The Godfather:

by Bill Dal Cerro and John Mancini

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Francis Ford Coppola’s Oscar-winning epic The Godfather. Since 1972, this film has had a special place in America’s heart. Over the years we have been told that the saga represents family, honor, and the immigrant struggle.

We are likewise told that The Godfather restored a more traditional America after the tumultuous decade of the 1960s — the Vietnam War, racial strife, political assassinations, rampant drug addiction, and domestic chaos. In short, America needed a return to an era of rules and reasonable men.

The Godfather, its defenders say, isn’t really about criminals, or even Italians. It was, and remains, a work of art that wove our nation’s immigrant roots with the struggles of capitalism and the eternal quest for justice. To underscore this point, Mario Puzo, author of the original book and co-writer of the movie, quoted Honore de Balzac’s famous statement that “behind every fortune is a crime.” The Italian underpinnings were seen as superfluous.

Even Marlon Brando, a stalwart liberal, when asked before the film’s release about the stereotyping of Italians as gangsters, simply rationalized it: “This is a film about American capitalism.” One could also say the same about the heroic cowboys who regularly wiped out Native Americans in John Ford movies, clearing the way for the vast Caucasian real estate acquisition.

It is a simple, brutal fact that such “enabling” attitudes are what led The Godfather to become the single most regressive cultural and political influence on any American ethnic group since D.W. Griffith’s civil war epic, Birth of A Nation (1915). It may have advanced the art of the film but it also set Italian Americans back nearly 100 years, resurrecting the crude, amoral stereotypes of the community first created by turn-of-the-century “yellow journalists.” What was once considered prejudice was — and still is — considered “art.”

Setting aside any talk of quality, an objective look at The Godfather reveals more harm than good. Shall we count the ways?

- It criminalized the history of the Italian American immigrant experience.
- It reaffirmed the prejudicial belief that criminal behavior is an essential aspect of Italian culture.
- It distorted the way Italian Americans viewed themselves (and still does).
- It frustrated Italian American artists in Hollywood who have tried to present Italian culture in non-stereotypical ways.
- It influenced the way “objective” journalists report on crime.
- It emboldened ambitious state’s attorneys to view Italian surnamed criminals as meal tickets.
- It deflected the focus of the FBI from pursuing more dangerous criminal groups such as drug cartels, street gangs, and Al Qaeda.
- It stifled the careers of several national Italian American politicians.

Worst of all, it has created a billion-dollar spin-off industry which has since spread to every conceivable media outlet in America — television, books, theater, advertising, cable, video games, and even, as of 2004, children’s programming: Shark Tale, an animated film which caricatures Italian Americans as surely as the racist — and now banned — Disney cartoon Song of the South caricatured African Americans in 1946.

If The Godfather was the answer to a battered America’s prayers, it was also, first and foremost, a perverse inspiration to many Italian American males.

THE SHAME IS OVERCOME

The 1940s and 1950s were, for Italian American males, eras of public humiliation, an outgrowth of the seeming incompetence and cowardice of Italy’s armed forces during the Second World War. Joe DiMaggio and the world of sports only carried so far in a man’s world. World War II still loomed large during this era. History...
Assessing the Damage

Forty years of propaganda has made Italic criminals an integral part of Americana. New ground was broken when Steven Spielberg used Italiens as gangster sharks in a 2004 children’s animation, Shark Tale (far right).

was what the English and Anglo-Americans said it was. Jokes and zingers abounded, as they still do, denigrating Italian military prowess.

Similarly, in this country, Italian American soldiers, although they comprised the largest ethnic fighting force overseas, found their accomplishments overlooked and seldom lauded. Heroes like Sgt. John Basilone and ace fighter pilot Don Gentile were overshadowed by Hollywood’s chosen golden boy, Audie Murphy. Images in American popular culture were no better, be they the bumbling immigrant in Life With Luigi or a talking mouse on The Ed Sullivan Show named Topo Gigio. Ominously, the only Italian men treated with any degree of seriousness in the media were Italian crooks, whether real (appearing at the U.S. Congressional hearings of the 1950s and 60s) or rehashed (television’s popular The Untouchables).

The salvation for Italian American males came with the publication of Mario Puzo’s 1968 pulp novel, The Godfather. There was no surrender or white flag in the gang wars. Instead of columns of war-weary Italians shrugging off to prison camps, “men of honor” defended their turf to the death (“we go to the mattresses!”). When brought to the big screen in 1972, The Godfather restored the mako to the Italian American male image.

Jewish Americans also suffered during this period, and well before, from the stereotype of the sedentary nebbish until Israel’s spectacular victory in the Six Day War (1967). Thereafter, the Israelis became world-class fighters, and American Jews still bask in the reflected glory.

It has been a perverse inspiration to many Italian American males.

MACHO TURNS TO RIDICULE

While American Jews rose up the ladder of respect on the shoulders of the Israelis, as well as their own political and financial hegemony in this country, Italian Americans found that The Godfather wasn’t the magic makeover for which they had hoped. Puzo’s gimmicky novel, amplified via Coppola’s grand opera theatrical film, devolved into comical spin-offs and shallow, self-serving parodies (e.g., HBO’s The Sopranos). Even once-respected terms within Italian culture — ‘godfather,’ ‘family,’ ‘soprano’ — are now sources of mockery by non-Italians. Ultimately, the Italian American gangster has become an overweight, blue-collar guy with a goofy nickname and only a passing command of the English language.

Forty years after The Godfather, the Italian American gangster is anything but intimidating. His crimes pale in comparison to other ethnic groups who perpetrate billions in Medicaid fraud, financial schemes, identity theft, and drug trafficking. These crimes dwarf the sums that Italian thugs still gain from sports betting and loan sharking. There is little macho left in the aging wiseguys whom the FBI regularly parade before the media. Some of these goons have only nicknames to separate them from their suburban neighbors.

Instead of an Italian American version of Robin Hood or Billy the Kid, the “made men,” both then and now, are usually high school drop-outs, pathetic shadows of the “men of honor” the cinema has conned us with. It is instructive to note, for exam-

(Cont’d. on p. 29)
ple, that real-life wiseguys, impressed by the “classiness” of the fictional Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather*, began cleaning up their own verbiage and dressing in three-piece suits. And the real-life inspiration for the fictional Don Vito Corleone—another Vito, the New York crime boss Vito Genovese—was far from a kind, grandfatherly figure. He murdered people, made millions off of heroin, and died in prison. One can’t imagine him cavorting happily in a tomato garden with a child.

In short, “real” Italian gangsters overtook “real” Italian gangsters in the public’s imagination. Even though 99.9% of Italians, here and in Italy, had nothing to do with crime or criminal gangs, *The Godfather* became the holy gospel of the Italian immigrant experience, and the kick-ass Corleones became role models of toughness to Americans from all walks of life.

One can only imagine what Coppola must think now when he sees his classical dialogue and nomenclature applied to doddering street thugs.

Objective journalists delight in playing up Italian thugs’ nicknames, or quoting lines from the movie while covering court cases. FBI agents and up-and-coming state’s attorneys know that prosecuting Italian named gamblers will move them up the career ladder. Politicians such as former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, who prosecuted mob guys, frequently mimics Don Vito Corleone at public fundraisers—not to scare people, but to amuse them.

Essentially, Coppola’s work of art launched an age of ridicule.

**A DEEPLY FLAWED CULTURE?**

Talk to any average Italian American across the nation and ask him if anyone in his family is a criminal, associates with criminals, or raises his kids to be criminals. The answer will be a largely resounding, “No. We’re good Americans.” Why, then, do so many of them embrace a film that portrays them as bad Americans? How can they not see that the fictional Don Vito Corleone, as former New York governor Mario Cuomo once pointed out, is basically a caricature of their own fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers who were genuine “men of honor”—that is, hard-working Americans? Why do they not distinguish between the form of *The Godfather* (its cinematic skill) and its content (the negative imagery)?

In addition to living vicariously through its tough-guy characters, millions of Italian Americans—men and women—still worship *The Godfather* because it provides a nebulous sense of pride about their heritage. In truth, they probably know very little, if anything, about Italy or Italian culture. Watching *The Godfather* provides them, they think, with a direct pipeline to it. (“Yes, I’ve been to Italian weddings like that....” “I love cannoli”....”My grandfather had a tomato garden just like Don Vito’s”).

Watching a film is much easier than actually reading a book or traveling to Italy.

This “dumbing down” isn’t unique to Italian Americans, of course; however, the extent to which they refuse to move beyond the godfather image is disturbing. One can understand, if not condone, culturally ignorant Italian Americans from the post-WWII era embracing the macho mafia lore, but there is no such excuse today. Assimilation has taken place. We live in an era of so-called sensitivity. Stereotyping is no longer accepted.

Sadly, what the previous generation has passed down to the current one is the same sense of ethnic fatalism characteristic of their immigrant grandparents—who, to be fair, were also cruelly caricatured by the popular media over a century ago. It is basically the psychological equivalent of a shoulder shrug, a gesture of shame and low self-esteem likewise greenhorn ancestors: “Don’t make waves...Stop speaking Italian...We are inferior...We’re lucky that America let us come here.”

In fact, the Founding Fathers of our country rejected their English homeland and took inspiration from another nation: Italy. It was from classical Rome and the Italian Renaissance that people like Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams took succor. There is even a real “godfather,” if you will, who guided our new nation: the political writer Filippo Mazzei, who provided his Virginia neighbor, Thomas Jefferson, with feedback and ideas for the Declaration of Independence.

The rejection of classical Italian culture, or even an appreciation of notable Italians throughout American history, is what has led to the current erosion of any sense of genuine ethnic pride. It is a long, sad slide from real people like Mazzei to the fictional Don Vito to the panoply of goombas, guidos, and reality show rejects who permeate every American media outlet today.

**CINEMATIC SCARLET LETTER**

If the media is your source of knowledge, Italian Americans top the chart for criminal mischief. Thanks to *The Godfather*, America doesn’t enjoy hearing about the endless war on drugs against Hispanic and Asian criminals. Corporate crime is multi-ethnic and boring, and Eastern European mega-thieves who regularly fleece America have little cultural romance about.
Godfather (cont’d. from p.29)

This classic scene of Don Corleone with his grandson in an Italian American garden allows the viewer to feel the humanity in this thief and murderer. Both Puzo and Coppola reached deeply into their love of heritage to imbue gangsters with traits of their good relatives.

Predictably, most Italian Americans fell for the hype; they were all-too-eager to embrace this grafting of their culture to outsized criminals on the big screen. It was magic to see “an Italian story” sweep America. Pizzerias, delis, and gift shops became amplifiers of the message that the Italians were the big shots. Move over Murder, Inc., stand aside Asian Tongs. Suddenly, other ethnic crime syndicates were minor league. It is noteworthy that no other American ethnic group has ever achieved the cinematic status of Italians in crime, despite scattered attempts by various filmmakers (e.g., The Yakuza by Sydney Pollack, Once Upon a Time in America by Sergio Leone, and The Road to Perdition by Sam Mendes).

AMERICA’S ETCH-A-SKETCH

Unlike pioneer filmmaker D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation (1915), the scandalous civil war epic which demonized African Americans, The Godfather won’t “sleep with the fishes” very soon. As demonstrated by that last sentence, the film’s famous catch-phrases, and its story of family loyalty, have become part of accepted Americana. It is even a favorite film of President Barack Obama — a cutting irony, given that a former president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, praised Griffith’s racist masterpiece (“It is history written in lightning!”). Times and sensibilities have changed, and yet the idea of Italians-as-criminals holds strong. The content of the film isn’t seen as prejudicial at all. Indeed, in the film You’ve Got Mail, Tom Hanks’s character refers to The Godfather as “the source of all wisdom.”

A few years ago, the American Film Institute voted The Godfather the second-greatest American film of all time, after Citizen Kane. It has even crept into Sight & Sound magazine’s famous “Critic’s Poll,” a Top Ten list of all-time great movies voted on by critics around the world every ten years. Yet, in the final analysis, is Godfather truly an original work of art, or of propaganda masquerading as art—a blurring of fact and fantasy?

Propaganda is a technique whereby facts are selectively omitted in order to collectively influence an audience, either to buy a product or, in this case, to accept an image of a community. And propaganda quite often uses stereotypes—that is, a limited way of looking at a particular ethnic group, over and over again.

In 1968, when a down-and-out novelist named Mario Puzo needed to erase some gambling debts, he knew that writing a mafia story would catch on enough to make some money. Newspapers and TV Congressional hearings had long conditioned public perceptions. What he could not have predicted is that, when his pulp novel was finally turned into a movie, he had successfully melded Italian culture and criminality into one.

As it turned out, the film broke box-office records, and it remained, for over a decade, one of the highest-grossing American movies of

“\textbf{I wanted to create a romantic myth, like the cowboy.}”

- Mario Puzo, 1999

The results of those investigations, skewed toward a secret criminal organization called La Cosa Nostra, allegedly run by Italian Americans and controlling crime in all fifty states, took hold of the public imagination. Puzo’s novel and Coppola’s film added the mythology and the cultural texture just as Da Vinci and Michelangelo transformed the Bible from words to paintings. Scholars who exposed the media’s obsession with Italian criminals, such as Professor Dwight Smith in his 1974 book The Mafia Mystique, were lonely voices in the wilderness. Solid research can’t compete with Hollywood hype.

Such distortion and derision came much earlier, however, in a template magnified by no less than the U.S. government, which held a series of three Congressional hearings on gangsters and low-lives during the post-WWII era: the Kefauver Commission of 1954, the Valachi Hearings of 1963, and the President’s Commission on Organized Crime of 1967. Such Congressional hearings, if held today, and if focused on other ethnic groups, would immediately be denounced by the media as fostering negative stereotyping.

In his seminal book, The Story of English, writer Robert MacNeil explains why: “Hollywood’s love affair with gangster movies has ensured a wide dissemination of criminal slang. The fact that these words—in the minds of many—now come with Italian accents, has to do with the power of the media, not the mafia.”
all-time, surpassing even Gone With the Wind. To add icing on top of the cannoli cake, American film critics, with few exceptions (John Simon and Stanley Kauffmann among them), praised Coppola’s work as “the greatest gangster movie ever made in this country” (so wrote the New Yorker’s Pauline Kael).

FIRST DO NO HARM
Some high-profile Italian Americans did pan the film, particularly singers Tony Bennett (born Anthony Benedetto) and Dean Martin (born Dino Crocetti). Bennett called the film’s linking of crime with Italian culture “pernicious,” adding, “It gives the impression that organized crime is all Italian, when, in fact, it consists of many nationalities.” Martin didn’t like what it did to the Italian people: “There was no call for that,” he told reporter Kay Gardella of the New York Daily News. “I’ve met gangsters in real-life, and they weren’t Italian. They were an Irishman, a Jew, and an all-American type.”

In 1974, the St. Louis priest and social activist Father Sal Polizzi told TIME Magazine that “every time someone uses the word ‘mafia’, they take away my civil rights.” Thirty-six years later, in 2010, Father Polizzi—who’s parents were first-generation Sicilians—hadn’t changed his views: “Can you believe they’ve been showing that movie all day on cable, and on Thanksgiving on top of it? What an absolute disgrace. I still go out of my way to tell people that [The Godfather] is an insult to both my mother and my father.”

In 1987, the Chicago Tribune columnist Mike Royko, a non-Italian, even coined the phrase “The Godfather Syndrome.” Royko, who was defending then-New York governor Mario Cuomo against charges of “oversensitivity” for speaking out against anti-Italian slurs, noted how Coppola’s film perpetuated a stereotype so powerful that it made objective journalists view Italian surnamed politicians with suspicion.

Indeed, there is a veritable laundry list of Italian American pols whose careers were hampered by “The Godfather Syndrome”:

Senator John Pastore (D-RI), a popular potential VP candidate for President Johnson’s reelection campaign (he was nixed after aides pointed out that his “eye-italian” last name would be a handicap, given the 1963 Valachi organized crime hearings);

Joseph Alioto, the dynamic mayor of San Francisco in the 1960s who successfully sued LOOK Magazine for defamation for associating him with criminals, but who later lost bids both for California governor and a possible VP spot with Jimmy Carter;

the late Albert Rosellini, the reform-minded governor of Washington State during the 1960s whose comeback bid in the mid-70s was derailed by “Godfather” caricatures;

and the late Geraldine Ferraro (D-NY), the first female vice presidential candidate on a major ticket (1984), whom ABC-TV’s Sam Donaldson challenged on national television to prove her family wasn’t in the Cosa Nostra.

Even intellectual former Governor Mario Cuomo, once considered a serious contender for the U.S. Presidency, refused to proceed with a campaign in 1991, citing concerns about how negative media coverage would affect his family. It remains to be seen if his son Andrew, the current New York governor, will be able to transcend “the Godfather Syndrome” should he make his own planned bid for the White House in 2016.

MEDIA LAND VS. REALITY
Anyone who watches the myriad cable stations finds a fiber-optic America that is a lot different than the one we actually live in. Nearly every TV series and movie is overloaded with minority and female super characters, whether on a fictitious police force, a hospital staff, or legal practice. Judging by these shows, America has successfully transcended racism, anti-feminism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. But one group still remains a stock character in Media Land: the Italian American. Need a mobster? Need a white guy with serious flaws? Need a bumbling comical sidekick? These voids are filled easily with characters having Italian surnames.

The Godfather saga and its progeny continue to dominate the cable stations regardless of how dated they are. The Godfather

(Cont’d. on p. 32)
saga of the 1970s can usually be found at least once a month somewhere on cable. And there are always Godfather festivals and anniversaries to put the series in a weeklong loop. It is easily more prevalent than the Wizard of Oz, Casablanca, and Gone with the Wind. Such an immortal presence, along with reruns of The Sopranos, My Cousin Vinny, Analyze This, and GoodFellas, ensures that succeeding generations of young Americans are being imprinted with Italian stereotypes.

Despite the abundance of Italian American lawyers, doctors, teachers, police officers, firemen, businesspeople, sports figures, and military types in real society, you will rarely find them on television or in the cinema. Italian media stereotyping is so ubiquitous that even Italian American actors have internalized the negativity and generally play non-Italian roles. Screenwriters use formulas to create characters. Why waste valuable screen time to develop a suspicious character when you can give him or her an Italian name? The audience expects it and is always rewarded.

Remember, there were no good Italians in The Godfather saga, just different degrees of thieves and murderers unless you count the peripheral wives and youngsters. Ditto GoodFellas and The Sopranos.

In 2015, the Italic Institute of America completed a sampling of over 1,500 Hollywood movies made about Italians since 1928. Two statistics about The Godfather stood out:

- There was a sharp increase in films featuring Italians as gangsters after the film’s release (81%), an increase which shows no signs of slowing down forty years later; and

- Of more than 500 films featuring Italians as gangsters, 87% of those movies portrayed fictional mobster characters with no basis in reality — in short, phony stereotypes, dreamed up by hack Hollywood screenwriters.

Like a virus, this pattern has since spread to American culture in general: advertisements, TV shows, and fictional novels continually feature evil or corrupt characters with Italian surnames or mannerisms. And, since the media make absolutely no attempt to balance such blanket negativity, “real” Italians continue to overwhelm “real” Italians, an irony which would have dazzled—and surely sickened — a writer like Luigi Pirandello (himself a Sicilian). The fact that there are more Italian cops than Italian crooks in America is seen as fantasy.

Filmmakers who have tried to fight this tsunami of negativity quickly found out what they were up against.

In 1996, for example, actor Stanley Tucci, frustrated at endless stereotypical portrayals of Italians on-screen, made Big Night, a comedy-drama about two Italian immigrant brothers in 1950s New Jersey (Tucci and Tony Shalhoub). Studio heads, although they liked the script, were uneasy about financing the film unless Tucci “put a mob guy in it”—which, in their minds, made the film more palatable to audiences, more believable as an “Italian” story. Tucci refused. Big Night was eventually financed independently.

In a tragic irony, the people who have fostered this now-institutionalized prejudice were the Italic brains behind The Godfather: Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola.

In 1999, just before he died, Puzo came clean about his motives: “Italian criminals never called each other godfather. Never. It was a term that I made up. I wanted to create a romantic myth, like the cowboy.”

And in 2003, in an interview in Cigar Aficionado magazine, Coppola shocked even his interviewer when he admitted that he didn’t know anything about Italian criminals. Quoth Coppola: “I just assumed that Italian criminals were no different than regular Italians. I based them on my Italian relatives, who, of course, were not criminals. (Ed. note: Coppola’s father, Carmine, was a respected musician in Arturo Toscanini’s renowned NBC orchestra of the 1930s and 40s.) It was like making a film about Jewish traditions without knowing any Jewish traditions.”

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CODA

It took decades, but D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation was finally put into proper context. It is rarely, if ever, shown; indeed, an announced screening in L.A. back in 2003 was canceled by the mere hint of a possible protest. It is now confined to art-house theaters or film study classrooms, where critics and instructors alike are careful to distinguish between the film’s undeniable artistry (form) and its blatant racism (content).

In yet another example of cultural irony, the “D. W. Griffith Award,” given annually to a respected Hollywood filmmaker, had Griffith’s name removed in 1999. It was seen as unseemly to give out an award tied to a filmmaker who managed to distort and uglify the soul of an entire American ethnic group via a single film.

And one of the chief proponents behind the change? Francis Ford Coppola!

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