



December 15, 2013

Opinion: The Jersey hustle

OLDER New Jerseyans may well remember the basis of a new film — “American Hustle” — that opened last Friday. It is a fictionalized account of Abscam, the FBI sting operation in the late 1970s and early 1980s that resulted in the conviction of three key New Jersey politicians, including a U.S. senator, a state senator and a member of the House of Representatives, as well as several other officials on charges including bribery and conspiracy.

Abscam put New Jersey on the map as hotbed of political corruption, a reputation that we maintain today.

The movie, directed by Philadelphia native David O. Russell, tells the story of a clever con man, Irving Rosenfeld, and his partner, Sydney Prosser, who are forced to infiltrate the wild arena of New Jersey politics and organized crime in the 1970s by FBI agent Richie DiMaso.

“American Hustle,” which last Thursday picked up seven Golden Globe nominations including best movie, actor and director, is a “fictionalized” account of “Abdul Scam” or Abscam, the FBI sting operation, which consisted of a fictional middle eastern sheikh named Karim Abdul Rahman (thus the “Abdul” scam moniker) offering bribes to political leaders in exchange for political asylum, money laundering and investment opportunities. The real-life con man that the FBI hires to play the sheik, Melvin Weinberg, is the character Irving Rosenfeld in the film, played by Christian Bale.

Included in the corruption mix were New Jersey’s Sen. Harrison A. Williams, Rep. Frank Thompson Jr., and Camden Mayor Angelo Errichetti, all of whom were convicted and served prison time for accepting bribes and conspiracy.

Ripple effects

Though Abscam took place more than 30 years ago, the ripple effects in New Jersey politics can be felt today. Politicians tend to serve for long periods of time here in the Garden State, and so we still live in the shadow of Abscam: With the resignation of Williams in 1982, New Jersey had an open U.S. Senate seat. Williams had served in the Senate for more than two decades. A 58-year-old Frank Lautenberg ran against Millicent Fenwick, a popular Republican congresswoman, and won an upset victory. He would serve in that seat for decades, retiring in 2000, only to return in 2003. He served until he passed away earlier this year at the age of 89.

In 1978, Chris Smith, a little-known 25-year-old Republican who worked in a sporting goods store challenged Rep. Frank Thompson, who had served as the congressman from New Jersey’s fourth congressional district since 1955. He lost miserably, but ran again in

1980. Expectations were low, but then Thompson was indicted for bribery and conspiracy. Smith beat Thompson with 57 percent of the vote, and he continues to hold the seat, usually with more than 60 percent of the vote.

Angelo Errichetti was the powerful mayor of Camden who garnered 88 percent of the vote while simultaneously being elected to the state Senate. He was convicted of bribery in 1981, though his fierce grip of the city's politics had begun to loosen the previous year as rumors of his eminent demise circulated. With Errichetti's conviction, the path was paved for the election of Camden's first African-American mayor, Melvin Randolph "Randy" Primas, who would serve from 1981 until 1990.

But the void left by Errichetti was an opportunity for another political operative who saw Camden's potential as a power base. George Norcross, the powerful South Jersey Democratic party boss, was elected chair of the Camden County Democratic Party 1989. His vise-like grip on power in South Jersey, and increasingly the state, would evoke Errichetti's envy.

Culture of corruption

The thing that Abscam did not change in New Jersey is the culture of corruption – subsequent generations of politicians still possess that feeling of omnipotence: "Nothing will happen to me. I won't get caught."

In the past 10 years, 17 mayors have been arrested for corruption in New Jersey, including those from most of New Jersey's major cities – Atlantic City, Hoboken, Newark, Paterson and Trenton.

In 2009, 44 political and religious leaders in the state – including six of the mayors mentioned above — were arrested for corruption in Operation Bid Rig.

The record shows that Abscam wasn't the end of corruption in the state. The clothes that the players wear may have changed significantly – narrower ties, narrower lapels – but the culture – disappointingly – hasn't changed.

[**View Original Article**](#)