

The House Always Wins (Except When It Doesn't):
Billy Wilkerson, Bugsy Siegel, and the Elusive Dream of Las Vegas

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The West was a land of ample opportunity, and in the 20th Century, Americans of all stripes set out toward California and Nevada in order to make their fortunes. William “Billy” Wilkerson was one such person, setting his eyes first upon the glamorous restaurant scene of Hollywood before shifting his attention to the Nevada desert. In 1945, Wilkerson began the conceptualization of his life’s dream: the Flamingo casino and hotel. Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel stepped onto the scene in 1946, eventually assuming control of the project due to Wilkerson’s financial troubles. Siegel played the role of the Las Vegas capitalist, experiencing both the glories and the disasters that such a title denotes. Labor and money issues, building restrictions, advertising, competition, and philanthropy all contributed to the story of Siegel’s Flamingo. Although Siegel proved to be an unskilled businessman, he ushered in an era of casino resort hotels that has since defined Las Vegas as a capitalist’s paradise.

Siegel was one of the 20th Century’s most infamous gangsters. Born on February 28, 1906 in New York City, Siegel was the son of Jewish immigrants from Galicia in Austria-Hungary.¹ Early in his adolescence, Siegel joined a street gang on New York’s Lower East Side. Those who knew Siegel characterized him as intelligent, driven, and impulsive. He was known for his irrational rage and violent behavior, both of which earned him the nickname he so reviled: “Bugsy.”² Siegel was also notably handsome; his future mob associate Lucky Luciano recalled in his memoir that Siegel “was tall and handsome, moving with a fluid grace and displaying an openness that beguiled victims and friends.”³ Crucially, Siegel’s involvement with crime associated him with Meyer Lansky, who became a lifelong mentor, partner, and friend.⁴ Siegel

¹ Larry D. Gragg, *Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel: The Gangster, the Flamingo, and the Making of Modern Las Vegas* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015): 2.

² Lawrence Block, *Gangsters, Swindlers, Killers, and Thieves: The Lives and Crimes of Fifty American Villains* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 205.

³ Martin Gosch, Richard Hammer, and Lucky Luciano, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1975): 22.

⁴ Larry D. Gragg, “Las Vegas: Who Built America’s Playground?”, in *History Today* 57:2 (2007): 52.

made his start during the Prohibition Era, but he yearned for greater profits. In 1935, he moved to California, falling in with the Hollywood crowd and charming movie stars and filmmakers alike. Yet, Siegel's end-game was not to become a celebrity; his eyes were set on the wire service for bookies in the late 1930's, where he earned himself both a reputation and great wealth.⁵ Still, Siegel was unsatisfied, and in 1946, he officially became involved in the Flamingo casino project in Las Vegas: a project which simultaneously infuriated and mesmerized him. Although Siegel had the makings of a great capitalist—charm, intelligence, and endless resources—he was unable to reap the profits, angering his bosses in New York City. They promptly sent Siegel a message, one that he received on June 20, 1947: four bullets that swiftly ended his life.⁶

Las Vegas and its alluring—and often corruptive—promises of wealth have attracted the attention of many historians. In his 1965 work *Gamblers' Money: The New Force in American Life*, Wallace Turner claimed that early Las Vegas was an entrancing place of illusion, intoxication, and spirit.⁷ The Las Vegas Strip controlled the city, which allowed the early casino owners to carve for themselves a powerful, influential role in the American economy.⁸ To Turner, Las Vegas in the 1960's was dominated by mobsters who made their fortunes through Prohibition and bootlegging.⁹ It is in this setting that Turner placed Siegel; Turner viewed Siegel as “the founding father of the Flamingo,” as he played a vital role in the development of the Strip.¹⁰ In the 1940's, Siegel became captivated by the idea “of a plush hotel and fancy gambling joint in the desert,” and the Flamingo became the realization of those dreams.¹¹ Though Siegel

⁵ “Bugsy Siegel FBI Files,” July 22, 1946: 62-2821, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

⁶ “Revenge, Gangster Quarrel Held Motives in Bugsy Siegel Murder,” in *Daily News* (Los Angeles), June 21, 1947: 6.

⁷ Wallace Turner, *Gamblers' Money: The New Force in American Life* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1965): 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

was, in the end, a failed capitalist, he embodied the role of the gambler as a businessman. In Turner's estimation, Siegel "was the Christopher Columbus for the Mob," as he went out West "and found the New World in the desert."¹² Siegel brought life to the idea of the Flamingo, which shaped the Strip into the driving force of the local economy. By the 1960's, Las Vegas was "the strangest city in America," as it merely "[existed] to get money and [was] said not to recognize any colors but green."¹³ To Turner, Siegel was instrumental in the development of Las Vegas, even if he himself did not live to see his casino flourish.

In later decades, the image of Siegel as Las Vegas's founding father dissipated. In his 1997 essay "The Ghost of Ben Siegel," John L. Smith rejected the idea of Siegel being the mastermind behind the Flamingo, instead purporting that Siegel had *accidentally* "contributed an aura as unique as neon to Las Vegas."¹⁴ Siegel first descended upon Southern Nevada due to his interest in the race wire business, but he became enraptured by "the Wild West version of a wiseguy paradise" that he found in Las Vegas.¹⁵ Despite Siegel's desire to reap the profits from the Flamingo, however, he was a mobster, not a developer, and he struggled to manage the project's ever-growing finances. Siegel was meticulous about his expense reports, but he still drove the Flamingo into the red with his lavish tastes. When the Flamingo opened for business on December 26, 1946, the casino lost \$300,000 within the span of two weeks. Consequently, Siegel was forced to shut down the casino for a few months in order to raise more capital to complete the rest of the hotel.¹⁶ Unfortunately for Siegel, he did not come up with the money quickly enough, and he was killed in June 1947. To Smith, Siegel's dramatic death made him a

¹² Ibid., 117.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ John L. Smith, "The Ghost of Ben Siegel," In *The Players: The Men Who Made Las Vegas*, edited by Jack Sheehan (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1997): 81.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

folk hero in Las Vegas. The legend of Siegel as the martyred visionary proved to be more appealing than the truth, and thus, “Ben Siegel had won a kind of Vegas immortality” that remains unmatched.¹⁷ In the years following Siegel’s death, Las Vegas became “the class operation that had disturbed his maniacal dreams all those years ago,” and though he did not live to witness the fruits of his labor, Siegel had a long-lasting impact on the Las Vegas Strip.¹⁸

Nevertheless, most historians now concede that Siegel’s casino defined modern-day Las Vegas. Larry Gragg’s 2015 biography *Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel: The Gangster, the Flamingo, and the Making of Modern Las Vegas* traced Siegel’s mobster ties and involvement in the Flamingo. Gragg acknowledged that Siegel was a celebrity in his time, having befriended societal elites. Siegel’s charisma and social status should have made him extraordinarily successful, but he was too “impetuous, restless, impatient, and too easily attracted to risks” in order to benefit from these advantages.¹⁹ Gragg’s assessment of Siegel’s business skills thus mirrors that of Smith—Siegel was unable to manage effectively his casino, which classified him as a failure in both his eyes and those of his superiors. Siegel was a wild card, rebelling against his mob bosses in order to indulge his fantasy of constructing the most glamorous casino in Las Vegas. The mob culture in which Siegel resided “did not accept impulsive and unpredictable individualists, no matter how charming.”²⁰ In the end, Siegel’s arrogance cost him his life. Though Siegel did not create the Flamingo, Gragg recognized Siegel’s crucial role in the Flamingo’s growth. Siegel was a man of exorbitant tastes, and his love for luxury defined the Flamingo and—in later years—the rest of the Strip.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹ Larry D. Gragg, *Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel: The Gangster, the Flamingo, and the Making of Modern Las Vegas* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015): xii.

²⁰ Ibid., xii.

²¹ Ibid., xiii.

In the early 20th Century, Las Vegas was nothing more than a mining town, but it prospered into a gambling metropolis. In his memoir, Hank Greenspun—who later worked as Siegel’s personal publicist—reiterated the history of early Las Vegas. After the mining boom ended in the 1910’s, Las Vegas became a ghost town that was “destined to be little more than a way station in the southwest corner of a vast, virtually empty state.”²² On its deathbed, however, Las Vegas was visited by a most punctual and dazzling visitor, one who would become a frequent guest in many a casino: Lady Luck. In 1928, President Calvin Coolidge signed the Boulder Canyon Bill, which authorized the construction of the Boulder Dam—later known as the Hoover Dam.²³ Newspapers around the nation immediately began reporting Las Vegas’s good fortune, citing the upcoming dam as nothing less than an economic godsend.²⁴ In 1931, the Nevada state legislature met to pass a group of measures that were designed to help protect the state from the far-reaching effects of the Great Depression. These measures included legalized prostitution, prompt weddings and fast divorces, and—most critically—legalized gambling.²⁵ The Hoover Dam may have brought the promise of valuable electrical power, but the legalization of gambling provided Las Vegas with its single, largest industry: the rise of the casino hotels.

The story of the Flamingo began with a man named Billy Wilkerson. In the 1930’s, Wilkerson was a successful Hollywood entrepreneur, owning several restaurants and nightclubs on Sunset Strip.²⁶ Film director Joe Pasternak claimed that Wilkerson “brought Paris to Hollywood at a time when Hollywood was still eating sandwiches and drinking Coca Colas.”²⁷

²² Hank Greenspun and Alex Pelle, *Where I Stand: The Record of a Reckless Man* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1966): 67.

²³ “The Boom at Boulder,” *Saturday Evening Post*, March 23, 1929: 10.

²⁴ “Ghost Town Sees Its Revival Near,” *Springfield Daily Republican* (MA), March 27, 1929: 16.

²⁵ Steve Fischer, *When the Mob Ran Vegas: Stories of Money, Mayhem and Murder* (New York: MJF Books, 2005): 11.

²⁶ “Restaurants: Hollywood Institution,” *Time* (New York City), July 3, 1944: 6.

²⁷ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro’s Books, 2006): 10.

Still, Wilkerson was a restless man who dreamed of a more exciting lifestyle. He set his eyes upon Las Vegas, the glittering jewel in the Nevada desert. Regrettably, though, Wilkerson was a compulsive gambler, and he wasted astounding amounts of money at various gaming tables. Although Wilkerson's relationship with Las Vegas was toxic and ultimately destructive, he could not abandon it. His business partner Tom Seward "watched Billy gamble [their] future away," but Wilkerson refused to heed the warnings or cease his harmful ways.²⁸ In his mind's eye, Las Vegas was "the last frontier," a land that "still echoed the Old West, lost in heat waves, sagebrush and the fathomless slumber of time."²⁹

Wilkerson's fascination with Las Vegas led him to purchase a thirty-three acre lot in January 1945: the start of the Flamingo. At the time, many felt that Wilkerson's purchase was quite the gamble, as the property was far-removed from the other casinos and hotels in the area.³⁰ Yet, Wilkerson had a vision: one that was at once mad and inspired. He imagined a glorious, five-story casino that would offer high-end accommodations similar to European luxury hotels. His experience as a gambler gave him what he considered to be valuable insight into how to design a casino. Wilkerson wanted to make it as simple as possible for his patrons to lose their money. The Flamingo would be the ultimate gamblers' paradise: a place where gamblers could indulge their passions in the comfort of unsurpassed luxury. In order to give his workers the clearest vision of his dream casino, Wilkerson spoke openly about his gambling addiction. What Wilkerson deemed to be his "lost weekends"—those hazy days spent throwing away money with the vain hope of making a fortune—inspired the Flamingo's magnificent design.³¹ There would be no windows or clocks on the Flamingo's game floor; the outside world had to cease to exist in

²⁸ Ibid., 24.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³⁰ "El Cortez Sold," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 28, 1945: 3.

³¹ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro's Books, 2006): 45.

order for the patrons to spend money as freely as possible. Capitalizing upon his casino's isolation, Wilkerson aimed "to feed the gambler's illness" by removing him from all traces of society.³² Unfortunately, Wilkerson did not view his own gambling addiction as problematic. He did not worry over his dwindling finances, even as he spent more and more nights in various casinos, hoping for a lucky break that never came.³³

However, Wilkerson did not allow his money issues to deteriorate the Flamingo's quality. His friend George Kennedy recalled that Wilkerson "believed that if you hired and bought the best, you got the best."³⁴ In early 1945, Wilkerson solicited the help of Moe Sedway and Gus Greenbaum to make his gambling dream a reality.³⁵ Wilkerson cheerily referred to Sedway and Greenbaum as "The Boys," and the three entered a silent partnership. Sedway and Greenbaum earned a percentage of the profits and managed the casino's gambling business.³⁶ Both men had irrefutably shady pasts, tracing their roots back to the mob with Meyer Lansky. Yet, Sedway and Greenbaum were, by all accounts, dedicated to the project, and they admired Wilkerson's grand dream for the Flamingo. Nevertheless, Wilkerson's demons caught up with him in mid-1945, and he was forced to retreat from the project. He wrote a letter to Sedway claiming that "Las Vegas [was] too dangerous for [him]," as he liked "gambling too much."³⁷ Wilkerson seemed conflicted about the Flamingo; he wanted to leave the casino far behind, but he also believed that its design was extraordinarily beautiful. Wilkerson was disgusted with himself for being unable to beat his addiction, but he could no longer keep up with the expenses. Accordingly, he bowed out as the project leader, assuming a decidedly smaller role.

³² Ibid., 46-7.

³³ Billy Wilkerson to Bank of America, "Check to Hotel El Rancho," in Wilkerson Archives, April 5, 1945.

³⁴ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro's Books, 2006): 51.

³⁵ Ibid., 52.

³⁶ Moe Sedway, Gus Greenbaum, and Billy Wilkerson, "Flamingo Business Contract," in Wilkerson Archives, February 1945.

³⁷ Letter from Billy Wilkerson to Moe Sedway, July 14, 1945, Beatrice Sedway Archives, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Despite Wilkerson's blessing, Sedway and Greenbaum did not pursue the Flamingo's construction. They were perfectly content running the El Cortez Hotel, which steadily and consistently generated immense profits.³⁸ As Wilkerson gambled his life away in various casinos around the Strip, his friend Joe Schenck stepped in and resurrected the project by appealing to Wilkerson's sense of dedication. Wilkerson took the bait, repurchasing the land on November 21, 1945. Construction on the Flamingo formally began later in the following weeks.³⁹ After his team had completed one third of the project, however, Wilkerson experienced the same problems he had before; he was in deep debt and could not keep up the construction without more revenue. In post-war Las Vegas, "labor was plentiful but wartime regulations and restrictions still made building materials extremely scarce."⁴⁰ The inflated costs of building materials forced Wilkerson to try to raise money the Las Vegas way: turning to Lady Luck. Wilkerson, nonetheless, proved himself once again to be a hopeless gambler, losing over \$100,000 in just a few nights' time.⁴¹

As Wilkerson unraveled, Sedway turned to the enigmatic Meyer Lansky for help. For his part, Lansky was at first unimpressed with the Nevada desert, despising its stifling heat. After visiting the site, though, he "began to see visions of money being made in the air-conditioned desert."⁴² Sedway and Lansky wanted to take over the project and get the casino off the ground, but they required Wilkerson's permission to do so. In February 1946, Sedway and Lansky brought G. Harry Rothberg—an East Coast businessman with mob ties—onto the project.⁴³ Rothberg told Wilkerson that he and his contacts would finish the Flamingo and that Wilkerson would retain a one-third share in the casino. Once the Flamingo opened, Wilkerson would act as

³⁸ "El Cortez Sold," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 28, 1945: 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro's Books, 2006): 58.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 60.

the sole operator and manager, and Rothberg and his associates would be nothing more than silent partners and investors.⁴⁴ Even though Wilkerson was suspicious of yet more silent partners, Rothberg's proposal gave him creative control of the Flamingo, and he agreed to the terms, save one: Wilkerson wanted to retain complete ownership of the land. Under Lanksy's orders, Rothberg "organized a syndicate to buy sixty-six percent of Wilkerson's Flamingo."⁴⁵ Rothberg and Wilkerson signed their business contract on February 26, 1946, and Rothberg wired over \$1,000,000 to W.R. Wilkerson Enterprises.⁴⁶ One month later, Sedway and Greenbaum returned to the site with "a loudly-dressed character who enthusiastically presented himself to [Wilkerson] as his new partner."⁴⁷ The man, of course, was Benjamin Siegel.

Wilkerson was—despite his discomfort—familiar with organized crime. During the Prohibition Era, Wilkerson ran speakeasies in New York City, and many of his closest associates were—in some way, shape, or form—affiliated with gangsters.⁴⁸ Yet, Wilkerson himself was not a mobster, and Siegel made him particularly uneasy. Siegel was a high-profile character, having been on trial in 1942 for the murder of Harry Greenberg: a charge of which the court declared Siegel "not guilty."⁴⁹ Understandably, Wilkerson was concerned with having such a notorious figure within his ranks. He and Siegel, however, had more in common than either man may have liked to see; Siegel, too, had a gambling addiction, as well as a (what would prove to be) deadly love affair with Las Vegas. Siegel was a colorful character whose personality was alarmingly erratic. One moment, he could be boyishly charming, but the next, he could be fiercely

⁴⁴ Moe Sedway, Meyer Lansky, G. Harry Rothberg, and Billy Wilkerson, "Flamingo Business Contract," in Wilkerson Archives, February 26, 1946.

⁴⁵ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro's Books, 2006): 62.

⁴⁶ G. Harry Rothberg to W.R. Wilkerson Enterprises, "Check to W.R. Wilkerson Enterprises," in Wilkerson Archives, February 28, 1946.

⁴⁷ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro's Books, 2006): 62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 63-5.

⁴⁹ "'Bugsie' Siegel Freed in Gangland Murder Case," *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 1942: 1.

aggressive.⁵⁰ Markedly, Siegel was not as revered or respected as Meyer Lansky, and his fellow syndicate members viewed him as more of a reckless hothead than a brilliant businessman.

Despite his youthful carelessness, Siegel was an incredibly dangerous man, and he was unafraid of using murder to achieve his end-game. Early on in the Flamingo project, Siegel told

Wilkerson that he would “take care” of a particularly infuriating worker, petrifying Wilkerson.⁵¹

Yet, Siegel could also be genuine and thoughtful; George Kennedy recalled that when his brother died, Siegel offered him several thousand dollars, saying, “Take it, George. Go on, take it.”⁵²

Truly, Siegel’s inconsistent behavior both puzzled and terrified those with whom he worked, and it defined the atmosphere of the Flamingo’s construction site.

Most likely, Siegel became involved with the Flamingo out of a desire to become a legitimate businessman. He set out to Hollywood to distance himself from his gangster image and enter the business world. Similarly to his old friend Meyer Lansky, Siegel despised the desert with an almost irrational hatred. Yet, although Siegel chose to reside in Beverly Hills, Lansky pressured him to head the Flamingo project, and Siegel agreed.⁵³ Lucky Luciano could not understand the appeal of Las Vegas. In his eyes, it appeared as though Siegel “was gonna run over by millions just to build a plush hotel and casino in the middle of a desert.”⁵⁴ Siegel, for his part, was determined to win Wilkerson’s approval. Throughout the spring of 1946, Wilkerson and Siegel worked closely with one another, and Siegel proved his usefulness to Wilkerson by obtaining black-market building materials through his anonymous connections. Siegel’s actions helped to mitigate the effects of the post-war shortages, which in turn allowed work on the

⁵⁰ “Bugsy Siegel FBI Files,” July 30, 1946: 62-81518-288 and 62-2837-127, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

⁵¹ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro’s Books, 2006): 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 73-4.

⁵⁴ Martin Gosch, Richard Hammer, and Lucky Luciano, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1975): 291.

Flamingo to continue.⁵⁵ As time went on, Wilkerson's associates noticed that Siegel idolized Wilkerson, aiming to imitate his business acumen. Tom Seward noted that Siegel "did not want to be like Billy; he literally wanted to *be* Billy."⁵⁶ Siegel admired Wilkerson's lifestyle, and he aspired to mimic Wilkerson's success on his own. Wilkerson showed Siegel how to manage the construction site, and Siegel took careful notes.

Yet, the role of the diligent pupil did not come easily to Siegel. Ever the narcissist, Siegel wished to exert his influence over the project. As the project continued, Siegel's idolization for Wilkerson turned into "an insane, all-consuming jealousy," and he began to edge Wilkerson out of the proceedings.⁵⁷ While Wilkerson's and Siegel's business relationship soured, Siegel began to claim that the Flamingo was all his idea, and the mere mention of Wilkerson's name drove him into one of his infamous rages. Siegel's ego was on the line; he saw himself as the vanguard of a new era, one in which he would be "Las Vegas's self-appointed gambling czar."⁵⁸ Consequently, Siegel became more hands-on, deeply infuriating Wilkerson, who viewed Siegel's rashness as detrimental to the project's well-being. In order to make the best of the situation, the project was divided up: Siegel took charge of the hotel portion while Wilkerson headed everything else.⁵⁹ Siegel hired his own crew, and Del E. Webb became his head contractor. The Flamingo was a product of two teams, and communication between Siegel and Wilkerson was nonexistent. Siegel's success in gaining more control over the casino instilled within him a sense of reckless pride, and he and his team spent exorbitant amounts of money. Wilkerson fervently hoped that Siegel's bosses would pull him from the project, but his wish fell upon deaf ears.

⁵⁵ "Wholesale Unemployment Predicted Here, Due to Restrictions on Building," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 2, 1946: 9.

⁵⁶ William R. Wilkerson III, *The Man Who Invented Las Vegas* (Beverly Hills: Ciro's Books, 2006): 75-6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁹ "Bugsy Siegel FBI Files," May 21, 1946: 62-81518-284, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

Eventually, Siegel became unsatisfied with his portion. In May 1946, he turned to his mob associates, persuading them to let him take the helm. Siegel assured them that Wilkerson would remain involved in the creative process: a promise that Wilkerson knew to be false.⁶⁰ By this point, Wilkerson had had enough of Siegel. Thus, when Siegel offered Wilkerson compensation for his creative participation with corporate stock, not cash, Wilkerson accepted.⁶¹ As a result, on June 20, 1946, Siegel founded the Nevada Project Corporation of California, of which he named himself president.⁶² Siegel emerged as the principal stockholder in the Flamingo operation, while the others—including Wilkerson—were mere shareholders. The formation of the Nevada Project Corporation of California officially ended Wilkerson's reign as the project's head, and Siegel was free to do as he pleased. Step one, of course, was to fire all of Wilkerson's on-site associates and staff, replacing them with his own team. Del E. Webb became the Flamingo's head contractor, and Siegel delegated the interior decorating to Virginia Hill, his favorite paramour.⁶³ Under Siegel, the Flamingo project became a beast of another nature.

Unfortunately for Siegel, his vision clashed with the Civilian Production Administration (CPA). The CPA was the successor of the War Production Board, a federal agency that imposed tight restraints on building materials during World War II.⁶⁴ Although the agency's controls on materials officially ended on October 10, 1945, the CPA reinstated limitations on commercial building on March 26, 1946 for the construction of low-cost houses specifically intended for returning veterans.⁶⁵ Essentially, if Siegel and his team could not prove that construction on the

⁶⁰ "Flamingo Stockholder and Shareholders," in Wilkerson Archives, May 28, 1946.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Pacht, Elton, Warne, Ross & Bernhard Law Firm, "Creation of the Nevada Project Corporation," in *Articles of Incorporation for the Nevada Project* (Sacramento, California), June 20, 1946: 1.

⁶³ "The Flamingo's Principal Contractors," in *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 27, 1946: 2.

⁶⁴ James F. Smith, "Ben Siegel: Father of Las Vegas and the Modern Casino-Hotel," in *The Journal of Popular Culture* 25:4 (1992): 15.

⁶⁵ "Text of Order Issued in Veterans' Housing Program Curbing Other Building," in *New York Times*, March 27, 1946: 19.

Flamingo had begun before March 26, they would have to terminate the project. Expectedly, this ban generated massive amounts of criticism from the area's contractors, trade unions, suppliers, and resort hotel entrepreneurs.⁶⁶ The CPA informed Siegel that the Flamingo was in apparent violation of its decree, and although he was free to petition for clearance, he had to cease temporarily all construction on the site. Gus Greenbaum and Siegel's premier lawyer Louis Wiener, Jr. explained in a joint letter that construction on the Flamingo had begun on December 4, 1945, thus signifying its compliance with the CPA's order.⁶⁷ Appealing to the CPA's economic sense, Wiener also noted that there was a massive sum of money invested in the project—well over \$440,000. After reviewing Wiener's letter, the San Francisco Office district manager E.S. Bender approved the furtherance of the Flamingo's construction.

Special Agent A.E. Ostholthoff of the FBI, however, disagreed with Bender's findings. Ostholthoff claimed that Webb's construction team had not started construction on the site until after March 26. He appealed to Director J. Edgar Hoover, arguing that bribery was at the core of the issue.⁶⁸ Accordingly, a team of agents descended upon the area, observing Siegel's every move for several weeks. They claimed to have overheard a conversation in which Siegel and his associates coordinated their stories for the official date of construction.⁶⁹ With the FBI's support, the CPA arranged for a hearing that would determine whether or not the Flamingo was in violation of its order. To the CPA's dismay, Commissioner Owens ruled in Siegel's favor, claiming that the CPA's case contained miniscule amounts of evidence.⁷⁰ Ostholthoff resolved to pursue the case on his own, as he believed that Siegel was involved in a government conspiracy.

⁶⁶ "Ban on Building Is Called Worst Burocrat Idea," in *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 28, 1946: 10.

⁶⁷ "Bugsy Siegel FBI Files," July 30, 1946: 62-81518-288 and 62-2837-127, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

⁶⁸ "Bugsy Siegel FBI Files," July 31, 1946: 62-81518-42, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-81518-42.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 62-2837-153 and 62-81518-187.

Siegel's case was in no small way assisted by Senator Pat McCarran, who assured CPA officials that the state wanted the Flamingo to be built for economic and political reasons. That McCarran was associated with Siegel was unsurprising; in Siegel's own words, "We [mobsters] don't run for office; we own the politicians."⁷¹ Thus, using his circle of influential friends, Siegel managed to outmaneuver the CPA and carry on with the Flamingo.

Siegel faced another crisis in August 1946: one concerning labor. Reporter Richard King claimed that the Flamingo was harming the community, as veterans could not secure the necessary materials to build their houses.⁷² In King's eyes, wealthy men such as Siegel were profiting off of others' misfortunes, using their money for selfish causes. Siegel was so angered by King's claim that he met with King in-person, telling him that he and his team had purchased the bulk of their materials before the CPA's freeze order.⁷³ (Siegel did not deem it necessary to add that he obtained the majority of those materials through his black-market associates.) Furthermore, Siegel informed King that he had nearly two-hundred veterans working on the Flamingo project, and through his payroll, he contributed \$48,000 to the local economy weekly. A few months later, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* confirmed that Siegel had employed around three-hundred veterans to work on the Flamingo, giving Siegel a much-needed boost in local popularity.⁷⁴ Siegel also claimed that when his casino was completed, it would employ over five-hundred people, which won him the support of the influential Las Vegas Builders Exchange. Throughout the area, building trades unions and veterans jointly voiced their complaints against the CPA's order, believing that the CPA was hurting the local construction industry.⁷⁵ Siegel

⁷¹ Ibid., 62-2837-131 and 62-81518-169.

⁷² Richard King, "Gambling Palaces versus Houses for Veterans," in *Las Vegas Tribune*, August 1, 1946: 1.

⁷³ "Bugsy Siegel FBI Files," August 1, 1946: 62-81518-288, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

⁷⁴ "300, Not 1200, Employed on Flamingo Job," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 3, 1946: 13.

⁷⁵ "Wholesale Unemployment Predicted Here, Due to Restrictions on Building," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, October 2, 1946: 9.

simultaneously won his victory over the CPA and King, and the Flamingo lived to see another day—but not without more problems.

Siegel's perfectionistic tendencies costed his team staggering amounts of money. According to Lucky Luciano, Siegel wanted his resort to be "the most grandiose and lavish" in all of Las Vegas, but such a vision required money.⁷⁶ For some, inexplicable reason, Siegel wanted each bathroom in all of the ninety-three hotel rooms to have its own private plumbing and sewage system, the cost of which was over \$1,150,000.⁷⁷ Siegel's blatant ignorance about the project's specifics also cost him; he ordered more toilets than were needed, wasting another \$50,000. Moreover, Siegel enlarged the sizes of many key rooms, costing the team over \$150,000.⁷⁸ Siegel's peculiarities were even more evident in his own penthouse, where he spent \$21,750 to remove a pipe that was hanging too low. Further hindering Siegel's ability to stay on budget was his belief that he had to bribe his own suppliers. Adding to the tragedy was the fact that the Flamingo was plagued by a crew of dishonest workers and builders. Siegel paid for his materials, which were then taken into the casino and then brought out the back door. The suppliers were incredibly plucky, to say the least, for, Siegel was a dangerous enemy to make. Yet, Siegel was mostly unaware of these occurrences, and he artlessly continued to buy materials he had already purchased. Siegel was much more design-oriented; he fanatically destroyed and rebuilt entire wings at a time.⁷⁹ Desperately, Siegel wished to make the casino's design his own. He eschewed Wilkerson's idea of an isolated world for gamblers, installing windows onto the game floor.⁸⁰ By October 1946, the Flamingo's expenses were well over \$4,000,000, and his

⁷⁶ Martin Gosch, Richard Hammer, and Lucky Luciano, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1975): 315.

⁷⁷ Greg Bautzer, "Flamingo Expense Reports," in Wilkerson Archives, September 1946.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Dean Southern Jennings, *We Only Kill Each Other: The Life and Bad Times of Bugsy Siegel* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1967): 152.

bosses began to question Siegel's authority on the project. To Luciano, Siegel's activities in "the small, sleazy Nevada oasis called Las Vegas" were failing to reap their benefits.⁸¹ Siegel was seemingly alone in his vision and inventive flair, and his associates were concerned that they would be unable to make a profit if Siegel continued to spend so much money.

Panicked, Siegel declared that the Flamingo would open on December 26, 1946.

Wilkerson was infuriated upon hearing this announcement, and he argued that the Flamingo was not yet ready. Wilkerson, however, was not telling anyone anything that they did not already know; even Siegel knew that Wilkerson was right. Still, Siegel ignored Wilkerson's advice, for, he had become increasingly paranoid that his bosses would kill him if he did not start to generate revenue. Consequently, he was adamant for the casino to open as quickly as possible.

Advertisements in the newspaper claimed that the Flamingo would be "the World's Greatest Playground," and Siegel ensured that the local media was on his side by having John Cahlan—a reporter for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*—on his payroll.⁸² Siegel's team claimed that the Flamingo was "the most luxurious club in the world" and that it would become "one of the world's greatest resorts for the comfort and enjoyment of all pleasure-loving people."⁸³ Siegel was finally in his preferred element: acting as the star of the show. He proclaimed that the casino's first two nights were dedicated to the spirited people of Las Vegas, and even Wilkerson—despite his misgivings—joined in on the publicity stunt. Wilkerson told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* that the Flamingo "was built for Las Vegas."⁸⁴ Together, Siegel and Wilkerson put on quite the show, playing the joint-role of proud visionary.

⁸¹ Martin Gosch, Richard Hammer, and Lucky Luciano, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1975): 315.

⁸² "World's Greatest Playground," advertisement in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 20, 1946: 18.

⁸³ "An Evening in Las Vegas: The Flamingo," advertisement for the Flamingo, December 15, 1946.

⁸⁴ "Top Notch Floor Show Arranged," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 24, 1946: 6.

Siegel wanted his opening night to be as extraordinary as possible. In typical fashion, he turned to the Hollywood crowd, many of whom adored him. Siegel thought that he had commitments from celebrities such as Lucille Ball, William Holden, Ava Gardner, and Veronica Lake, but many were unable to come due to the terrible weather that plagued Los Angeles.⁸⁵ A few celebrities did attend the opening night, however, such as George Raft, Sunny Tufts, Eleanor Parker, and Sid Grauman.⁸⁶ All the excitement surrounding the Flamingo intrigued many Las Vegas locals, who flocked to their cars and created a traffic jam at the Flamingo's entrance.⁸⁷ The exterior of the casino was nothing short of spectacular; the drive was lined with evergreens, palm trees, and semi-tropical shrubs, all of which lit up in red and blue.⁸⁸ Siegel himself stood inside the casino, dressed handsomely in a tuxedo with a pink carnation in his pocket, greeting his guests. The Flamingo was adorned with plush carpeting, exquisite draperies, marble statues, green leather walls, and bright red furniture. The spectators were in awe of the casino's decadence; never before had they seen anything so glorious in the West. Hundreds of people piled in, inhibiting free movement within the casino's walls.⁸⁹ Adding to the splendor of the scene was the Cugat band, who put on "a dazzling show" that mesmerized the Flamingo's patrons.⁹⁰ The success of Siegel's band inspired the area's other casinos to hire live entertainment, causing columnist Bob Thomas to claim that "good, live entertainment in the West is making its last stand where it got its first start—in the gambling saloons of the frontier."⁹¹ Columnist and screenwriter Jimmy Starr declared the Flamingo to be "an adult's

⁸⁵ "New Downpour Drenches L.A.: Another Due," in *Los Angeles Examiner*, December 27, 1946: 1.

⁸⁶ "Flamingo Hotel Plays Host to Luminaries," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 30, 1946: 4.

⁸⁷ "Flamingo Opens with Loud Fanfare," in *Las Vegas Age*, December 29, 1946: 4.

⁸⁸ "Five-Million-Dollar Flamingo Resort Hotel Opens Here Tonight," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 26, 1946: 3.

⁸⁹ Wally Williams, "Flamingo Resort Hotel Jammed at Opening," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 27, 1946: 7.

⁹⁰ "Flamingo Hotel Plays Host to Luminaries," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 30, 1946: 4.

⁹¹ Bob Thomas, "Hollywood Today," in *Los Angeles Examiner*, December 29, 1946: 2.

fairyland, a place that might have been dreamed up by Walt Disney.”⁹² For many, though, the highlight of the night was seeing the dashing Siegel, who “[strode] all over the place like a proud papa,” feeling as though his extravagant tastes had finally paid off.⁹³

Not all went according to Siegel’s plans, however. Though no casino is complete without the elusive presence of Lady Luck, in the Flamingo’s first few nights, Lady Luck was far too prevalent for Siegel’s tastes. One gambler went home with over \$500,000, and he was not the only one to be so fortunate. The Flamingo lost around \$300,000 within its first weeks of operation, which deeply troubled Siegel.⁹⁴ His infamous temper was ignited when he learned that many of his dealers were giving away money even when the gamblers did not win. Upon learning of Siegel’s heavy losses, Lucky Luciano ominously declared that “only a miracle [could] save the Flamingo”—and, by extension, Siegel.⁹⁵ Adding to Siegel’s dismay was the fact that the crowds had dwindled significantly since the opening weeks, which forced him to advertise obsessively. Regrettably, Siegel’s energetic advertisement campaign did not succeed, and the crowds continued to decrease well into January.⁹⁶ In order to stop the continuous loss of money, Siegel was forced to close the casino, restaurant, and shops for a few months. He announced that the Flamingo would have a grand gala opening on March 1, 1947, on which the entire resort would be re-opened.⁹⁷ Siegel therefore had to negotiate a new loan in order to pay Webb’s construction team. On February 6, 1947, he received a generous loan of \$350,000 from the Valley Bank of Phoenix.⁹⁸ With a renewed sense of confidence, Siegel wished to buy out

⁹² “Daily Diary,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, January 6, 1947: 3.

⁹³ “Supercolossal Night Club Open to Tune of \$5,000,000,” in *Baton Rouge Advocate*, January 2, 1947: 16.

⁹⁴ “Flamingo Hotel Plans Gala Opening March 1,” in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 5, 1947: 9.

⁹⁵ Martin Gosch, Richard Hammer, and Lucky Luciano, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1975): 318.

⁹⁶ “The Flamingo in Gay Las Vegas,” advertisement in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, January 2, 1947.

⁹⁷ “Flamingo Hotel Plans Gala Opening March 1,” in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 5, 1947: 9.

⁹⁸ “Bugsy Siegel FBI Files,” May 21, 1946: 62-81518-284, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

Wilkerson's half of the Flamingo. Siegel offered Wilkerson \$600,000, half of which would be paid in May and the rest in August.⁹⁹ With G. Harry Rothberg's assistance, Siegel was one step closer to gaining complete control of the Flamingo.

Sadly, problems continued to mount for Siegel. In the early months of 1947, Siegel was confronted with the very real issue of competition. Hotel Last Frontier, El Cortez, and El Rancho Vegas booked fantastic live acts, challenging the Flamingo.¹⁰⁰ Siegel countered his competition by booking the biggest names—such as Lena Horne and the Andrews Sisters—for the Flamingo Room. Bud Abbott and Lou Costello also made their way to the Flamingo, and Siegel refused to relent his position as the premier destination for live entertainment.¹⁰¹ To ensure that the acts were constant, Siegel offered between \$10,000 and \$25,000 a week for the most renowned stars.¹⁰² While Siegel kept his hotel busy with various acts, however, rumors began to circulate about the property itself. Some thought that the Flamingo was struggling because Siegel was offensive toward the Las Vegas people; others asserted that local businesses were banding together in order to usurp Siegel.¹⁰³ The FBI had been tracking Siegel since his move out West and was privy to the reports surrounding him. An informant told the agency that Siegel believed that his mob bosses would assassinate him due to his incompetence. Although the FBI could not solidify any of the rumors, it did conclude that Siegel faced a crisis at the Flamingo. For Siegel, though, it was business as usual. If he feared for his life, he did not outwardly show it.

The reborn Fabulous Flamingo attracted much attention. Hollywood stars such as Gary Cooper and Susan Hayward showed up, and many reporters also stopped by for the gala opening.

⁹⁹ G. Harry Rothberg, "Release of All Demands," in Wilkerson Archives, March 19, 1947.

¹⁰⁰ "Gay Nineties," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 9, 1947: 3.

¹⁰¹ "Flamingo Hotel Plans Gala Opening March 1," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 5, 1947: 9.

¹⁰² "Great Show," in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, March 3, 1947: 4.

¹⁰³ "Bugsy Siegel FBI Files," January 6, 1947: 62-2837-588, 62-8158-364, and 62-81518-409, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

Gossip columnist Erskine Johnson remarked that the Flamingo looked like “an MGM movie set.”¹⁰⁴ To many in attendance, the Flamingo was unsurpassed in beauty and decadence. The Flamingo’s future seemed bright; columnist Brigham Townsend determined that it appeared as though “the pink bird [was] really gonna fly.”¹⁰⁵ Yet, despite the positive reactions, the Flamingo continued to experience heavy losses, partly due to the gambling debts that Siegel was unable to collect. Some of the gamblers’ checks bounced, and Siegel was forced to call upon Curtis Lynum, a local FBI agent, for assistance.¹⁰⁶ Siegel must have seen the irony of his having to ask the FBI for help, but regardless, the FBI could not help Siegel collect his money. In classic fashion, Siegel became desperate. He began to sell shares of the Nevada Project Corporation’s stock, and he threw more of his personal wealth into the property. Siegel also upped his advertising campaign, hiring Hank Greenspun of *Las Vegas Life* to work as his publicist. In his memoir, Greenspun described the Flamingo as being “a six-million dollar concrete-and-steel fantasy,” and he was intrigued by its enigmatic owner.¹⁰⁷ Looking at the Flamingo, Greenspun felt as though he had entered “a perfect paradise of majestic mountains, infinite skies, and balmy air that looked and felt like warm, breathable crystal.”¹⁰⁸ Greenspun viewed the Flamingo as a legitimate business, and Siegel compensated Greenspun well for his role as publicist.

Siegel’s public relations campaign pivoted in May 1947 when he decided to host a benefit concert at the Flamingo. The concert supported the fledgling Damon Runyon fund, which was dedicated to cancer research.¹⁰⁹ Siegel was more than courteous, offering up his glamorous

¹⁰⁴ Erskine Johnson, “In Hollywood,” *Daily Journal Gazette* (IL), March 15, 1947: 5.

¹⁰⁵ “Flamingo Hotel Opens Formally Tomorrow,” in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 28, 1947: 3.

¹⁰⁶ Curtis O. Lynum, *The FBI and I: One Family’s Life in the FBI during the Hoover Years* (Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania: Dorrance, 1988): 86.

¹⁰⁷ Hank Greenspun and Alex Pelle, *Where I Stand: The Record of a Reckless Man* (New York: D. McKay Co., 1966): 68.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁹ “Vegas Show Will Aid Cancer Fund,” in *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 23, 1947: 6.

Flamingo Room as the main event space.¹¹⁰ Siegel and his staff brought in the best acts from all over Las Vegas, appealing to the community's sense of charity. The event was a complete success; many of the attendees participated in the auction that helped to raise more than \$8,000 for the fund. Siegel was beyond pleased, and many of the patrons personally congratulated him on both his altruism and his beautiful casino. The Damon Runyon fundraiser, however, was not Siegel's only attempt at philanthropy. He had participated in an Eddie Cantor fundraiser earlier in the spring. Siegel also preferred to keep the amounts of his donations private, leading some to conclude that Siegel truly was a charitable soul.¹¹¹ Siegel's generous actions concealed inner turmoil; he could no longer cover the Flamingo's mounting costs. Siegel attempted to pay Webb and his crew, but several of his checks bounced, and he knew that he was in deep trouble.¹¹² Worried, Siegel paced the casino floor, muttering that "business was bad" and that he "had lost."¹¹³ It was then—in the spring of 1947—that the truth finally dawned on him: he was not a businessman. Unfortunately for Siegel, he found out too late.

By all accounts, June 20, 1947 was one of Siegel's best days. He was in Beverly Hills, grateful to be away from the madness of Las Vegas.¹¹⁴ As Siegel walked the streets of Beverly Hills, a group of eight men—all unidentified—sat at a table in the Flamingo, entirely uninterested in the show.¹¹⁵ Flamingo patrons recalled how they sat still all night, seemingly waiting for something. A man came up to them around 8:15PM, and they all nodded solemnly. Meanwhile, Siegel—accompanied by his old friend Allen Smiley—had made his way to Virginia Hill's mansion. Siegel and Smiley both read newspapers, oblivious to the arrival of someone

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹¹ "Youth Foundation Gets Siegel Check," in *Los Angeles Examiner*, June 24, 1947: 3.

¹¹² "\$150,000 Bad Checks Clue in Bugsy Slaying," *Daily News* (Los Angeles), July 2, 1947: 1 and 36.

¹¹³ "Bugsy Siegel FBI Files," August 9, 1947: 62-2837-697, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 62-8158-481, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 62-2837-688, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Bugsy%20Siegel%20>.

outside the living room window. Then, a little before 11:00PM, the mysterious visitor fired nine rounds through the window, four of which hit Siegel. Siegel died on the spot, holding a small slip of paper that read—ironically—“Good night, sleep well.”¹¹⁶ Most likely, the eight men who were sitting in the Flamingo were affiliated with Lucky Luciano.¹¹⁷ Luciano admitted as much in his memoir, claiming that the mob had arranged a meeting in Havana, Cuba to discuss “The Siegel Situation.”¹¹⁸ Thus ended the life of forty-one year old Benjamin Siegel—the gangster, the businessman, and the failed capitalist.

Wilkerson and Siegel were both victims of a dream: a dream that bankrupted and destroyed them. In Las Vegas, they saw endless opportunity, and the Flamingo became the encapsulation of both men’s vision and ultimate tragedy. Wilkerson—though business-savvy—had a crippling gambling addiction, and he was unable to summon the necessary funds to build his casino. He was thus forced to surrender his dream to the dashing Benjamin Siegel. Siegel, for his part, seemed like a perfect candidate to make the Flamingo into a reality; he was charming, resourceful, and independently wealthy. Yet, Siegel, too, had difficulties with money, and throughout the entire Flamingo project, his extravagant tastes proved to be too costly.¹¹⁹ In the end, his roguish independence became unforgivable to his associates, and he paid the ultimate price for his failure. After Siegel’s death, Moe Sedway, Gus Greenbaum, and Morris Rosen assumed control of the Flamingo, making a handsome profit in the following months. Perhaps, then, Siegel’s death was a financial godsend for the Flamingo, as the \$5,000,000 casino at last began to reap its long-awaited rewards. Siegel may have been a failed businessman, but he made

¹¹⁶ “Underworld Keeps Its Secrets about Siegel,” in *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1947: 5.

¹¹⁷ Jonathan Foster, “Stigma Cities: Birmingham and Las Vegas in the National Newspaper Media, 1945-2000,” in *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 50:4 (2007): 301.

¹¹⁸ Martin Gosch, Richard Hammer, and Lucky Luciano, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1975): 315.

¹¹⁹ Greg Bautzer, “Flamingo Expense Reports,” in Wilkerson Archives, September 1946.

Wilkerson's elusive dream a reality. Siegel's legacy is thus marked not by its victory, but by its place in history. Without Siegel's contributions, modern-day Las Vegas may not have become the capitalist world it is today, and for that, Siegel will always be remembered—if not appreciated.

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