. Movie stars, millionaires, socialites, and plain John Does are standing two deep at the roulette and dice tables.”¹⁶ Films from the early 1940s reinforced these images of a glamorous Las Vegas. Movies like *Las Vegas Nights*, *Moon Over Las Vegas*, and *Lady Luck* presented elegantly dressed casino patrons and fashionable floor shows with singers and dancers. Indeed, *Las Vegas Nights* featured the Tommy Dorsey orchestra with Frank Sinatra in his movie debut singing “I’ll Never Smile Again.”

It would be going too far to contend that the positive descriptions of Las Vegas before the opening of the Flamingo told the whole story about the desert community. After all, the city’s Chamber of Commerce was quite skilled in cultivating visiting journalists and those scribes may have been, on occasion, reciprocating for the complimentary rooms, meals, and entertainment. Indeed, there were occasional pieces that were not nearly as complimentary of the city’s progress. In a 1940 article, *Look* magazine argued that Las Vegas was “the most sensationally cockeyed and self-consciously wicked place on earth,” an “American Gomorrah” if you will. The magazine described not a fashionable resort city, but rather a place unashamedly offering wide-open gambling, prostitution, innumerable bars, and quick divorces, a place where one could “do what you please” as long you minded you “own business.”¹⁷

It is also true that Siegel consciously cultivated the image of a charming

entrepreneur while in Las Vegas. Many people in the community who encountered Siegel saw him as a generous and caring man with a good sense of humor, a person who sought to fit in. Mort Saiger, who worked at the Hotel Last Frontier where Siegel stayed during the construction of the Flamingo, taught Siegel’s daughters to ride horses. He recollected that Siegel was soft spoken and generous. Saiger said, “After a two-hour lesson, Ben Siegel would come over, thank me, shake my hand, and give me a \$100 bill. In 1946, that was a month’s wages.”¹⁸ In his autobiography, Curtis Lynum, who was an FBI agent in Las Vegas in spring 1947, recalled a surprisingly pleasant encounter with the gangster. Siegel had called Lynum to complain about some bad checks at the Flamingo. When Lynum dropped by Siegel’s office, he “noticed a .38 caliber automatic on the ink blotter directly in front of Siegel.” Lynum pulled his gun and aimed it at his host. Siegel asked, “What the hell are you doing?” Lynum replied, “This interview has to be on even terms—let *me* put your gun in your desk drawer, and I’ll holster my gun, and we can proceed with the interview.” Siegel chuckled in response and said, “Okay, have it your way.” Later, one of Lynum’s informants told him that Siegel related the story to his friends, ‘Imagine that young FBI agent pulling a gun on me.’ The informant also told him that “Siegel bore me no animosity and respected my ‘guts.’”¹⁹ Las Vegas lawyer Paul Ralli wrote that Siegel “mingled” with residents and businessmen alike while in the community. He even “followed the Las Vegas custom of dressing informally in shirtsleeves.” From Ralli’s perspective, Siegel was “an affable, polished man, he was liked by most of the Las Vegas people who had known or met him.”²⁰

Once the Flamingo opened, Siegel truly captivated people. Performers particularly liked him. Liberace, who was under contract with the Hotel Last Frontier at the time, claimed Siegel “had a most convincing and ingratiating way about him.”²¹ Rose Marie, who was one of the casino’s opening acts, described Siegel as courteous,

supportive, and protective of her. After her two weeks at the Flamingo, he told her, "You're all right. I like you and you do a great show. I hope to have you back here soon. Thanks for everything."²² Susan Berman, daughter of one of Siegel's partners, explained, "No one who met Ben Siegel ever forgot him. Charisma, power, call it what you will; he simply captivated others."²³

The charisma noted by Berman is best explained by author Erskine Caldwell. A frequent visitor to Las Vegas, Caldwell dropped by the Flamingo shortly after it opened and was amazed how Siegel could attract everyone's attention "merely by quietly appearing with his ever-present, half-smoked cigar clutched between two fingers of his left hand." The author of *Tobacco Road* vividly described Siegel's impact on the crowded casino:

With his glowing personality, his handsome physique, and his expensively tailored dark-blue suit worn with a white-on-white monogrammed shirt and black silk necktie it was a magical combination that stated Bugsy's presence in unmistakable terms. Bartenders, cocktail girls, busboys, porters, and even hard-drinking barstool customers recognized Bugsy either with lingering glances of awe or with unconcealed signs of apprehension.²⁴

There was good reason for Caldwell's closing words. The charismatic, charming Siegel was still a man to be feared. There are several accounts of his fits of temper after the Flamingo opening. A few episodes are commonly reported. "One oft-repeated story," Las Vegas journalist John L. Smith has noted, "concerned a tourist who failed to refer to the boss by his proper name and instead addressed him as 'Bugsy.' Siegel beat the man bloody with his ever present .38 revolver." Smith also related a story about Siegel forcing publicist Abe Schiller to "crawl on his hands and knees around the pool after a perceived slight."²⁵

The myth is enriched by the tragic end of Siegel. He emerges from the various accounts as an innovative, visionary man that syndicate leaders did not trust. He was impulsive, unpredictable, and unwilling to abide by their efforts to restrain his expansive ideas about an ever more expensive resort in the middle of a desert. Most importantly, he attracted the wrath of Lucky Luciano. Though deported from the United States, Luciano remained a powerful figure in the syndicate. Indeed, as Richard Hammer noted in his *Illustrated History of Organized Crime*, in December 1946, "Luciano summoned all the major chieftains of the American underworld to Havana for the first full-scale convention of the Syndicate since the early Thirties." High on their agenda was Siegel's soon to open Flamingo. For days they discussed their concerns with Bugsy and his project. He had gone way over budget on the hotel and they believed he was skimming some of the construction money and having Virginia Hill place it in Swiss bank accounts.²⁶ Ultimately, Siegel was violating the syndicate's rule by consensus of its leadership. Despite the growing success of the Flamingo in spring 1947, Siegel's death had been decided by a powerful organization unwilling to tolerate an independent agent.

Still, it is clear that those interested in fashioning the Siegel myth ignored the contemporary evidence about what Las Vegas had to offer tourists before his Flamingo opened. Siegel's property was indeed luxurious. Beautifully landscaped lawns with palm trees, a lobby with deeply cushioned chairs, thick carpeting and luxurious drapes throughout a property with a green and pink color scheme did add glamour to Las Vegas, but it was an incremental improvement over the other properties. Developers like Tommy Hull, Robert Griffith, William Moore, Bob Brooks, and especially Billy Wilkerson, the man who developed the idea for a luxurious hotel-casino called the Flamingo, had set the stage for the emergence of truly glamorous properties like the Desert Inn and Sands hotels in the 1950s.

But Hull, Griffith, Moore, Brooks, and Wilkerson did not die at the hands of an assassin. The grim demise of Siegel, his unmistakable charisma, and the luxurious Las Vegas property associated with his name make for a compelling story. As portrayed by actors as varied as Armand Assante, Brad Dexter, Warren Beatty, Ray Sharkey, Richard Grieco, Joe Penny, and Harvey Keitel, Siegel is the tragic visionary, the man who saw the future, the man who became the mythological “father of Las Vegas.”

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Notes

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