

A close-up, high-angle portrait of Oscar Goodman, an older man with a grey beard and mustache, wearing dark-rimmed glasses. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.

Oscar Goodman's Life From Mob  
Mouthpiece to Mayor of Las Vegas

# Of Rats and Men

JOHN L. SMITH



“Whatever I got from my days representing organized crime is not enough to compensate me for what happened to me.”

—Defense attorney John Fitzgerald, Jr., whose right leg was blown off by a car-bomb blast in retaliation for his representation of Boston hit-man-turned-informant Joseph “the Animal” Barboza.



“‘*The United States of America versus Anthony Spilotro.*’ Now what kind of odds are those?”

—Chicago mobster Anthony “Tough Tony” Spilotro, a suspect in at least 22 murders. Never convicted.



“I’d rather have my daughter date Tony Spilotro than an FBI agent.”

—Oscar B. Goodman



“Thank God for Oscar Goodman!”

—Multimillion-dollar drug trafficker Jimmy Chagra, after beating the rap for the murder of federal Judge “Maximum” John Wood.



“There is no mob.”

—Oscar B. Goodman, to anyone who would listen.



“The biggest lie of the 20th century: There is no mob.”

—Message on souvenir T-shirts distributed to hundreds of guests at the black-tie 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Oscar B. Goodman’s law practice specializing in criminal defense of reputed members of organized crime.



“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Yet if I am for myself only, what am I?”

—Hillel



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Mob Mouthpiece to  
Mayor of Las Vegas**

**by John L. Smith**

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## **Dedication**

*For four stand-up women: Laura Goodman,  
Carolyn Goodman, Janet Smith, and Tricia Smith.*



## Acknowledgments

**F**or a man who has lived much of his professional life in the media spotlight, tracking Oscar Goodman's incredible legal career provided a genuine challenge that was assisted by a variety of people. Those who provided insight into Goodman's character were often glad to do so on the condition they not be identified. I came to believe that this had far less to do with Goodman's reputation as a tough mob lawyer than it had to do with his meteoric political success. In a juice town, most attorneys and business owners would rather have Tony Spilotro mad at them than City Hall's mercurial chief enforcer.

Off and on throughout the long process of researching this book, Goodman sat for many hours of interviews and allowed me to glimpse his heavily guarded personal life. That access is greatly appreciated.

Thanks are due to Carolyn Goodman, a class act who provided insight into her husband and their impressively successful and surprisingly well-adjusted children, Oscar Jr., Ross, Eric, and Cara. There is no doubt Carolyn is the real power behind the Goodmans. Thanks also to Oscar's mother, Laura Baylin Goodman, an artist and charmer who agreed to be interviewed for this project. It's obvious that Oscar got his sense of humor and flair for the dramatic from his mother. Lona Livingston,

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Oscar's sister, was also kind enough to grant an interview.

Next come the attorneys, business operators, law-enforcement investigators, former reporters, and underworld characters who shared their knowledge of the subject: Pete Beckman, Donald Campbell, Bill Cassidy, David Chesnoff, Harry Claiborne, Dick Crane, Joey Cusumano, Tom Dillard, Jim Ferrence, Mark Fierro, Byron Fox, Dominic Gentile, Brad Jerbic, Marty Keach, Tom Letizia, Don Logan, Gary Peck, Frank Rosenthal, Steve Stein, Loren Stevens, Michael Stuhff, Howard Stutz, Alan Tobin, Billy Vassiliadis, Gerald Werksman, and three dozen sources who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Oscar Goodman has been good copy for journalists for more than three decades and, as Las Vegas mayor, shows no signs of slowing down in the media and self-promotion departments. The work of the following reporters, columnists, and authors was insightful: Warren Bates, Connie Bruck, Jeff Burbank, Gary Cartwright, Juliet V. Casey, Norm Clarke, Donald Cox, Jim Day, Steve Friess, Frank Geary, Jeff German, John Kerr, George Knapp, Ed Koch, Glen Meek, Thomas Mitchell, Mike Miller, Jan Moller, Jane Ann Morrison, Erin Neff, Matt O'Brien, Peter O'Connell, Glenn Puit, Jon Ralston, Joe Schoenmann, Geoff Schumacher, Steve Sebelius, Vin Suprynowicz, and Mike Zapler. The work of Ned Day, late mob aficionado, continues to resound more than 15 years after his death.

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# Prologue

## Living In The House the Mob Built

**A**nd it came to pass in the new Las Vegas at the twilight of the 20th century that all the most notorious mobsters—at least those with the snappy monikers and blood-soaked resumés who lacked Ivy League MBAs and vast stock portfolios—were either infirm, incarcerated, interred, or had assumed new identities in the Federal Witness Protection Program.

This state of affairs suited the corporate image of a city built by Meyer Lansky and Benny Siegel, Moe Dalitz and the recalcitrant killers behind the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund. But it was no fun at all for criminal defense attorney Oscar B. Goodman, whose marble-floored law office at 520 South Fourth Street in downtown Las Vegas was known nationally as “the House the Mob Built.” Not that Goodman was complaining loudly. He’d grown rich and infamous representing a rogue’s gallery of reputed members of organized crime—a felonious fraternity whose very existence he’d denied throughout most of his 35-year legal career. If the Mafia was a myth, it certainly paid exceedingly well and often in cash.

Goodman had become a name in the American justice system. He was among the nation’s premier criminal defense attorneys. He’d argued on the floor of the U.S. Senate, served as president of the National Association of Criminal Defense

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Attorneys, was named one of America's "Best Trial Lawyers" by the *National Law Journal*, generated a seven-figure annual income, and attracted a legion of clients to his plush office lobby. Accused killers and racketeers lined up to see the lawyer who'd spent his life zealously and successfully defending the rights of such dangerous men in hostile courtrooms across the nation. His winning percentage was as enviable as his client list was disreputable. His in-your-face taunts sizzled in the psyches of Organized Crime Strike Force attorneys.

Whenever the latter-day history of gangsterism was considered, Goodman the Mob Mouthpiece was prominently mentioned. Here was a man whose image was so synonymous with organized crime that he appeared as himself in Martin Scorsese's Las Vegas mobster epic *Casino*, a man whose life was so intriguing it was the subject of the feature-length documentary *Mob Law: The True Story of Oscar Goodman*. Here was a man some organized-crime experts believed was juiced in to Las Vegas at a pivotal time in the city's dark history through a mysterious connection from Philadelphia, as well as Lansky, the financial titan of the underworld whom he'd one day represent but would never meet. Here was a man without a criminal record, but a record of criminal representation that made him Public Enemy Number One among federal mob prosecutors.

In his shadowy netherworld, Oscar Goodman was a celebrity.

But what about the rest of the world?

As he sat in his office near the turn of the millennium, crafting his cases like Balzac with his endless manuscripts, a question formed in the morning light: If Las Vegas, America's most tawdry and notorious city, could lose its five-o'clock shadow, dress up in a corporate collar, and merge with mainstream society as a sort of Mickey Cohen-meets-Mickey Mouse resort-destination mecca, might it not also be possible for a man of Oscar Goodman's reputation to change his pinstripes and write a fresh ending to his life story?

The odds were long, but then Las Vegas is the land of long odds. Of all the mobsters who gave Las Vegas its reputation as a bastion of the broken-nose set, eventually it was their mouthpiece who came to symbolize all that was notorious about Las Vegas. Chicago hitman Tony Spilotro wasn't quoted

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in the newspapers more than a handful of times in his life; Oscar Goodman talked tough for him. Most FBI agents couldn't have picked Kansas City boss Nick Civella out of a lineup, but they could see Oscar Goodman's hawk's beak, piercing eyes, and perpetual sneer coming from a mile away. Goodman paraded his dangerous clients past a line of television cameras and print reporters. He was one-part lion tamer one-part bodyguard, and he played the role to perfection.

After Spilotro's grisly murder by his Outfit bosses in 1986, Goodman's professional life began to change. His wiseguy worldview was altered forever.

Like Olivier rendering *Hamlet* for the ten thousandth time, Goodman wore the character of the mob mouthpiece like the Prince of Denmark's cape. He began to grow tired of metaphorically holding up the bullet-pierced skull of his client's victim and decrying, "Alas, poor Yorick! We never knew him, Your Honor, and we've got alibi witnesses." With so much attention paid to Oscar the Mouthpiece, there was little recognition of the other Oscar, the fiercely loyal husband and father of four who privately cared more about the academic success of his kids than the succession of the Chicago mob or the Gambino crime family.

An actor at heart, he'd spent a career courting the spotlight like a Broadway hooper. That high profile was great for business, but he gradually became identified more with his clients than with his practice of jurisprudence. There came a time early in his career when Goodman was no longer simply considered a skilled attorney, but was widely known as a mob lawyer. In at least a segment of the government's view, he was a mobster with a juris doctorate. FBI men and local police investigators whispered that he was quite likely a *consigliere* to La Cosa Nostra, a man whose advice was sought by the mob's top hoodlums, killers, and bosses.

Was Goodman really connected by more than the attorney-client relationship?

It had happened many times with other criminal defense attorneys who had stepped out of their roles and stood too close to the fire. Chicago had Sidney Korshak, the dynamo long suspected of playing a senior role in Outfit business. Boston had John Fitzgerald, who'd lost a leg and nearly his

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life when his car exploded. Philadelphia had Goodman's old college friend Bobby Simone, who took a federal tax fall after being identified as a trusted confidant of Philadelphia mob boss Nicky Scarfo.

Whether a mobster lawyer or, as he'd long argued, a lawyer who represented reputed mobsters, Goodman was sorely in need of the kind of character rehabilitation that Las Vegas seemed able to provide. For generations, the city had been the place a fellow hamstrung by felonious repute could come to change his luck, or at least his name, and start life anew. If even Oscar Goodman could redefine his persona, then Las Vegas truly was a magical place, a neon River Jordan capable of making any man reborn.

The odds were far longer than the chances of the traditional mob making a comeback in the new Las Vegas. Then again, Oscar Goodman had faced long odds throughout his legal career.



From behind a desk in an expansive office lined with photographs of the celebrated and inglorious people in his life, Goodman leaned forward in his chair for emphasis and started to explain how the mob had been a figment of the government's imagination.

Then the phone rang.

It was Vinny Ferrara calling from Terminal Island, the federal penitentiary in California. The underboss of New England's most powerful Mafia family was in prison after a murder and racketeering conviction, but was still fighting for his freedom, and he called his attorney regularly from inside for updates on his long-shot appeal.

A few minutes later, the phone rang again. This time it was Natale "Big Chris" Richichi calling from the hospital at a federal prison in Springfield, Missouri. A Gambino crime-family capo, Richichi was best known as "Dapper Don," John Gotti's confidant. With criminal activity dating to the FDR administration, Richichi was considered one of the last great dinosaur mobsters in a nation that had seen traditional organized crime either merge with Corporate America or hover on the edge

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of extinction. “To the public, these are bad men,” Goodman explained after hanging up. “I know a different side of them. They may be bad men, but they are men, not animals, no matter what nickname the police may label them with.”

The first irony. Oscar Goodman hears more from the clients he has failed to keep out of prison than from those for whom he’s won freedom. Ferrara and Richichi weren’t going anywhere soon, and Goodman knew it. But they faithfully called their man in Vegas. The winners? They rarely write, and never call.

A few of the remaining old-schoolers who were still on the street, however, appeared to appreciate Goodman’s role in their lives and found time to visit. Take Charles Panarella.

With Goodman in his corner, the Colombo crime-family capo had won a split decision on money-laundering charges. He waited in the outer office and chatted with Goodman’s legal assistant, Vinny Montalto. Although crippled by arthritis, at 75 years old Panarella still possessed an ironworker’s handshake — and one of the underworld’s great monikers, “Charlie Moose.” Those who know him recommend that strangers not bring up the legendary underworld story about the time Charlie Moose cut off the testicles of an offending hoodlum before delivering the kill shot.

Montalto, a slender gray-haired New York transplant known on the street as “Skinny Vinny,” entered stage-left-style through the office door. Like a character out of a David Mamet play, Montalto talked naturally out of the side of his mouth, handing Goodman the latest betting line, spouting one-liners like a street-wise Yogi Berra. When he wasn’t providing Goodman with gambling information, Vinny interpreted the voluminous Title III federal wiretaps the firm’s clients invariably generated. Lord knows he knew the lingo.



The walls of Oscar Goodman’s gaudy inner sanctum were festooned with photographs of clients and advertisements for himself. Snapshots captured Goodman being interviewed by Mike Wallace, Dick Cavett, and Geraldo Rivera. On one wall, life imitated art with stills of Goodman portraying himself in

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*Casino* with Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci, and Sharon Stone. With clients ranging from Mike Tyson to LaToya Jackson, Goodman was no stranger to tabloid celebrity. Photographers also captured Goodman on the courthouse steps with Spilotro, Philadelphia mob boss “Little Nicky” Scarfo, and his underboss “Crazy Phil” Leonetti, collectively suspected in as many as 50 murders. Artist’s courtroom renderings depicted drug-trafficking kingpin Jamiel “Jimmy” Chagra, the focal point of one of the most expensive investigations in FBI history – the murder of federal judge John Wood.

If those walls could talk, a vaudevillian might say, half the underworld murders in America might be solved. The fact that he’d basked in the spotlight while representing clients whose lives depended on their maintaining a code of silence was the second irony about the federal Organized Crime Strike Force’s biggest nemesis and greatest critic.

Goodman wore his reputation as a courtroom hitman with pride, bristling at government prosecutors and newspaper reporters who questioned his win-loss record. In conversation, he sounded more like Jake LaMotta arguing about his greatest fights than America’s best mob attorney reminiscing about his cases.

“I’m not like Gerry Spence who says he’s never lost a case,” Goodman cracked. “The man who’s never lost a case hasn’t tried too many of them. The people who say that are just talking off the top of their head. First of all, I never lost a case for Anthony Spilotro. You start off with that premise. The last major case I tried was the government against show producer Jeff Kutash, a dead-bang case of bribery against a public official, in this case a District Court Judge. Kutash: not guilty. There’s the Maximum John Wood murder case against my client, Jimmy Chagra. He walked on the murder. Chris Petti was the government’s choice to assume the head of all Mafia activity in Southern California. They had him nailed on a stack of cases. I wrapped them up and instead of receiving two hundred years, he got seven; I consider that a victory. There’s Leonardo Contreras Subias. All he faced was something like fifteen thousand years in prison. I persuaded the court to give him a ten-year sentence to run concurrent with a sentence he was serving in another case. In other words, he got nothing.

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It's a win. I represented a man involved in a two-hundred-thirty-seven-million-dollar fraud. I got him probation. The government can crow all it wants about getting a conviction. But probation for a two-hundred-thirty-seven-million-dollar fraud is not a loss.

"But there's no question that I do lose cases. That's because I try cases."

The photograph of Harry Claiborne, for example. Rail slim with a coyote grin, as a criminal defense attorney Claiborne was as smooth as single-malt scotch. He dined daily with Horseshoe Casino patriarch and former Dallas rackets king Lester "Benny" Binion. When Claiborne became a federal judge, he was immediately targeted by the FBI on suspicion of corruption. He was eventually tried and convicted of tax evasion, becoming the first federal judge in a century to be impeached. The case originated with a sweetheart deal and cooperation from Mustang Ranch whoremaster Joe Conforte.

Mention Conforte and Goodman still bares his teeth. Rats earn the utmost derision from Goodman. Through the years, he railed relentlessly against government informants, such as Aladena "Jimmy the Weasel" Fratianno, Frank Cullotta, even the young killer he once thought might grow up to be the boss of all bosses, Philip Leonetti. And with good reason. Mob historians know that the government's real success against organized crime came not only with the liberalization of the telephone-wiretap statutes, but with the steady parade of defectors. Pretty soon, there will be more mob guys on the government payroll than there are on the streets. Ever aware that today's standup guy might be tomorrow's star witness for the prosecution, Goodman no longer engaged in casual conversations with his new clients.

"It's taken a lot of the fun out of the game," he said.

Fun? Out of representing some of the most notorious criminals in the history of the American justice system? The third irony.

In a justice system turned upside down, in which dark is light and the government uses admitted killers to convict suspected ones, high-wire criminal defense is the final mind-bending frontier. When professional hitmen retain your services, it's not how you play the game, but whether you win or lose. This

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is a story of rats and men, of how a scrawny Jewish kid from Philadelphia grew up to be called the powerhouse *consigliere* to La Cosa Nostra and still managed to keep his scalp, raise a family in Las Vegas, put down daily bets on the ballgames, and get elected the mayor of the whole damn town.

This is that most improbable of Las Vegas long-shot stories: the one in which the high roller, after making a highly unlikely comeback, decides to quit while he's ahead. He takes what he's learned in his previous existence and goes legit without entirely changing his stripes.

It's a far-fetched plot line. But if ever a city needed a fearless advocate at the twilight of the 20th century, it was Las Vegas.

And what better preparation for a political career than representing the mob?