

SEMPRE AVANTI
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WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

By Dona De Sanctis

Why don't most Italian Americans care as passionately about stereotyping as Americans of Jewish, African, Hispanic or Indian descent?

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that, unlike these ethnic groups, Italian Americans think that they have nothing to gain from complaining about discrimination, despite strong evidence that militancy is enormously helpful to an ethnic community.

SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGNS

Over the past 50 years since the Civil Rights Movement, African American leaders and the NAACP have helped millions of black Americans by getting states and the federal government to pass laws that address past injustices.

Among these policies are affirmative action programs and racial quotas that have been adopted by many universities and large corporations; special tuition and work/study grants that assist young, inner-city African Americans, and social programs to aid black single mothers and children, living at the poverty level.

African American leaders have done such an effective job of raising the media's awareness about racism that rare is the day when a newspaper or television newscast does not report a case of alleged racial discrimination by a landlord, employer or police officer.

Hollywood and television, now far more respectful than in the past of the sensitivities of black Americans, routinely cast African American actors as heroic judges, police officers, brain surgeons, astronauts and even president of the United States while in the world of politics, candidates from dogcatcher to U.S. president carefully court the African American vote.

Hispanic Americans have taken note of the political clout wielded by African Americans. As America's newest and largest ethnic group, they do not want their children to lose Spanish and have successfully lobbied state and federal lawmakers for funding to support bi-lingual education in our public schools.

Indian tribes, led by the American Indian Movement, have been remarkably effective in educating the public about the wrongs their people have suffered at the hands of the federal government over the past two centuries.

Unfortunately, they have chosen as the poster boy of injustice, an Italian explorer who never even set foot on American soil. Their concerted propaganda campaign has seriously damaged the reputation of Christopher Columbus and undermined Columbus Day, one of America's oldest patriotic celebrations and a federal holiday since 1968.

The militancy of American Indian groups resulted in beneficial federal legislation, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988, which made gambling on reservations a multibillion dollar industry. Today an estimated 300 gaming operations are run by more than 200 of the nations' 556 federally-recognized tribes.

Americans of Jewish heritage have been enormously successful in raising public awareness about their tragic history of discrimination. One "concrete" example

of how effective American Jewish organizations and individuals have been is found near the National Mall in Washington, D.C., not far from the memorials to Lincoln, Jefferson and Washington.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was chartered by a unanimous Act of Congress in 1980 and opened in 1993 at a cost of \$168 million (\$90 million to build and \$78 million for exhibits).

It is built on land donated by the federal government and funded through private contributions that are tax-deductible. Its mission is “to broaden public understanding of the history of the Holocaust” through exhibits, research, publications, annual “Days of Remembrance,” educational materials for teachers and students and programs to educate the public about the Holocaust, which, by the way, happened in Europe, not the U.S.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

But what have Italian Americans to gain from protesting stereotyping, ethnic profiling and injustice, which are all very much a part of our history and still present today?

We are no longer the despised minority of newly arrived immigrants, unable to speak, read or write English or our native language. When our ancestors’ civil rights were violated, their only recourse was to prove their worth by taking care of their families, working hard and saving their money so they could move out of the ghettos now picturesquely known as “Little Italys.”

Character rather than federal laws and special policies enabled us in less than a century to rise from the lowest of the working class to the solid and prosperous

middle class where, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, most Italian Americans now reside.

We are the nation's fifth largest ethnic group but we are not a recognizable voting block. And much as we would like to have our children learn Italian at school, there are no publicly financed bi-lingual programs for us since English is our native tongue. It is possible to lobby school boards to institute Italian programs, but few of us are willing or able to make that commitment because it means work. (For those that are, please see the free how-to kit on OSIA's website, "Start Italian in Your School.")

So, given that there are no social or economic incentives, perhaps it is not so mysterious that we Italian Americans are not up in arms about the way we are portrayed on television and in the movies.

Relatively few of us ever protest the often slanted stories that the news media write about us; or the disrespectful and distorted way our customs and traditions are used by the consumer industry; or by the way our contributions are passed over in books, museum exhibits, documentaries and other intellectual and artistic projects.

Why get upset because "The Sopranos" had its seventh season premiere on Easter Sunday? Who cares if a restaurant in Arizona or Arkansas names its dishes after long-dead criminals of Italian descent or fictitious Mafia dons? Or if Italian Americans are kicked off jury trials involving alleged members of organized crime because "most Italian Americans have a Mafioso in the family?"

Does it matter that the history of Italian Americans is left out of the text books our children study from in school while lies about Columbus are presented as

facts? Or that the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. has only three modern Italian Americans' pictures on display: Al Capone, Rocky Graziano and Madonna?

Or that New York City, which has more Italian Americans than any other U.S. metropolis, has museums that feature the art, history and heritage of Americans of Jewish, African, Chinese, Asian, Hispanic and American Indian descent, but not one on Italian Americans?

Is it offensive when Public Television, funded with our own tax dollars, presents a series on the Medicis entitled "The Godfathers of the Renaissance?" or when a children's book on the history of immigration lists only one Italian: Lucky Luciano? Should we be amused when U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito is called "a meat-ball sucking wop?"

Does anyone care about this? Do you?

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