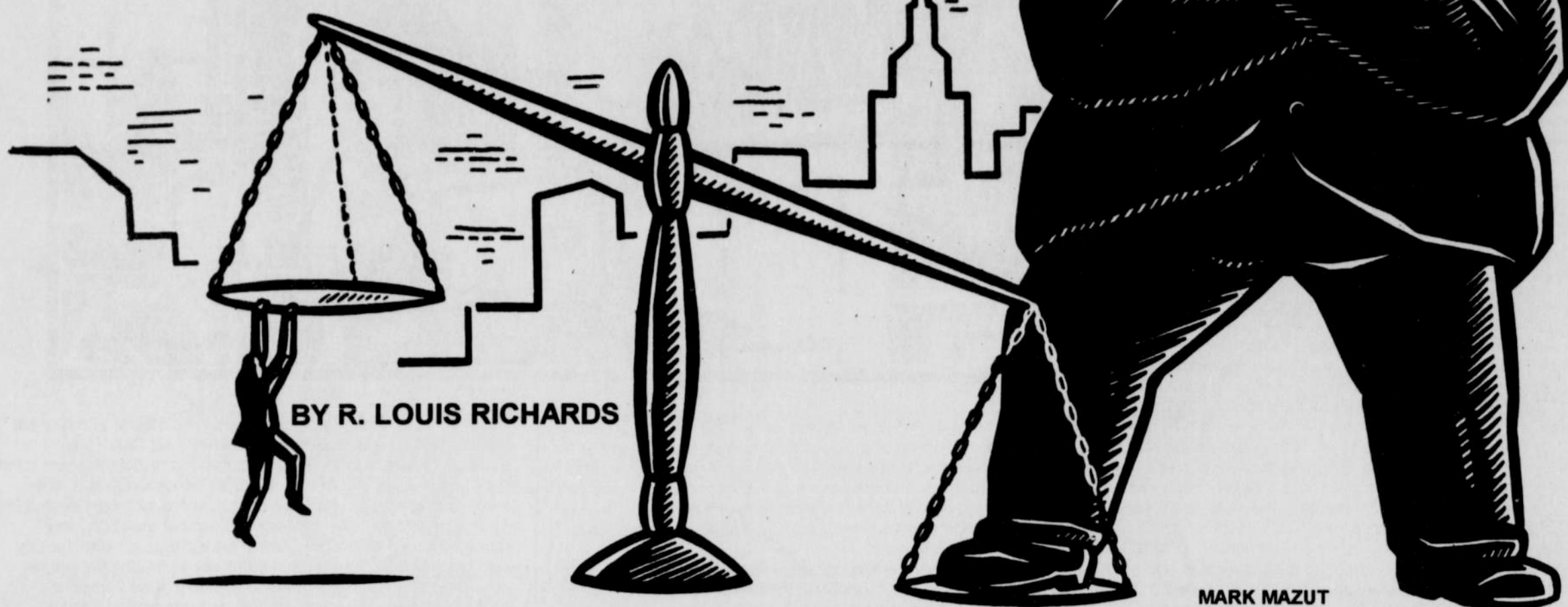


THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN



BY R. LOUIS RICHARDS

PART 1

"When the Mafia went legitimate, there wasn't anything legitimate left."

—WILL SLAYTON (1975)

If it had ever been more than the blind acceptance of a national myth, it seems at some point in our coming of age the "American Dream" died. Its passing went mostly unheralded under the distracted tubular gaze of the general population. In the context of our state religion (*Capital Uber Allis*) with its own unique take on the 'Golden Rule' ("He who has the gold, rules"), the dream's demise is roundly denied. As is the case with any dead messiah cult, as a psychological buffer in grim times, we will say, "It lives within my heart." We kneel and remember the rites of hard work and study, of good old American ingenuity and the building of that better mouse trap. This was, is, and forever will be, that blessed land of opportunity.

The deprived nation of the Great Depression viewed cinema newsreels and watched as their youth defended the dream against dark totalitarian forces and won. Then, like the dream come true, there splashed out an industrial plenty, comucopialike, onto the peacetime sands of the 1950s and early '60s. The returned world-warriors became daddies and took over mommies' production jobs. They worked in the rampant currents of the great war machine's productive inertia. It filled their pockets. The mommies kept the house and kids and selected the next appliance necessary to live the modern life. It seemed like the sun would shine every day. It was somewhere in those bright days when the inheritors of classical gangland publicly proclaimed the turning of their new leaf. They had seen the error of their ways and from now they were going to be "strictly legit."

Suddenly, into our warm, white, and happy middle class lives there exploded that spray of red November mist in Dallas, Texas. We wondered who and why? Something was said about Cubans and Communists. And then there was that Vietnam thing. Then Watergate and the public's skeptical reaction to a Presidential pardon. Then we had that "Energy Crisis." Samosa and the Shah fell in revolutions left and right. Soon we were *October Surprised* to see Reagan/Bush and Iran/Contra. Next there surfaced a myriad of murky banking scandals. All these played out against the backdrop of an ongoing "War on Drugs" being fought, we're told, for the benefit of our domestic tranquility.

Now, in these frigid fearful days of the mid-1990s we kneel before a brazen idol, pockets bleeding. We emulate the three brass monkeys, holding our eyes, wars and mouth, but failing to cover our gonads from the cold ignorance that will surely deprive us of our potency. Mommy, Daddy, the kids too, most everyone without the last name of *I-N-C-period (Inc.)* is working more time for less benefit. (Is this what Chief Seattle called "the end of living and the beginning of survival?")

Day's work done, we use what is left of our intellectual vigor to tie off and inject news and information from the corporately owned syringe. Hallucinatory images of crime, wars, disasters and sex scandals are punctuated by fleshly commercial directives. Strangled in a tangle of yellow ribbons we accepted the sermon of victory in Iraq. Modeling his desert cammies was the new sex symbol, *Stormin' Norman*.

Except in its underlying mythical ideal, when did the American Dream die? Sometimes when dealing with the slow death of a complex organism it can be hard to pinpoint the exact moment of extinction. This is especially true when corporate state ministers do their job so well. They quash rumors and assuage our acute fears. (Chronic seems to be the desired type of fear. Perhaps we consume more readily in that mode as we seek to escape the specter of what it is we deny.) Bishop Dan Rather looks us straight in the eye each evening from his pulpit in a box and tells us our thoughts for the day. We repeat the chant and bolster our belief in the dream, deferring for one more wobbly planetary rotation, the realization of our political impotence.

So it was that the man on the street did not see the green line on the dream's monitor flatten. But upon noticing some people scrambling over each other to loot Savings & Loans and gobble up mega-properties — by the power of negotiable paper widely called "junk" — shouldn't we have been relatively certain that the dream's demise was becoming known in some circles?

(Was the germ that sickened the dream growing in organs of the public and private spheres all along? Perhaps a spore had blown in with the three little ships from España. One would expect that to the original inhabitants of this hemisphere our cultural dream was fast seen as a pathogen.)

During World War 2 a man from the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), armed with an introduction from a Mr. Meyer Lansky, paid a visit to mobster and convicted super-pimp Charles "Lucky" Luciano in his New York prison cell. Our forces, it happened, needed to move against the Axis occupation of Sicily. In this endeavor the good Mr. Luciano could be of help. At roughly the same time the ONI, and soon after the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, predecessor of the CIA), fearing Reds in labor unions, delivered security of the east coast ports and their longshoremen's unions into the hands of Mr. Luciano's friends and associates. Though maybe not killing the dream outright, a poisonous ferment was spreading. (Exclude that the fix was in *On The Waterfront* and, you know? *We could'a been contendin'...*)

Luciano got his "get out of jail free" card and retired back to Sicily, taking extended vacations in Havana. He, his homies and friends (including Mr. Lansky) witnessed the growth and flowering of Turkish poppies turning into a great new service industry. And it was one with the most loyal of customers. They controlled this trade stateside, but were dependent on the help of their "French Connections," the *Corsican Brotherhood* and the

Service de Documentation Exterieur et de Contre Espionage (SDECE). These two are the French equivalents of the Mafia and the CIA. Curiously these (death squads by any other name) had made basically the same bargain for the maintenance of a French rightist political influence in Northwest Africa, as had the ONI and the gangster for the liberation of Sicily.

While the new schemes were bubbling up along the postwar east coast, some of the late Al Capone's chums, looking west, decided that the movie industry was a great place to "invest." Persuasion being their *forté*, they put the 'squeeze' on around Tinseltown. And did anybody *not* notice what went on in Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe and Reno during this span of time? All the while, the FBI continually denied the very existence of a Mafia. (Gee, perhaps J. Edgar Hoover should not have allowed himself to be photographed in that party dress.)

PART 2

*I believe these are the days
of lasers in the jungle
Lasers in the jungle somewhere*

*Staccato signals
of constant information
A loose affiliation of millionaires and billionaires
and baby
These are the days of miracle and wonder*

—PAUL SIMON ('Days of Miracle & Wonder')

"Territory." Mobsters will kill for it. Today it's called turf. Not completely geographical, it once included the extortion rackets welded against the once ubiquitous neighborhood Mom & Pop markets. Behind today's corporate cloaking, who can say what are the current limits? With Mom & Pop definitely out of the picture, now it could run the whole spectrum from owning the controlling stock in Quick Stops, Stop & Go's and 7-11s. Or from Safeway and Fred Meyer to even the hottest addresses on Wall Street. Maybe it is motor home repair shops or the national supply of pizza cheese or where you can place a bet. It could be the people who import and sell nails wholesale or who run professional sports leagues or vending machine companies or where you can rent sex. Who knows, it could even be the tow-boat outfits on the Columbia River. On paper there could be five companies with five owners, all in the same businesses, but in reality having just one covert boss. That's just the thing, you see. Doing business can be so much less of a hassle without real competition. "So we can have this little thing of ours, *capish?*"

Did legitimate industries get taken over by mobsters or did they themselves learn to function more as mobsters. Chicken; egg? Egg; chicken? It can't be said for sure but the limited liability of the corporation would attract the investment

SHALLON

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