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The Valachi Papers

The Work

In 1964 Joseph Valachi (1904-1971), a Mafia informant, was urged by the U.S. Department of Justice to write a personal history of his underworld career with the so-called Cosa Nostra. Although Valachi was only expected to fill in the gaps in his formal questioning, the resulting account of his thirty-year criminal career was a nearly twelve-hundred-page manuscript.

In 1965 U.S. attorney general Nicholas Katzenbach authorized the public release of Valachi's manuscript, and gave author Peter Maas the job of editing the huge manuscript after he broke Valachi's story in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Katzenbach believed that publication of Valachi's story would aid law enforcement and possibly encourage other criminal informers to step forward.

In response to the book's pending publication, the Italian American newspaper *Il Progresso* denounced the book on the grounds that it would reinforce negative ethnic stereotypes. The American Italian Anti-Defamation Council then promoted a national campaign against the book, claiming the issue to be a civil rights matter. The Justice Department met with an Italian American delegation demanding that if the book's publication was not stopped they would appeal directly to the White House. Katzenbach reversed his decision on the book after a meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson, in an action that embarrassed the Justice Department. On May 10, 1966, Katzenbach asked a district court to stop Maas from publishing the book—the first time that a U.S. attorney general had ever tried to ban a book.

Although Maas was never permitted to publish his edition of Valachi's original memoirs, he was allowed to publish a third-person account based upon interviews he himself had conducted. These formed the basis of *The Valachi Papers*, which Putnam published in 1968.

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