

Eli Black and the death that changed Modern American Business

I am currently working on a biography of Eli Black, the former Chief Executive Officer of United Brands Corporation who, on February 3, 1975, committed suicide by throwing himself from the 44th floor of the Pan American Building (now, MetLife) in midtown Manhattan. He was later discovered to have bribed the president of Honduras and other leaders of Central and South American countries to lower tariffs on United Fruit bananas. His actions were a product of long-standing US business practices in Latin America and a concern for his shareholders who had been losing money since the merger of United Fruit with his other holdings (including Morrell Meat Co.) to form United Brands in the late 1960s.

My interest in Black is manifold and grows out of my research on the United Farm Workers. In the archive, I discovered Black as an early negotiator with Cesar Chavez who wanted to avoid the repercussions of the boycott on products grown under the company named Inter-Harvest, a subsidiary of United Brands. Fellow businessmen maligned Black—often in anti-Semitic terms—for settling labor disputes with the UFW. He saw the destructive nature of the boycott well before his contemporaries. I plan to explore the tension between Jewish and non-Jewish owners in my book, and am intrigued by Black as a thoughtful, even visionary leader of a company.

Eli Black's suicide offers much more than a sensational tale of a tragic hero. He was a deeply religious man who had studied to become a rabbi. He was also an extremely successful businessman, which makes him a very familiar character in the history of Jewish Americans. In many ways, Black's story mirrors that of the fictional character of David Levinsky in the classic novel by Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1917). In that novel, Cahan captures the story of an immigrant from Eastern Europe who comes to the United States and becomes a successful owner of a cloak company at the expense of his religion and his personal happiness. Eli Black, who was an immigrant and the son of a rabbi from Poland, similarly tried unsuccessfully to balance his secular and spiritual endeavors. In this regard, the story is a classic Old World versus New World immigrant tale.

I believe Black's suicide initiated a new way of doing business in Latin America. Prior to Black's death, US companies often operated on their own and with the clandestine support of the US government in facilitating business abroad. By bribing Honduran officials, Black was operating according to a well-established code of business conduct that predated him. After Black's death, the United States government became much more aggressive and overt in facilitating trade agreements that favored US companies. In essence, the era of "free trade" agreements expanded as a result of the tragic events surrounding Black's suicide.