

TALKING POINTS: “THE GODFATHER” AND STEREOTYPING IN HOLLYWOOD

- The U.S. entertainment industry presents Italian American characters and plots in a manner that is unbalanced, unfair, and damaging to the collective reputation of an estimated 26 million Americans of Italian descent, the nation’s fifth largest ethnic group.
- The principal agent responsible for such a characterization of Italian Americans is Francis Ford Coppola’s Godfather trilogy, based on Mario Puzo’s novel of the same name.
- The increase in mob movies can be attributed to the commercial and critical success of “The Godfather.” Prior to its release in 1972, only 109 movies about organized crime had been made, according a Year 2000 report from the Italic Studies Institute, Floral Park, N.Y. After 1972, however, the number soared to 321, an average of eight mob movies a year for the past 28 years.
- The Italic Studies report reviewed all films made in Hollywood from 1928 to the beginning of the year 2000, that featured Italian or Italian American characters.
- Of the 1,078 films that fit this description, an overwhelming 73 percent portray Italians in a negative light.
- Of the 27 percent that featured positive portrayals of Italians and Italian Americans, most of the characters were in supporting rather than central roles.
- Of the negative Italian American characters, 33 percent were boors, buffoons, bigots or bimbos.
- Characters that were involved in organized crime accounted for 40 percent, but of the 430 crime films, only 14 percent were based on the lives of actual people. The remaining 86 percent of the films featured entirely fictional Italian American criminals.
- The portrayal of Italian Americans almost exclusively as gangsters conflicts with the facts. According to the U.S. Justice Department, only about 5,000 people are involved in organized crime. The ethnic breakdown includes people of Hispanic, Asian, Russian, Jewish and Chinese ancestry as well as Italian. Even if all 5,000 criminals in organized crime were Italian American, however, that would constitute .0025 percent of the nation’s estimated 20 million Americans of Italian descent.
- Coppola’s films helped America fall in love with the Mafia myth. Today we have television programs like “The Sopranos” and films like “Analyze This,” “Mickey Blue Eyes,” and “Good Fellas” which present gangsters exclusively as Italian American.
- The advertising industry has followed suit. We now have commercials and print ads that feature Mafia characters selling soft drinks, chewing gum, video games, and even Italian wine and olive oil.
- But we never see a documentary, a sitcom, a police drama, or made-for-television movie that presents Italian Americans as educated, articulate, upright, honest citizens.

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- Italian Americans discovered the AIDS virus, founded the FBI, and have fought in every American war since the Revolution, earning at least 24 Medals of Honor.
- Two men of Italian descent, William Paca and Caesar Rodney, signed the Declaration of Independence.
- Italian Americans also sculpted the Lincoln Memorial; invented the Jacuzzi; established such major corporations as Barnes and Noble, Planters' Peanut, Tropicana Orange Juice, and the Bank of America; and have a long tradition of public service as mayors, governors, senators and congressmen and women.
- Despite such an admirable record of achievement, the media have stereotyped Italian Americans exclusively as either gangsters or losers, or both.

The Order Sons of Italy in American (OSIA) is the biggest and oldest national organization for men and women of Italian heritage in the United States. Founded in 1905, today it has more than 600,000 members and supporters and a network of 700 chapters coast-to-coast.