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U.S. Elites: the Original Gangsters

By Nick Alexandrov
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Re-Thinking Organized Crime

Donald Trump is at home in the underworld. Tom Robbins writes that the *de facto* GOP nominee “has encountered a steady stream of mob-tainted offers that he apparently couldn’t refuse” in his decades in business. He “worked with mob-controlled companies and unions” while building his empire, the *Washington Post* reports.

So the man has presidential cred. U.S. elites, since the colonial era, have shown contempt for the law: if they weren’t ignoring their own codes, they were violating those of other nations or international statutes, or partnering with avowed outlaws. It’s not clear, in other words, what distinguishes politicians and businessmen from career criminals.

Think of how Europeans occupied North America. The process abounded with illicit activity, officially sanctioned in the end. “The original settlers in the Boston region who settled before the arrival of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were without legal rights in their settlement,” Henry Tatter observed. “Such were also the first settlers into the region later to become Connecticut.”

And colonists farther west: Andrew Cayton writes that Europeans crossing the Ohio River “had no legal right to occupy the land” they claimed. The 1787 Northwest Ordinance’s scheme to admit new states to the Union just “legalized the invasion” underway, D’Arcy McNickle argued. This advance into Ohio was part of what Gary Nash called “lawless white expansion into Indian lands.” Repeated deceit enabled the takeover. Linda Robyn describes how, in the century after George Washington’s 1778 treaty with the Delaware Nation, “more than six hundred treaties and agreements were made with native tribes and nations of North America. Every one of these agreements was, at some point, broken.” The first president himself “had amassed vast tracts to which his titles were flatly invalid” by the 1770s, according to William Hogeland.

In the Southwest, “literally thousands of *Norteamericanos*”—“illegal immigrants,” Stewart Brewer dubs them—“began to settle in Mexican territories between Texas and California” in the 19th century. “By 1823 some three thousand Americans lived illegally on the Mexican frontier,” adds Graham Davis, stressing that “they occupied land to which they had no title,” even when Texas declared independence in 1836.

Next consider slavery, the institution that “produced the wealth that made independence possible” (Greg Grandin) and “made the United States powerful and rich” (Edward Baptist). The U.S. government banned slave imports in 1807. But Michael Woodiwiss points out “international organized criminal activity developed” to maintain the trade. W. E. B. Du Bois determined Washington, in effect, endorsed this piracy: “there was no especial set of machinery provided for the enforcement of this [1807] act,” which “came very near being a dead letter.” There was also regular Antebellum “kidnapping of free blacks for sale as slaves,” Carol Wilson reminds us. The peculiar institution had a criminal core, even by the warped standards of a slave society.

Now look at corporations. The modern firm, Ford Motor Co. VP William Gossett wrote in 1957, “touches every aspect of our lives,” and is today, Joel Bakan observes, “the world’s dominant institution.” Peter Andreas notes Washington’s “state-sponsored theft” spurred the industrialization businesses fought to dominate. The U.S. “systematically stole from [the British] as part of the nation’s early industrialization strategy,” and “aggressively engaged in the kind of intellectual property theft it now insists other countries prohibit and crack down on.”

When Edwin Sutherland studied seventy top U.S. firms in 1949, he found them guilty of “crimes against...consumers, competitors, stockholders and other investors, inventors, and employees,” contending that “the criminality of the corporations, like that of professional thieves, is persistent: a large proportion of the offenders are recidivists.”

Decades later, Russell Mokhiber assessed “the numbers of victims of corporate crime and violence in the United States”: “Almost 800 Americans die every day from cigarette-induced disease,” for example, while some “240,000 people—8,000 per year, one every hour,” would likely “die from asbestos-related cancer” over three decades. James Coleman put the tolls from “unsafe consumer products” at “20 million serious injuries and 30,000 deaths a year,” citing National Product Safety Commission statistics.

And Gregg Barak’s recent *Theft of a Nation* “explains how the federal government, despite its rhetoric to the contrary, came to dismiss the crimes of Wall Street,” freeing “bankers, mortgage lenders, and associated swindlers”—“networks of criminality”—“from any accountability for their criminally fraudulent behavior.”

Consider finally U.S. foreign policy. Just keeping to the last several decades, we can note, with Alfred McCoy, that “the Allied invasion of Italy” in World War II “returned the Sicilian Mafia to power.” The mob, after the conflict, formed “an awesome international narcotics syndicate,” exporting heroin to the U.S. “in substantial quantities” for over a decade—“without ever suffering a major arrest or seizure.” The operation was so efficient it “increased the number of active [U.S.] addicts from an estimated 20,000 at the close of the war to 60,000 in 1952 and to 150,000 by 1965.”

“One of the most well-known cases of CIA complicity” with drug-running, meanwhile, “occurred during the Vietnam War when the agency enlisted the support of General Vang Pao, the leader of an army of Hmong tribesmen in Laos whose primary cash crop was opium,” Ronald Berger informs us. Tom Feiling recalls that, under Reagan, “the CIA...approved and supported the Contras’ trafficking of cocaine into the United States.”

Other U.S. intelligence crimes ranged beyond drug-dealing: “All postwar presidents have used the CIA for illegal covert actions,” Melvin Goodman affirms. Richard Immerman, reviewing the CIA’s 1954 Guatemala coup, concluded Washington’s strategy was “unquestionably illegal.” “As for that liberal icon John Kennedy,” sneers Carl Boggs, “he...sponsored the illegal Operation Mongoose targeting Fidel Castro,” only one intended victim in the U.S. terror assault on Cuba.

Another onslaught—President Nixon’s 1969-70 “secret bombing” of Cambodia—was also “illegal,” explains national security expert Douglas Borer. Nicole Barrett concurs: it contravened, among other measures, “the U.S. Law of Land Warfare, published in 1956” and which “finds that firing on undefended localities or areas without military significance and causing purposeless destruction violate the law of war.”

Ronald Kramer and Raymond Michalowski argue George W. Bush’s assault on Iraq “was a clear violation of the United Nations Charter and other forms of public international law, making it a state crime of the highest order”—a war of aggression, the Nuremberg Charter’s “supreme international crime.”

And Obama, with his gleaming legal pedigree, backed the overthrow and forced exile of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya in June 2009. Four School of the Americas alumni helmed the coup. Another graduate involved—a top military lawyer—confessed they’d committed “a crime.” Honduran activists condemn the event for launching a surge in attacks on women. Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, championed the outlaw regime.

Michael Woodiwiss, in his piercing *Organized Crime and American Power*, says many today “understand organized crime in a very restricted sense, as being virtually synonymous with super-criminal organizations such as the Mafia,” when in fact “established economic and political power structures” mesh with, often thrive on, illicit activity. This situation suggests the

“decent citizen,” as radical pacifist David Dellinger called her, must decide whether she or anyone else “owes one scrap of allegiance...to American law, American custom or American institutions.”