

The following ad ran in the September 6, 1993 issue of "Variety," the weekly newspaper for the entertainment industry. The ad was published by the Italic Studies Institute, an Italian American organization based in New York. The ad was prompted in part by the fact that the producers of the film "Lorenzo's Oil" were told not to hire an Italian American actor for the part of the courageous and determined Italian father because those actors have become tainted by Mafia typecasting. The part went to non-Italian actor Nick Nolte.

TO ITALIAN AMERICANS IN THE MEDIA

This is the pay-off of stereotyping

"Few, if any, other ethnic groups in this nation have suffered the unrelenting media defamation of Italian Americans. Ironically, much of it has been done by our brethren in the name of art and profit. That mainstream America has fully accepted the premise of cinematic defamation is evidenced every day in some form or other. Its effect on the attitudes of the American public

toward Italian surnames is manifested daily. This negative, larger than life Italic image has now been immortalized in reference works and in vocabulary throughout the globe. The Italic Studies Institute demands the end of the media stereotyping that has stained the heritage of 15 million Americans of Italian descent, the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States. We call on all Italian American actors, actresses, filmmakers, and producers to exercise responsibility in television, radio, film and video. We call on our media brethren to atone for past actions through balanced works based on reality."

Italian Americans have a big "image problem." The problem is real and has been documented in study after study from the turn of the century to the present. A recent 1990 study showed that most Americans, almost 80%, associate Italian Americans with organized crime and that this image of Italian Americans is attributable to the negative portrayal of Italian Americans by all segments of the media. **Unfortunately for Italian Americans, the way they have been portrayed by the media has become ingrained in the national psyche and has contributed to a persistent and underlying prejudice against them.**

This cultural prejudice has affected the way Italian Americans have been treated by American society and institutions. It has contributed to numerous lynchings of Italian Americans during the earlier part of this century, to restrictive immigration laws in the 1920's that barred most Italian immigration, to the arrest, relocation and internment of tens of thousands of Italian Americans during World War II, and to problems of lowered self esteem and achievement among Italian American youth today who now have among the highest high school drop out rates in the nation.

While there are those who believe these images glorify Italian Americans, most Americans, when pressed, admit that these images undermine all Italian Americans and leave the impression the stereotypes are true and we are all associated with the stereotypes.

The ad by the Italic Studies Institute reminds us that we have a problem. **Protest is important because it makes us aware of the problem we face.** Italian American anti-defamation groups in Chicago and New Jersey have recently led protests against the television series "The Untouchables," which frequently uses slurs like "wop" and "dago" and have initiated a campaign to convince advertisers to remove their support from the series. In October, over 200 protestors from the Italian American One Voice Committee staged a protest rally against the series in front of WOR-TV 9 in Secaucus, New Jersey.

Even more important than protest is the need for Italian American studies to be included in our nations schools to combat the effects of more than a century of prejudice and defamation against us. Italian Americans do not merely suffer from an image problem, we suffer from a devastating lack of awareness about ourselves. This nation, including Italian Americans, is terribly misinformed about the Italian American experience. The association of Italian Americans with organized crime shows how devastating this lack of knowledge can be. Our children deserve better, they deserve the truth.

In school, Italian American children are exposed to books that either neglect them or when they do include them do so in overwhelmingly negative stereotypes and in condescending terms. Our children need to know their heritage. The way Italian Americans have been portrayed by the media does not provide young Italian Americans with any support or affirmation that their heritage may have any value for them. Rather, the way the media portrays Italian Americans stigmatizes them and distorts their heritage. **Italian American studies are necessary for our children to overcome the stigma of their own ancestry and for the nation to overcome its prejudice against Italian Americans.**

The challenges facing Italian Americans are real and can only be overcome by action. Italian Americans need to lobby their educational institutions so that they too will be included in the story of this nation and can overcome the disadvantages of their continued negative treatment by the media.

The Italic Studies Institute deserves our thanks for speaking out for us. The Institute produces a quarterly Magazine, "The Italic Way." Persons wishing to subscribe should send \$20 to The Italic Studies Institute, PO Box 818, Floral Park, NY 11001.

"There was, however, one Italian import whose vocabulary has had an influence on the [English] language out of all proportion to its significance in the Italian American community: the Mafia. Now treated as synonymous with organized crime (which it is not), the Mafia has added terms like *godfather*, *the family*, and *capo* to the language. **Hollywood's love affair with "gangster movies"** has ensured a wide dissemination of criminal slang: *hoodlum*, *racketeer*, *rough house*, *hatchet man*, *doing the dirty work*, *hot seat* (originally "the electric chair"), protection racket and loan shark. **The fact that these words -- in the minds of many -- now come with Italian accents, it is to do with the power of the media not the Mafia."**

The Story of English by Robert MacNeil, Robert Cran and Robert McCrum, 394 pages, Penguin Books, 1992