

The silent don: the
criminal underworld
of santo trafficante jr.
essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Santo Trafficante Jr. was a Tampa mafia boss from the 1950s till his death in the 1980s. Being a first generation Italian, he inherited the family business from his father, Santo Trafficante. He was given the nickname “ Th” because he was ruthless, yet well-liked and mannered. He greatly enjoyed reading history and biography novels, was educated and very charming, which won the hearts of many and helped his mafia achieve mob leadership of Tampa, Florida. He organized gambling establishments and, prior to Fidel Castro’s rise in power, he also established crimes in Cuba.

Trafficante was arrested many times in his life, but managed to avoid any charges or serious convictions. Santo Trafficante Jr. was the last boss to be an immediate family member of the Trafficante mafia. He died at 72 in 1987 due to natural health related issues and passed the power down to the LoScalzo family. Santo Trafficante Sr. came to the Americas in 1901 from Cianciana, Italy. Poverty had struck the family immensely because of the rocky economic conditions Italy was in at the time. The family arrived to Ellis Island and then moved to Tampa, Florida which was a new and upcoming city.

He started this mob through a cigar business by conducting illegal games of bolita, a popular lottery game among Italian, Black, and Hispanic immigrants. Trafficante Jr. took his first mobster position during the Second Tampa Mob War against the Italiano mafia in the early-1950s. The Italiano mafia had mob leadership in Tampa, with James Lumia being the mafia boss while Sal “ Red” Italiano was in Italy. The purpose of the war was to claim mafia dominance in Tampa. Lumia was shot in 1950 by a Trafficante member.

Police made Trafficante Sr. an immediate suspect for the killing, but by the time they went to question him, Trafficante Sr. was hospitalized due to stomach cancer and died in 1954. This is when Santo Trafficante Jr. took the position of mafia boss. Meanwhile in Italy, Sal "Red" Italiano was still calling the shots from Italy even after Lumia's death. This was hindering the Trafficante family from full mob dominance in Tampa. Trafficante Jr.'s first mafia boss decision was to target Italiano member, Rene Nunez, and Angelo Giglio.

Due to these killings, the Italiano mafia began to deteriorate, only just starting the Trafficante family's mafia leadership in Tampa. Ed Blackburn, an investigator for the Rene Nunez and Angelo Giglio killings, made it his personal goal to take out the Trafficante mafia. Blackburn would make "pick up order[s] for Trafficante" (Dietche, 39) in which he would wait outside Trafficante's casinos and plan to immediately put him into custody when he stepped outside. However, he was never successful using this tactic. In the mid-1950s, Trafficante got shot after having dinner with his wife and children.

He was simply walking outside back to his car when two men shot him and then fled the area. This was the only time in Trafficante's life when he would reconsider the role as mafia boss. Trafficante had a family and did not want to put them in danger. However, Trafficante spent his whole life being a part of this mafia so it was not long before his mindset changed. Trafficante then made the decision to seek any old Italiano mafia loyalists and kill them.

Dominick Ferraro and Joe Antinori were next for Trafficante.

Still living in Tampa, these ex-Italiano mobsters were primary targets. Only a month after Trafficante was shot, Ferraro disappeared in New York. With Ferraro out of the picture, Trafficante attempted to kill Joe Antinori twice and by the second time, successfully murdered him. Police made the Trafficante family primary suspects in Antinori's murder. Both Trafficante and his brother, Fano, were taken into the police station to be questioned. Fano was released after only an hour of questioning. Trafficante was released after questioning and fingerprinting.

However, Trafficante's refusal to take a lie detector test raised suspicions among the station. Detective Ed Blackburn continued to coordinate the "pick up orders" for Trafficante, but was never able to successfully pin him for any illegal activities or the murder of Joe Antinori. Due to the disappearance of Dominick Ferraro, murder of Joe Antinori and other Italiano mafia loyalists, the Trafficante's were finally the most dominant mafia in Tampa! Post World War II, Trafficante was ready to move on to the next big money item: real estate.

Having already conquered Tampa, he moved onto St. Petersburg which had yet to have any activities of organized crime. Trafficante bought lots along the coast and in the midtown of St. Petersburg. He used the property along the coast for his family and used the poor, St. Petersburg midtown as a place to be mortgage holders and conduct small business. Since the Trafficante mafia was the dominant mafia in Tampa and the city was much more populated than St. Petersburg, it was safer for illegal crimes to be conducted there and then have "Deuces", bolita runners, go to St.

Petersburg to make the deals. This strategy kept the Trafficante's under the radar. Trafficante was known to be "one of the pivotal figures in the complex world of narcotics smuggling" (Deitche 85). In the 1950s, Trafficante established casinos in the Havana, Cuba area and continued to perform his bolita business. The mafia smuggled heroin and other narcotics to the Tampa area from Cuba, gradually taking a major role in the Cuban drug underworld. By 1956, Fidel Castro and his rebels started to make their movement to overthrowing Fulgencio Batista.

Trafficante by this time had opened international gambling casinos in Havana and, it was rumored that he had some "behind-the-scenes" work with a number of hotel and club casinos. To save his business during this time of revolt, he supported both the Batista troops and the Castro rebels; cooperating with Batista's demands while giving Castro and his rebels weapons. This way, whether Batista or Castro gained control he and his operation were safe. However, this tactic backfired when Castro gained full power in 1959. Castro ordered that all casinos were to be closed down.

Trafficante was baffled by this action. Unsure of Castro's intentions, he eventually abandoned his casinos and resided in his residence in Havana. The revolutionary government eventually found Trafficante and arrested him for having owned the casinos. He was almost immediately expelled from the country. Having been expelled from Cuba and still in hot water in the United States, he paid off an authority to make him "disappear". He resided in Miami until 1963 when Tampa police discovered he was still in the United States.

Police began to testify against Trafficante's organization and their business dealing narcotics and other crimes like gambling and bolita. The Tampa Police Department did not have any physical evidence against Trafficante; only information on his organization's history and operation systems from the past few decades. Knowing this, Trafficante suspected that someone within his mafia was leaking this information to the police. He did his own personal investigation of the major figures within the mafia and made the conclusion that it wasn't any of these men.

Baffled on how this information got out, he decided to make an ingenious arrangement. At the time, Cubans were fleeing Cuba away from Castro's power and the United States CIA hired Cuban immigrants to aid the government in removing Castro from power. Trafficante, who had many connections in Cuba, managed to bring these immigrants into his mafia and "for a brief time, the CIA and the Mafia became one in the same" (Deitche 131). After the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HCSA) in 1976 investigated the people involved in plots against Fidel Castro. During this investigation, Trafficante, once again, became an instant suspect. The HCSA discovered his connections in Cuba and within the CIA. They started to find clues that tied Trafficante and his mafia to people involved with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. After the President's assassination, many of Trafficante's associates were being assassinated as well. This also rose suspicion with the HCSA against Trafficante: why is it that Trafficante is alive while people around him are dying?

He was under close watch by the FBI and was finally convicted of association of the assassinations of President Kennedy and directly associated with the assassination of other underworld mobster bosses. He pleaded not guilty and tried to win the sympathy of the jury by looking “ grandfatherly”: wearing a knit sweater and looking ill and disheveled. Regardless of the 25, 000 pages of evidence against Trafficante, the judge acquitted him of all charges! Astonished, people claimed that Trafficante bribed the judge to let the 81 year old man free.

Trafficante’s years of living the life as a mobster caught up with him and his health was very poor. On March 17, 1987, Trafficante passed away due to natural causes. The few years of his life, his organization deteriorated as he gradually stepped away from power. After Trafficante’s death, his mafia was nearly inexistent. Vincent LoScalzo, who was Trafficante’s driver, is believed to have adopted what was left of the mafia. REACTION: Scott Deitche’s writing style is conversational and descriptive which, I believe, is ideal when depicting the life of a big-time mafia boss like Santo Trafficante Jr.

Trafficante was a man of actions, not of words. Deitche portrayed that beautifully by not having a lot of direct quotes and dialogue from Trafficante himself. I also appreciated the connection Deitche made with the reader. He became very personal throughout the book by briefly giving his input on certain events and writing just like the way he would speak it in a conversation. As for Trafficante, his life was a dangerous one; always on the run from police and constantly fleeing to other cities and countries to continue establishing his criminal underworld.

I was truly astounded how many crimes he was charged with and, until the end of his life, he was never actually convicted. He was such a huge influence in so many different ways between dominating the mafia world on the western coast of Florida to aiding Fidel Castro in his fight for control over Cuba. Prior to reading this book, I had never heard of Santo Trafficante Jr. but subsequently, I couldn't imagine not knowing who he was and the power he had in the criminal underworld! Take his affect on having his Cuban mafia men a part of the United States CIA.

The fact that even for a passing moment, the CIA was composed with mafia men in providing national security, is not only daunting, but is nearly impossible and Trafficante was able to do so. Trafficante single-handedly brought his mafia to the top of the chain in the Tampa and St. Petersburg area and, for a time in Havana, Cuba. Although in comparison to other, more famous, big-time mafia bosses like Al Capone and Frank Costello, Trafficante remained quiet and overlooked; his actions most definitely spoke louder than his words giving him the suited nickname "The Silent Don".

This book gave me an insight on how mafias work and the authority they can have in a city. Mafias in the United States have been running since the late 1800s and as early as the 17th century in other parts of the world. I feel like this is a part of history that is so fascinating and is only ever depicted on the big screen as a form of entertainment. Trafficante Jr. lived a life we have all seen in the movies, except with more deception, more con artistry and had a lot more money than one can ever imagine.