

Al Capone: Savvy Businessman or Victim of  
Prejudice and Disease?

Name

April 26, 2007

Prof. Maxfield

US History II

Al Capone. The name sends shivers down many spines, conjures up images of bloodied corpses and brings to mind tales of ruthless extortion. Dark alleyways, raunchy brothels, smoky saloons, weapons concealed beneath the fringes of dark trench coats and dark lashed eyes peering out from beneath suave felt hats. All of these images are evoked with just the mention of Capone's name. Al Capone is a legend, a man who has made one of the most significant marks on the America's collective imagination. His story has been so widely chronicled in the media and in the colloquial American dialogue that Capone's story is felt to be entirely understood by a great number of people. After all, who hasn't heard of Al Capone?

Two biographers, Robert J. Schoenberg and Laurence Bergreen, have written detailed and thought-provoking books about the famed gangster. Both feel that Capone's story has been grossly misunderstood and seek to set the records straight. Capone, in their view, has been undeservingly both demonized and glorified, so each avoids the pitfall of drawing a caricature of an entirely demented and sadistic killing machine, but they must also deal with the real carnage left in Capone's wake. In their attempts to present more accurate and balanced views of Capone, Schoenberg and Bergreen take diverging routes. In his 1992 biography, *Mr. Capone*, Robert J. Schoenberg attempts to peel away the many layers of sensationalism and hype obscuring the real man and the real story of his life. *Mr. Capone* is Schoenberg's attempt to logically explain Capone and the decisions he made, creating a very real sense of Capone's *humanity*. Schoenberg relies heavily on the causality of various political and societal forces in explaining the kind of man Capone was. Also, Schoenberg stresses the business side of Al Capone's endeavors, presenting a

man who was primarily motivated by a desire to establish a lucrative business during a time and in a political climate in which bootlegging was a very logical answer to his problem. Laurence Bergreen, in his 1994 biography, *Capone: The Man and the Era*, takes a different stance in explaining Capone's life. Bergreen also cites various environmental factors in the shaping of Al Capone. As opposed to Schoenberg's emphasis on the impact on Capone's thought process being made by a combination of political and economic factors, Bergreen takes a more sociological/psychological approach to explaining Capone. Setting black-and-white judgments of right and wrong aside, Bergreen presents Capone's career as an organized crime boss stemming from the mistreatment and disadvantages he was born into as an Italian American. Also, Bergreen argues that a major contributor to Al Capone's success in the underworld was an unseen enemy that lived inside his own skin: the congenital disease syphilis. Armed with stories of injustice shown to Capone's ethnic group, of his generosity, and of uncharacteristic rages or mood swings resulting from brain deterioration caused by syphilis, Bergreen sets out to redeem Capone's blackened reputation.

Schoenberg links the development of Al Capone and his activities in organized crime as being the results of a corrupt city government. When discussing the Chicago government, Schoenberg discusses in great detail the dishonesty in the city under Mayor Thompson. The mayor, also referred to as "Big Bill" Thompson, came into office amidst already staggering amounts of corruption.

A typical example of what happened to an honest man under "Big Bill's" regime can be found in Max Nootbar's experience. Max Nootbar took over the job of captain of the Chicago police department after his predecessor was fired following a scandalous

shootout with some angry gangsters. The new captain was incorruptible, refusing to allow the existence of the former alliances between the police department and owners of places of vice. Some of the brothel owners even closed their doors, convinced that a major change had come to the police department that would not allow them to stay in business. However, when Big Bill Thompson became mayor, rather than rewarding the courage and honesty of Captain Nootbar, Thompson soon banished Nootbar to a distant district and prevented his reforms from enduring for more than a brief time. Corruption permeated every aspect of Chicago's administration under Big Bill Thompson. Schoenberg even ventures to say that, "(Thompson's) appointees and allies were, with one exception, unequivocally corrupt." (54) That exception was the Illinois state attorney. Even under the apparently honest Robert E. Crowe convictions of gangsters for major crimes were still nonexistent. In such a corrupt political system, one that, as Schoenberg claims "*mandated* corruption," (41) in which the lines between the "good guys" and the "bad guys" were blurry, Schoenberg writes that "a Capone was not only logical but inevitable." (40)

In addition to explaining Capone's career as resulting from a particular social and political situation, Schoenberg goes further and frames Capone's participation from a business orientation. Throughout *Mr. Capone*, Schoenberg cites seemingly endless statistics and exact figures of various transactions that Capone carried out during his lifetime. Schoenberg builds a case that shows Capone as nothing like the monster he has been thought to be. To do this, Schoenberg emphasizes Capone's business acumen and the rationality of Capone's career in organized crime, discussing things in terms like markets, profit, gross, and overhead. Schoenberg's stance is best revealed in the quote of

Capone's that begins the book. In the quote, Capone denies culpability for his counter-Prohibition activities, justifying his actions by referring to the duplicity of those in power and technically on the right side of the law as purchasers of alcohol. He was just like everyone else in regards to the law; he "supplied a legitimate business. Some call it bootlegging. Some call it racketeering. I call it a business." To this assertion, Schoenberg exclaims that Capone's "moral point made sense."(176)

Laurence Bergreen presents a very different argument in *Capone: The Man and the Era*. Bergreen's main rationale in explaining Al Capone's criminal life is as a reaction to his difficult upbringing. Presenting a dark and depressing glimpse of New England's city streets as sordid, poverty-ridden, and dangerous areas full of street gangs with distinct ethnic identifications, Bergreen portrays the adversity that Capone faced as a young Italian-American. Also, the biographer illustrates the many ways that Italian-Americans were seen in white American culture that were unjust, extremely unflattering and detrimental to their victims' views of themselves. Bergreen writes that "one of the cruelest stereotypes to gain currency—and beyond that, intellectual respectability—was that of Southern Italians like the Capones, who were invariably portrayed as lazy, lusty, stupid, and criminal."(21) Such a stereotype certainly did nothing to give Capone a "leg-up" in the competitive capitalist American society, and Bergreen points this out in outrage. With such hostility in the world, with so many hardships and disadvantages, and with such low expectations for his life as an Italian-American, Bergreen argues that Capone's life course was already profoundly affected from the moment he was born. Even the common misconception about this event taking place not in America, but in Naples, Italy, Bergreen views as a result of prejudice, "as if no American lad could ever

grow up to be so evil.”(19) Bergreen even tries to portray Capone as a well-meaning, if misguided modern-day Robin Hood, defending his people and dutifully giving all his earnings to his mother as a young man and seeking honest employment for several years before finally getting deeply involved in organized crime.

Another way that Bergreen explains Capone’s life is in view of his drawn-out battle with the sexually transmitted disease, syphilis. Capone apparently contracted syphilis as a young man, almost immediately after becoming sexually active. After producing initial outward symptoms, syphilis can lay dormant and undetected for years or even decades before starting to attack the frontal lobes of the brain. This assailment of the portion of the brain which is the “seat of the personality” can have devastating results; “slowly but surely the victim loses his mind.”(45) Bergreen claims that this degeneration of Capone’s mental facilities ultimately brought his success in the underworld of organized crime. Bergreen asserts that “If Capone’s syphilis had healed itself, as most cases did, it is unlikely he would have developed into the high-profile, feared gangster he became.”(45) Bergreen claims that Capone’s severe mood swings and sometimes bizarre violent behavior were consequences of his illness. Bergreen repudiates the public conception of Capone as a heartless demon, asserting instead that “The Capone we remember was the creation of a disease that had magnified his personality. Syphilis made Al Capone larger than life.”(46)

Ironically, two biographers attempting to soften the amount of perceived evil in America’s best known gangster do so in diametrically opposing manners. Robert J. Schoenberg utilizes arguments of the rationality and savvy of Capone’s business dealings to abandon commonly-held beliefs about his villainy. Transversely, Bergreen’s claims

discount the perception of Capone as pure evil by arguing that his reasoning and decision-making facilities were not fully intact. Capone is, therefore, not culpable for his actions to a great extent in Bergreen's estimation. Bergreen also claims that the adversity that Capone experienced as a child and a young man was, to a great degree, responsible for Capone's later involvement in organized crime. However, neither argument completely releases Capone from responsibility for his actions. Although, perhaps Capone was only one of many corrupt individuals using bribery and violence to push their agendas and attain what they wanted, he was still at fault for what he did, as were all of his fellows. Monetary gain and the acquisition of fame are not and never were worth taking a human life, let alone numerous lives. Also, countless people are victims of prejudice, yet certainly not all of them grow up to be violent gang bosses. Syphilis, while it undoubtedly did affect Capone's mind over the years cannot be entirely blamed for Capone's frequent violent brutality.

Al Capone, American's best known gangster, was a complex man who, as all human beings, was not entirely evil. He is fortunate to have two such sympathetic biographers attempt to redeem his sullied reputation, although they cannot fully excuse the horrific damage that lays in the wake of this one man.

Works Cited:

Bergreen, Laurence. Capone: The Man and the Era. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster  
Paperbacks, 1994.

Schoenberg, Robert J. Mr. Capone. New York, NY: Quill, 1992.