

Book Review #2

Cutting the Wire: Gambling Prohibition and the Internet

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Reviewed by Betty McNeal

Cutting the Wire: Gambling Prohibition and the Internet traces America's long-standing love/hate relationship with gambling as the pendulum swings according to our moral, social, political, legal or economic moods. We get a quick tour that shows gambling at various times as: deplored, condemned, banned, criminalized, punished, tolerated, sanctioned, licensed, regulated, investigated, incorporated, profited and taxed. This sweeping history from colonial days to the cyberspace era puts online gambling in context and shows its logical emergence through modern technology. That said we must nonetheless be careful to keep the Internet gaming question front and center lest it get lost in the chapters about gambling in other times and by other means.

To pluck Internet gaming out of the landscape the book focuses first on U. S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, circa 1960. RFK in his zeal to wipe out gambling pushed through the Wire Act or Wire Wagering Act to clamp down on mobsters in illegal betting operations. In 2005 we're stuck with the Wire Act as the main weapon to fight Internet gaming unheard of over 40 years ago when the law took effect.

The Wire Act served law enforcement well for several decades as shown in Schwartz' extensive discussion of the race wire service that sent wagering information across state lines and kept organized crime in the unlawful betting business (Chapter 4, "Booking the Bookies"). Chapter 5, "A Money Jungle from Sea to Shining Sea", shows a change of public policy toward respectability for legalized gaming through state lotteries and casinos, including Indian casinos. "Point, Click, and Bet" brings us up to date with Internet gaming and shows Congressional attempts to deal unsuccessfully with this modern pastime that attracts billions of dollars from U. S. players every year.

To show the Wire Act being tested and applied today, Schwartz gives us a detailed story of a U. S. citizen, Jay Cohen who was convicted and sentenced for owning an Internet gambling company on the small island nation of Antigua and accepting bets from people here. Getting all sides of the story Schwartz takes us to the man himself as he interviews Cohen in prison at Nellis Air Force Base outside Las Vegas. Another example of Wire Act controversy shows how the law was disputed before the World Trade Organization (WTO) after a complaint brought by Antigua. Follow up orders to the WTO case are still pending.

Scanning the many problems in *Cutting the Wire*, it seems nothing is permanently settled on the legality of Internet gambling in this country. Real problems of regulation, licensing and control go unaddressed. We are not surprised that the book ends with little hope for consensus and great despair for rational handling of the online gaming industry.

Cutting the Wire provides an interesting read. This is creative non-fiction, full of metaphors and colorful expressions. For example, the author brings up "Camelot", a pundit-created term referring to the John F. Kennedy White House years of youth

and glamour and great hope. You will miss the cleverness of the heading “Profiles in Prosecution” about Robert Kennedy’s crime cracking spree if you don’t recognize it as a take-off on “Profiles in Courage”, the Pulitzer Prize winning book by brother John, when he was a U. S. Senator. Novel phrases and witty expressions keep you awake, absorbed and involved. This change from a strict academic text tags this book as popular history with nuance and opinion beyond the facts—a plus for reaching a wider audience.

This is also a book for reference. It has footnotes and a book list to make gaming researchers and professional historians happy. All readers get to see U. S. gaming through the lens of time. We can watch as gaming develops, stand above the heated views of advocates and antagonists, gain perspective and depth. *Cutting the Wire* is therefore a key to understanding, not easy solutions. Added to the bookshelf of each Congressman and Senator it might awaken a few to the realities of Internet wagering. Whether the U. S. keeps the lid on Internet gaming or releases it full-blown, an instructive history such as this stands ready to inform serious deliberations on the next step to take.