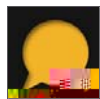


December 16, 2013

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The film "American Hustle"

Democrats — U.S. Sen. Harrison Williams, U.S. Rep. Frank Thompson and Camden Mayor Angelo Errichetti, who was also a state senator — were among the congressmen, Philadelphia City Council members and others indicted and sent to jail. But don't expect "American Hustle" to be a recounting of the machinations that ended so many political careers. The real-life events amounted to a political tragedy — and opportunity — that reshaped New Jersey's political landscape in ways that continue to this day.

## **Waia**

Abscam was a reprehensible operation, said George Amick, Capital Talk columnist for *The Times of Trenton*. "For the FBI to create crimes that wouldn't have occurred otherwise, and to target politicians like Frank Thompson and Harrison 'Pete' Williams, whose conduct always had been above suspicion, was an abuse of the investigative and prosecutorial power that should have been directed at people who were doing illegal things on their own initiative," said Amick, longtime



abortion and family planning that has been detrimental to the well-being of women in the United States and abroad, as well as Smith's part in the GOP right-wing obstructionism that's virtually paralyzed the federal government.

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The conservative Smith continues to win in a district that had been traditionally Democratic "because he's very, very good at attending to the needs of his constituents," Dworkin said.

COMMENT

Some of those constituents may vigorously disagree with Smith's stance on abortion, but they continue to elect him because they like lots of other things about him, Dworkin said.

FIND MORE

## Impact

Dworkin says the election of Frank Lautenberg as U.S. senator in Williams' place has had a profound effect on New Jersey and beyond.

A "tremendous advocate" for transportation and mass transit projects, "Lautenberg brought billions of dollars to New Jersey over 30 years," Dworkin said.

Legislation sponsored by Lautenberg led to a uniform national 21 year old drinking age and a uniform national permissible blood alcohol level of 0.08 percent for drivers and a smoking ban on commercial airline flights.

He was a fierce advocate of gun control and managed to push through legislation prohibiting those convicted of spousal abuse from obtaining a gun permit, Dworkin said, a major accomplishment in a time when any kind of gun control is so difficult.

Shortly before his death this year, a severely ill Lautenberg was wheeled onto the Senate floor to vote in favor of gun control legislation.

It's unlikely Williams' seat would have opened up without the Abscam conviction, Dworkin says. And Lautenberg, who was already a wealthy and successful businessman might not have embarked on a political career that has had such far-reaching significance.

## Abscam

Abscam also created a power vacuum in South Jersey politics when Camden's mayor was indicted and convicted in the sting.

And that eventually led to the rise of George Norcross, says Patrick Murray, director of the Monmouth University Polling Institute.

That political unraveling of Mayor Angelo Errichetti's influence took a bit of time, said Brigid Harrison, professor of Political Science and Law at Montclair State University.

"But it did set up the situation that was ripe for someone like Norcross to come in ... to establish a fiefdom," she said.

Norcross, the Democratic powerbroker, chairman of Cooper University Hospital in Camden, and part owner of the parent company of The Inquirer, Daily News and Philly.com, recalled Errichetti as a "significant mentor and a friend" when he died in May.

"I would say his political genius was, in part, the reason southern New Jersey was the beneficiary of many initiatives during his tenure in government," George Norcross said in an Inquirer story ([http://articles.philly.com/2013-05-19/news/39338568\\_1\\_richard-cinaglia-angelo-errichetti-mayor-gwendolyn-faison](http://articles.philly.com/2013-05-19/news/39338568_1_richard-cinaglia-angelo-errichetti-mayor-gwendolyn-faison)).

The same might be said today of Norcross.

## **ONS**

Abscam "cemented the perception of New Jersey as a hotbed of corruption," said Harrison. Of course, corruption was not an anomaly in the Garden State, but the FBI sting and all its trappings led to a broader national perception of chronic malfeasance, she said.

That's somewhat ironic. Considered against the vast canon of crime — organized and otherwise — in New Jersey, Abscam was relatively small potatoes.

It doesn't hold a candle, said Douglas, to the corruption as regular as the tides in Atlantic City under the leadership of Commodore Louis Kuehnle and Enoch "Nucky" Johnson that's chronicled in the book "Boardwalk Empire" by Nelson Johnson. Amick and Douglas both mention Hudson County's legendary boss, Frank "I am the law" Hague (who never was convicted of anything), as perhaps the most egregious crook the state has known.

## **WHY**

In the aftermath of Abscam, as the trials took place, "the thought was that Camden would be cleaned up, that corruption could be eliminated," Harrison said. "The trials made the politicians nervous."

"It was a case of shock and awe in some ways, and there was a kind of pulling back," she said. "They were wary and careful."

That reticence didn't last, of course. "It's the nature of politicians, they're people with very big egos," Harrison said.

"I can only blame myself for the tremendous ego I developed, the kind of ego that gets politicians in trouble," Errichetti said after his release from prison.

Such egos figured in the next political scandal. And the next.  
And the one after that. And so on.

## Feb

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