

THE MONEY AND THE POWER

The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2000

By Sally Denton and Roger Morris
Knopf • 479pp • \$26.95

LAS VEGAS CONFIDENTIAL

It's a bit premature to single out any one place as "the American city of the 21st century," but if forced to do so, putting your money on Las Vegas would be a smart bet. In the past 50-odd years, the city has grown from a remote railroad water stop into an international tourist destination drawing millions of visitors. According to the last census, the Las Vegas metro area is by far the fastest-growing in the country, attracting 6,000 new residents a month. Its 24/7 cornucopia of casinos puts Las Vegas in the front rank of a national economy dominated by services. Hollywood has taken notice with such movies as *3000 Miles to Graceland* and *Leaving Las Vegas*.

So it's easy to think of Las Vegas not only as a booming metropolis but also as a convenient one-stop metaphor for modern America. That's the idea behind the exhaustively researched *The Money and the Power* by investigative journalist Sally Denton and her husband, Roger Morris, the author of a well-regarded biography of Richard Nixon. The pair have attempted to formulate a unified field theory of corruption—political, economic, and criminal—in which all dark roads lead to the oasis in the Nevada wasteland. "The city has been the quintessential crossroads and end result of the now furtive, now open collusion of government, business, and criminal commerce that has become—on so much unpalatable but undeniable evidence—a governing force in the American system," they write.

That's some claim. There are those readers who will nod in agreement, especially considering the uproar over recent, fishy Presidential pardons. While the authors marshal a sprawling body of evidence, I kept waiting in vain for them to tie it all together in some comprehensible way. In the end, though, they crapped out.

Las Vegas' connection to and domination by the criminal underworld has always been part of the city's appeal: The whole point of a Vegas vacation is to enjoy things you can't legally do in Saginaw or Schenectady—whether it's playing craps or attending "Nudes on Ice." And in this telling, it's the pols who can't get enough of what the city promises. Las Vegas' endless gusher of cash is said to have handed its criminal syndicate the "juice" to corrupt the corridors of official power at the highest levels. Denton and Morris drag just about every U.S. President since Harry Truman into their account, alongside Bugsy Siegel, Meyer Lansky, Sam Giancana, and scores of less well-known political and mob figures. And in this telling, the separation between pol and gangster never approaches nearly as much as six degrees. We also get glimpses of J. Edgar Hoover, Joseph and Robert F. Kennedy, casino magnate Steve Wynn, Howard Hughes, Teamsters bosses, and Frank Sinatra.

Much of this may remind the reader of one of those supersize \$1.98 shrimp cocktails that the casinos lure visitors with: It's overstuffed and filling, but it leaves a canned taste behind. Las Vegas' syndicate roots have already been exposed ad nauseam, and Denton and Morris draw heavily on previously published "mob-ologies."

There are some fresh bits. One interesting chapter details how a small group of bankers—particularly E. Parry Thomas, head of Valley Bank—funneled deposits from the Mormon Church into the huge loans that fueled Las Vegas' explosive growth in the 1950s. "If a single entity, beyond the Syndicate, financed the first great expansion of modern Las Vegas... it was—wittingly and

unwittingly—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," the authors write.

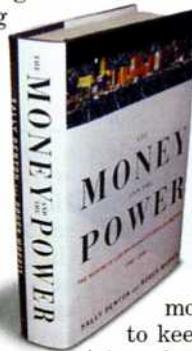
The book also sheds some light on the early career of Wynn. In 1972, in his first front-page deal, Wynn—with a loan from Thomas—bought a 25-foot-wide sliver of land adjacent to the parking lot of Caesars Palace for \$1.1 million and threatened to build "the world's narrowest casino." Months later, he sold that parcel to Caesars for \$2.25 million and used his profits to acquire the Golden Nugget from a blacklisted gangster. Wynn's threat was only a charade designed to make the inflated price appear reasonable, the authors claim. *The Money and the Power* also tells the little-known story of FBI agent Joe Yablonsky, who in the early 1980s made one of the last stabs at busting the syndicate's local grip, only to draw the ire of politicians friendly to gambling interests, including former Senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.), a confidant of Ronald Reagan.

But too often, *The Money and the Power* veers into hyperbole. Las Vegas is described repeatedly as America's "shadow capital, in political as well as socioeconomic terms," and the Reagan-era shifting of the tax burden from the rich to the poor is treated as a coup d'état in the economic order. The authors also refer—twice, no less—to unsubstantiated rumors that Lansky forced Hoover to keep his hands off his rackets, using photographs that captured the FBI director in homosexual acts. No source is cited for this remarkable allegation of blackmail.

Perhaps the greatest failing of *The Money and the Power* is one of conception: The authors focus solely on the supply side of gambling, ignoring the growing demand. Political and social changes during the past quarter-century have fueled society's acceptance of gambling, now legally available in 47 of the 50 states. Once an anomaly on the American scene, Las Vegas is now simply the biggest, gaudiest joint. It would be fascinating to know just why and how so many citizens caught the gambling bug. But that fresh story awaits another book.

BY MARK FRANKEL

Frankel is a writer living in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y.



THE AUTHORS' PORTRAYAL OF WHAT THEY SEE AS AMERICA'S DARK UNDERSIDE IS FLAWED