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The Strange Life of Joseph Colombo:
Mobster, Anti-discrimination Champion, or
Both?

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Immigration and ethnic diversity have both been cornerstones of the American experience since the establishment of the nation. The heterogeneity of the population has certainly caused and continues to cause conflict, however the first modern democracy still stands. Different groups of Americans have all had unique experiences worth researching; the Italian-American experience is particularly intriguing. Similar to other new immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Italians in the United States had gone from being perceived as ‘other’ to being labeled ‘white.’ Yet Italian-Americans also controlled some of the largest organized crime operations in the world, which led to a lasting and unfavorable stereotype. A fascinating effort to diminish the association between Italian-Americans and organized crime came in the form of the Italian-American Civil Rights League, which was led by Joe Colombo, widely known as the boss of New York’s Colombo crime family. Although other factors were probably more important in actually reducing the power of this negative stereotype, the story of Colombo’s organization illustrates the desire of the great majority of law abiding Italians to diminish association the public made between their community and criminal activity.

Joe Colombo was born on June 16th, 1924 in Brooklyn, New York to Italian-American parents. His mother was born and bred in Brooklyn, while his father, Anthony Colombo was born in Brazil.¹ Colombo greatly admired his parents, especially his father. Anthony Colombo was a well known racketeer in the Profaci crime family. The 1920’s was a period of flourishing organized crime in the United States, and Colombo’s father took advantage. Prohibition was in full swing by the time Colombo was born and crime organizations were leading the market in illegal alcohol sales. As a child, Colombo admired his father for the valuable advice he gave him

¹ Don Capria and Anthony Colombo, *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder* (San Diego: Unity Press, 2013), 3.

time and time again. Joe's father taught him how to play golf; much of his advice stemmed from the sport. The emphasis he placed on golf mostly revolved around the professionalism of the game. More specifically the attire of the golfer as well as his demeanor were core aspects of the sport and Colombo's father taught him to emulate these attributes in everyday life.²

Unfortunately for Colombo, his father was found dead in his car with his mistress in February of 1938. The police report cited "death by strangulation" as the official cause.³ As a child, Colombo was unaware of his father's involvement in organized crime and "one of the biggest gang wars in the nation's history." Organized crime is certainly a family affair and the sons of mobsters were usually the next in line during the first half of the twentieth century. The connections one makes through networking in any field can greatly increase the opportunities available to that person. The same idea is true for large crime conglomerates as well.

The connections Colombo was able to make through his father were invaluable. However once these connections were visible, Colombo suddenly had a target on his back from both law enforcement and members of rival Brooklyn gangs. Italians who were high up in these organized crime syndicates were connected to a valuable networking ring in most major American cities. New York was the epicenter to this phenomenon. After Colombo's service in the Coast Guard ended in 1946, he had to look for work around the city in order to support his growing family. His membership in the local International Longshoremen's Association significantly helped Colombo find well-paid work.⁴ Through this association, Colombo was able to come in contact with men who were familiar with his late father. These men held great influence over the unions and a fair amount of the local politics as well. For instance, one of his father's friends whom he

² *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 5.

³ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 7.

⁴ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 30.

met in prison was Albert Anastasia. Anastasia had a large share of control over the multiple unions in Brooklyn, and this control gave him a vast amount of power. The strength of Colombo's relationships with these influential men certainly affected his interactions with his family, for his line of work would quickly become dangerous.

Colombo had a unique style of parenting which could be interpreted by some people as abusive. Anthony Colombo recalled a particular incident in his co-written biography devoted to his father, *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*. The line of work in which Colombo was involved with certainly contributed to a possible paranoid state of existence. Men from rival gangs could launch an attack at any time, on Colombo or any member of his family. Law enforcement was certainly a threat as well; the fear of being locked away for years away from one's family is a rather daunting prospect. Due to this stress, Colombo punished his children with an iron fist if he felt they had done something to put their lives at risk. Anthony, the eldest of Colombo's children, had a daily curfew set by his father. This curfew was often ignored by Anthony and his mother if his father was in the city to handle some "business." One night Colombo returned home earlier than expected and Anthony was nowhere to be found. Long story short, Anthony was out drinking with friends and his father knocked him out with a single punch after he would not tell the truth regarding his whereabouts.⁵ While most Americans would likely interpret the punch as an aggressive act, the context and the time period makes Colombo's use of force arguably less egregious.

Despite a number of accounts depicting Colombo as aggressive in his personal and professional life, he showed immense love for the people he cared about and appeared to have

⁵ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 71.

received the same love and respect from the people closest to him. For instance, Anthony helped author Don Capria write two books about his father's life which exemplifies his admiration of Joe Colombo. In the book *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, Anthony portrays his father as a honorable and successful man who cared significantly for his loved ones. Much of his love could have fell under the "tough love" umbrella, but nevertheless it was something. Anthony recalled his father's treatment of his friend Caesar while Colombo was inquiring about a fight which law enforcement had thought related back to two missing persons in the alleged Colombo crime family. Clearly a stressful event, Colombo was able to keep his composure in order to spare his son's friend who was involved in the fight. Anthony offered an interpretation of his father's actions: "I think back now about how well my father knew people, and how in a moment he could calculate exactly how much a person could withstand. He possessed an amazing intuition. Anthony acknowledged his father's ability to read people and excused his occasional aggression; "My father knew I was as tough as he raised me." ⁶

Joe Colombo had to be tough for a variety of reasons. Colombo's serious personality could largely be due to the injustices experienced by the Italian-Americans who came before him. Having been raised in a largely Italian community likely exposed him to a number of stories which demonstrated the struggle of the early Italian-American experience. Upon their arrival in the United States, Italians underwent discriminatory and prejudicial practices as result of their perceived differences.

Perhaps one of the most challenging events the Italian-American community faced following their arrival to the United States occurred in New Orleans, Louisiana. Following the

⁶ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 152.

murder of police commissioner David Hennessey in 1890, blame was almost instantly cast on the newly settled Italian community in the city. According to the F.B.I., “hundreds of Sicilians were arrested, and nineteen were eventually indicted for the murder.” After the trial and subsequent acquittal of the defendants, many residents of New Orleans formed a violent mob and killed nine of the nineteen defendants.⁷ This event is a prime example of how marginalized groups have previously and continue to be at risk of becoming victims of people who choose to take the law in their own hands.

Joe Colombo had first seen the discrimination against the Italian-American community during the beginning of the Second World War. According to his son “at eighteen years old Joe Colombo was ineligible for the draft, since he was the sole provider for his mother, grandmother, and sister.”⁸ However, Colombo eventually enlisted in the Coast Guard with his mother’s reluctant consent around the one year anniversary of the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Although many Italian-Americans were fighting in the war and contributing to the overall war effort, there was a newly formed negative stigma directed towards the community on the home front. The earlier association of Italian-Americans with organized crime was now augmented by fears of cultural ties to Mussolini's Italy which was allied with Nazi Germany.

Internment of American citizens or residents throughout World War II is one of the largest stains in United States’ history. The Federal Bureau of Investigation started to gather information on tens of millions of foreign-born and American-born individuals a few years before the war even began. President Roosevelt agreed to allow J. Edgar Hoover and the F.B.I. to

⁷ “History of La Cosa Nostra,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation*
<https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/organized-crime/history-of-la-cosa-nostra>

⁸ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 19.

“compile a list of all individuals who posed a potential security risk to the nation.”⁹ The F.B.I. gathered information about ten million Americans, many foreign-born, by the end of the 1930s. The act surely teetered on the border of unconstitutionality, but the labeling of hundreds of thousands of American residents as “enemy aliens” further blurred the line between legal and illegal.¹⁰ The Hobbs Bill, which was made into law in May 1939, laid the groundwork for the Department of Justice to setup the Emergency Detention Program. Once the war was underway, internment of individuals based on ethnicity or beliefs began as well. On the West Coast, a train carried hundreds of mostly Italian and German internees from Los Angeles, California to Missoula, Montana. By the winter of 1942 roughly thirty-three hundred Italians were taken into custody by the federal government, as well as eleven thousand Germans and sixteen thousand Japanese.¹¹ These camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences and most of the internees would not leave the camp until the end of the war.

Internment of Italian-Americans was not the only injustice faced by the community during the Second World War. A number of historians have studied ethnicity and how this particular construct has led to a plethora of issues throughout history; the history of modern America is no exception. For instance, many Italian-Americans reported feeling discriminated against around the time of World War II. According to a survey conducted among the Italian-American community cited by historian Salvatore LaGumina, “Four out of every five thought Italian-Americans had a harder time getting jobs than people from other countries. (They

⁹ Lawrence DiStasi, “The Internment of Enemy Aliens, East and West,” in *The Impact of World War II on Italian Americans*, ed. Gary Mormino (Chicago: American Italian Historical Association, 2002), 98.

¹⁰ Steve Chawkins, “State apologizes for mistreatment of Italian residents during WWII,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 23, 2010.

¹¹ “The Internment of Enemy Aliens, East and West,” 100.

often told specific tales of discrimination.)”¹² Despite the survey being a self-report, even the perceived feeling of discrimination should not be taken lightly.

The Italian-American community was flourishing in the United States during the early 1940s but they were worried the discrimination would continue as the war progressed. Italian-Americans “in their feelings of insecurity have sentimentally glorified Italy in their minds, though not necessarily Mussolini or the Fascist regime, and they hated to see this allegiance challenged.”¹³ The feared discrimination was even addressed in the *Congressional Record*, when a Senator from Mississippi addressed a letter to an Italian-American woman in Brooklyn beginning with the slur “My Dear ‘Dago.’”¹⁴ Prejudice towards the Italian-American community existed in all levels of American society. The central reason for prejudice tends to trace back to being different. Historically people feared those who were different from themselves, and when this fear was paired with the potential danger of organized crime, it was particularly damaging to the maturing Italian-American community.

Historically *La Cosa Nostra* is the crime organization which originated in the southern Italian island of Sicily. *Cosa Nostra* and the terms “mafia” or “the mob” are often used interchangeably in the United States; each of these terms were and continue to be used to label the mostly Italian-led crime conglomerates throughout the country.¹⁵ The first known members of Italian organized crime groups immigrated to the United States in 1880 after multiple murders of high profile Sicilians occurred.¹⁶ It is important to note the multiple Italian-led organized

¹² Salvatore LaGumina, “*WOP!": A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 250.

¹³ LaGumina, 267.

¹⁴ LaGumina, 269.

¹⁵ “History of La Cosa Nostra,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation*

¹⁶ “History of La Cosa Nostra,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation*

crime groups that have existed at different points of time in the United States and their distinctions.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, urban areas throughout the country were experiencing a large influx of immigrants from across the world, but the most sizeable group during this period were overwhelmingly from southern or eastern Europe. East Coast cities saw a diversification of their neighborhoods, however the individual neighborhoods were generally segregated by ethnicity. Neighborhoods with significant minority or immigrant populations were certainly working class and did not receive the same benefits as their wealthier and whiter counterparts. For instance, these neighborhoods were more often than not disease and crime ridden, which was one of the reasons the progressive era of welfare reform came about in the United States. Police had a tendency of avoiding these areas and would let them fend for themselves. In an effort to keep their neighborhoods afloat, organized crime groups took the charge in policing their neighbors in order to keep everyone safe. This phenomenon survived into the mid twentieth century due to the strength of precedent; “during this time, it was typical for wise guys, as opposed to police, to enforce social regulations and maintain order in the neighborhoods.”¹⁷ Thus the inception of organized crime in the United States may not have been entirely sinister, but rather out of necessity.

Organized crime groups have affiliates all over the United States, but some of the main hubs throughout the twentieth century were New York, Chicago, and New Orleans to name a few. In the latter half of the twentieth century, there were nearly two million Italian-American residents in the New York metropolitan area.¹⁸ Many Italians who immigrated to the United

¹⁷ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 254.

¹⁸ “The 50 U.S. cities with the most Italian Americans,” *The National Italian American Foundation*, <http://www.niaf.org/culture/statistics/5187-2/>

States had to be processed in Ellis Island and most decided to stay put in or around New York in order to start their new lives. Given this substantial size, it is no surprise organized crime conglomerates had their strongest footing in this section of the country.

Within the New York metropolitan area, the hotbed of organized crime activity existed in Brooklyn. Throughout the century, there were a few successions of power in the underground crime world. Jewish and Italian gangsters were the main powers within the organized crime community of New York. According to the F.B.I., the first large succession of power came in 1928 during the “Castellammarese War.” Joe Masseria, the leader of the two large gangs which were operating in New York, sought control of American organized crime as a whole. A couple of years later, he was killed in a conspiracy led by Salvatore Maranzano and a high ranking member of Masseria’s own gang, Charles “Lucky” Luciano.¹⁹ According to the F.B.I., this was the event which directly led to the birth of what is known as the modern day *La Cosa Nostra*. The five family faction setup was designed by Maranzano, as well as the code of conduct. The desire for power seems to have overruled the supposed importance of respect and loyalty in the mob; a few months after the murder of Masseria, Luciano arranged the murder of Maranzano as well. Marzano had named Luciano the boss of one of the five families before he had been killed.

Luciano aimed to operate *La Cosa Nostra* similar to the way one would run a “major corporation.” In fact, it was Luciano’s idea to set up “The Commission”, which included the leaders of seven crime families. The Commission was designed to oversee all of the activities of which the families were conducting. The goal was to also curb intraorganizational violence and

¹⁹ “History of La Cosa Nostra,” *Federal Bureau of Investigation*

to keep *La Cosa Nostra* as unified and secretive as possible. These institutions were well established by the time Joe Colombo immersed himself into the world of organized crime.

Following the Second World War, Colombo began working on the docks of Brooklyn similar to the Italian-American men who came before him. The Italians who immigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century were overwhelmingly from the more rural, impoverished, and southern regions of the Italian peninsula. Most of the job opportunities available to Italian men in the south were in agriculture and often would be in the form of sharecropping; “Patterns of landholding and land use, combined with unfavorable climate and topography, produced an agriculture of scarcity, characterized by chronic shortages of work and food.”²⁰ This long history of working outside did not change when Italian immigrants arrived in the United States. According to historian Richard Alba, sixty percent of the heads of the household within the Italian-American community in New York City worked in construction or as “rag pickers and longshoreman.”²¹

La Cosa Nostra had successfully infiltrated many labor unions and other organizations within the United States during the early twentieth century. Thus it is no surprise Joe Colombo’s start in the docks of Brooklyn coincided with law enforcement beginning to look into his life. Albert Anastasia, a good friend and previous cellmate of Colombo’s father, was extremely well known by both local and federal law enforcement. According to Anthony Colombo “Anastasia was known as the architect of the infamous Murder Inc. organization.” Murder Inc. was another organized crime group which was based in New York after Prohibition was repealed during the

²⁰ Richard D. Alba, “The Twilight of Ethnicity Among Americans of European Ancestry: The Case of the Italians,” in *Rethinking Today’s Minorities*, ed. Vincent N. Parillo (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 33.

²¹ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 35.

Great Depression. Basically, Murder Inc. was a syndicate of for-hire hitmen who were often contracted by the other organized crime families in and around the city.²²

Local law enforcement became interested in Joe Colombo while he was becoming more visible in and around the shipyards of Brooklyn. The New York Police Department often found the docks to be impenetrable; the only information regarding illegal activities came from low level informants who were often reporting second or third hand information.²³ Colombo was often seen hanging out with well-known mobsters otherwise known as “wise-guys” in a local bar and grill during work breaks. The police firmly believed he was involved in racketeering, organizing craps games, and being a strong arm for the bosses. Colombo’s involvement in loan sharking was also widely believed by the police. Loan sharking is the act of “shaking down” local businesses owners or union workers who were one way or another in debt with the organized crime groups.²⁴ Oftentimes these were gambling debts which the workers found difficult to repay. This was simply the beginning of Colombo’s ventures in organized crime.

As the years went by, Colombo would continue to receive more attention from law enforcement. Police investigations into the docks intensified by the mid 1950’s and Colombo managed to switch his line of work. He began to work in another heavily mob controlled enterprise: meat sales and distribution. The switch allowed Colombo to work fewer hours and spend more time with his family. Despite working fewer hours, Colombo actually earned more money as a meat salesman than he made at the waterfront.²⁵ Using the extra money he had been earning, Joe opened up a cafe in Brooklyn called Cafe Royal. The cafe was frequented by

²² Emanuel Perlmutter, "A Syndicate Formed to Kill," *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1951.

²³ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 31.

²⁴ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 32.

²⁵ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 46.

notable Italian-Americans and average locals alike, but the establishment was refused a beer and wine license. This was likely due to the evident links between Colombo and multiple known mobsters. However, law enforcement arguably became the most interested in Colombo after he attended the wedding of ruthless mob boss Joe Profaci's daughter. According to Anthony Colombo, his father's presence "was viewed by law enforcement as an indisputable sign of rank."²⁶

The Colombo crime family is currently one of the five New York crime families which make up *La Cosa Nostra*. The majority of these "families" had roots in their southern Italian heritage and valued the importance of tradition. Colombo had a different mentality. As one of the youngest organized crime leaders in the nation, Colombo deposed much of the previous leadership of the family. There are many qualities of the crime families which overlapped with qualities of culturally ordinary, law abiding Italian families. These characteristics which these two kinds of families share are cornerstones of southern Italian culture and subsequently Italian-American culture. For instance, the entire idea of family in and of itself is very important for both institutions. Historian Richard D. Alba accredits these strong familial ties to scarcity: scarcity of work, food, and legitimate prospects.²⁷ The importance of putting the family before oneself is a concept which transcended time and place as well. Familial ties, nuclear, extended, and friendship-based, had significant influence over Italian-Americans and their southern Italian predecessors; "life in the South exalts the family. It has been said of Sicily that the family sentiment is perhaps the only deeply rooted moral sentiment that prevails."²⁸ That being said, it

²⁶ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 47.

²⁷ "The Case of the Italians," 34.

²⁸ "The Case of the Italians," 36.

should come to no surprise the Italian-led organized crime groups were able to survive and frankly thrive in decent secrecy for as long as they have.

The federal government has long been considered the enemy of the various organized crime groups in the United States. Many of the crimes committed by organized crime groups and their affiliates fell under federal jurisdiction. Most of these crimes were white collar in nature and often crossed state and federal borders. Colombo and the league's targeting of law enforcement was very strategic and enabled the league to increase their number of supporters. This conscious act of shifting blame towards law enforcement at all levels is important to acknowledge due to its present and historic applications. African-Americans have long suffered from discrimination of all kinds and arguably in its the most serious form, police discrimination. There were and are areas in the United States where African-Americans feel they cannot trust the local police. Even the Federal Bureau of Investigation has a racist history, plagued with aiming to suppress important aspects of the Civil Rights movement. Colombo tried and even succeeded for sometime to apply this kind of "bad cop" behavior to the Italian-American experience as an example of the discrimination all minorities have faced. However, Colombo and the other Italian-Americans who were targeted by law enforcement were indeed overwhelmingly involved with organized crime to some extent.

The F.B.I. as an organization has a history of antagonizing people whom they are investigating. Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the powers of the F.B.I. were greatly expanded when the organization was tasked with finding and exposing "subversives" inside of the country. This was especially accurate during the 1960's and the Civil Rights movement overall. The F.B.I. was not only targeting alleged mobsters; Martin Luther King Jr. was under

strict surveillance of the bureau as well. Investigators were pushing the idea of a possible association between King and communism any way they could. Wiretapping of his home and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were taking place in the early 1960's.²⁹ The F.B.I. also used his condemnation of the Vietnam War as supposed evidence of his support for communism. They even went as far as considering King's possible infidelity as a matter of national security, which likely resulted in some waste of taxpayers' money.³⁰ Perhaps the most vile tactic used by the F.B.I. against Dr. King was the letter they mailed to him while he was serving time in jail. The letter was simply disgusting and demeaning. The letter requested that King would just end his life, and would go on as one of the bureau's most notorious acts. It was this kind of behavior which caused many to be suspicious of the F.B.I. under J. Edgar Hoover's leadership.

Federal authorities had informants in the mafia world, as well as some undercover agents. Many *La Cosa Nostra* members were prosecuted based on, "extensive electronic eavesdropping based on 'bugs' that the F.B.I. and various state and local law enforcement agencies planted in *La Cosa Nostra* members' cars, homes, and social clubs."³¹ This was arguably the most effective way in which members of organized crime conglomerates were brought down by law enforcement at any level.

Colombo did not begin to receive attention from the press until the late 1960's. According to F.B.I. reports, Colombo and his gang were "quiet."³² The disappearance of two

²⁹ "King Encyclopedia," *Stanford University*

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_federal_bureau_of_investigation_fbi/

³⁰ Beverly Gage, "What an Uncensored Letter to M.L.K. Reveals," *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 2014.

³¹ James B. Jacobs and Lauryn P. Gouldin, "Cosa Nostra: The Final Chapter?," *Crime and Justice* 25 (1999), 131.

³² *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 144.

alleged mobsters, Salvatore “Sally D” D’Ambrosio and Freddy “No Nose” De Lucio, sparked increased interest of law enforcement to look into Joe Colombo. People close to Colombo cite the association between him and the disappearances as entirely fiction. They believe the F.B.I. forced this narrative to the press and the media ran with the false story regarding an alleged “torture chamber” used by Colombo and his gang.³³ As previously mentioned, Anthony Colombo claims the blood found in the supposed “torture chamber” in the teenaged hangout club was the result of an altercation between two teenagers. Colombo and his supporters claim the authorities knew the truth but wanted to create dissent within Colombo’s organization. The F.B.I. often faced significant challenges in trying to fight Colombo and organized crime in general.

By the late 1960’s, the criminal justice system had to adapt to more current trends in order to effectively combat organized crime. There was less media scrutiny towards organized crime groups and the dramatic high profile crimes which used to be plastered on the front pages of newspapers were generally lacking. Previously, mob bosses were pretty untouchable from law enforcement because they were rarely committing the actual crimes. In 1970 however, Congress passed Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. This law was enacted in order to “establish severe consequences for those who engage in a pattern of wrongdoing as a member of a criminal enterprise.”³⁴ One specific aspect of the law was especially damaging to mob bosses in particular: only one witness’ testimony was needed for a conviction.³⁵ This legislation was pivotal in the effort to diminish the power of organized crime groups in New York and throughout the country.

³³ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 147.

³⁴ “RICO Law: Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act,” *Legal Resources*, <https://www.hg.org/rico-law.html>

³⁵ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 135.

The F.B.I. was especially damaging to the success of organized crime groups in the United States, however many in the Italian-American community were scared of the behavior of individual agents. Carol Colombo, the wife of Anthony Colombo, was allegedly harassed by two F.B.I. agents at night and directly outside of her home. Her children were sleeping and she was alone watching television while Anthony was still at work. The doorbell had begun to ring repeatedly and every time Carol looked through the peephole no one was there. Eventually she discovered it was two F.B.I. agents with whom she was familiar, and they appeared to be inebriated.³⁶ After she had called the local police which resulted in no arrests because of rank, it became apparent the F.B.I. was indeed very powerful and nearly impossible to ignore.

Another event involving the F.B.I. and its perceived less than lawful behavior sparked Joe Colombo's interest in creating an organization which would strive to protect the rights of Italian-Americans and other marginalized groups who were unfairly targeted by law enforcement. In April of 1970, Colombo's oldest son Joe Jr. "was brought in by the F.B.I. on charges of conspiring with a group of men to melt silver coins into ingots."³⁷ Allegedly, law enforcement forcibly entered their home in order to arrest Colombo Jr. and this did not sit well with Colombo. Joe Colombo and his close friend, Nat Marcone, founded the Italian-American Civil Rights League while picketing the New York field office of the F.B.I. following the arrest of Joe Jr. The pickets continued every night and eventually the crowds grew into thousands of supporters. These protests were certainly a turning point in the life of Joe Colombo.

³⁶ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 158.

³⁷ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 159.

Prior to the establishment of the Italian-American Civil Rights League, Colombo had created another organization with a similar goal: “the organization A.I.D. (Americans of Italian Descent) was established by Joe and a few friends in an attempt to combat the negative stereotyping of Italian-Americans and to stop the harassment and violation of their civil liberties.”³⁸ According to Colombo, Italian-Americans did not feel as though they were treated as full citizens. This organization was never able to make the advances in civil rights as it would have wanted, and it is likely due to the leadership. By the end of the 1960’s, Colombo was a well-known mobster or at least had the reputation as one. In order to appear legitimate, successful professionals within the Italian-American community were tasked with leading the organization. Problems began to arise when these doctors, lawyers, and businessmen were not willing to vocalize their grievances to the fullest extent. After a few hiccups, A.I.D. later appointed the famous Frank Sinatra to head the organization before it eventually dissolved.

There were other Italian-American advocacy groups in which Colombo had zero involvement. The Italian-American League Against Discrimination was active in the beginning of the 1960’s. Organizations such as the Order of the Sons of Italy were also active during this time and were working in coordination to combat “the media’s pervasive depiction of Italians as criminals.”³⁹ These groups would boycott the advertisers and the television programs, as well as large scale films which used the term “Mafia.” The media would become one of the largest targets of the I.A.C.R.L. because of its continued perpetuation of an unfair stereotype.

The Italian-American Civil Rights League, or the I.A.C.R.L. garnered a ton of support from the Italian-American community during its first few years of existence. This could have

³⁸ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 113.

³⁹ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 60.

been largely due to the overall climate of activism during this period in United States' history. Just a few years before the creation of the league, the African-American civil rights movement was in full swing, as well as second wave feminism, the anti-war movement, the gay rights movement and so on so forth. Activism was in the air and had been a largely successful way in which to draw attention to a cause. Colombo took advantage of the current political climate of the time and worked tirelessly to delegitimize the authority as well as the morality of the F.B.I. and law enforcement in general.

The Godfather is widely regarded as one of the greatest films of all time, and the original novel has been purchased by millions since its publication in 1969. The author, Mario Puzo, grew up in a similar setting as Joe Colombo. Puzo was brought up in the "Neapolitan ghetto" which is also known as the neighborhood in Manhattan called Hell's Kitchen. Anthony Colombo and Don Capria paint a sad depiction of Puzo's upbringing with claims such as his lack of athleticism and friends. The authors also note "his angst and isolation as a child, coupled with disdain for the older generation of immigrants and blue collar workers in his neighborhood shaped his perspective and infused his dramas with dark realism."⁴⁰ *The Godfather* film, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, would become vital to the I.A.C.R.L. and their platform. Initially protesting the film on the basis of its negative and stereotypical depiction of Italian-Americans, Colombo eventually became a pivotal adviser to the production of the film.⁴¹ The decision placed him further into the spotlight.

Before the League agreed to help contribute to the production of the film, it was adamantly against *The Godfather* and did not want to see it succeed. The roughly forty thousand

⁴⁰ Colombo: *The Unsolved Murder*, 251.

⁴¹ Colombo: *The Unsolved Murder*, 256.

members of the I.A.C.R.L. were tired of seeing their people being depicted as vicious criminals on the big screen.⁴² Accusations of Colombo threatening to kill executives at Paramount Pictures were denied by his son Anthony, but he does not deny his father may have called them in order to have them reconsider making the film. The original tactic was to institute a union strike in order to strip the film of its drivers and therefore its deliveries as well.

One of the biggest victories the league garnered followed the first Unity Day rally in the summer of 1970. Before the rally, the media portrayed the I.A.C.R.L. as a mysterious group with probable relations to organized crime groups. However, the tens of thousands of supporters who showed up to the rally was likely the largest demonstration of Italian-Americans in our nation's history. Media outlets and law enforcement could no longer dismiss Italian-Americans' concerns after a protest of this size. The attendees of the rally had a number of concerns, but their top concern was their portrayal in film and popular media in general. Many Italian-Americans believed they were unfairly and overwhelmingly represented as criminals. However, a member of the Nixon administration would grant the league its biggest accomplishment since it was created just a couple years before.

The attorney general in 1970, John Mitchell, extended an unexpected olive branch towards the Italian-American community following the first Unity Day rally in New York City. In July 1970 "Attorney General John Mitchell called for all government departments to stop using the words 'Mafia' and '*La Cosa Nostra*' in their communications."⁴³ This was incredibly important to members of the Italian-American community. For years the community felt as though law enforcement and the media were overemphasizing Italian-American involvement in

⁴² *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 257.

⁴³ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 187.

organized crime and ignoring other groups of people who were engaging in unlawful activity at the same time. This narrative was also supported by the governor of New York State, Nelson Rockefeller, who announced, “Organized crime includes members of virtually every ethnic group. The insistence of foreign labels to lend a Hollywood aura of sensationalism to this criminality undeniably damages the good name of millions of Italian-Americans to whom hard work, self-reliance, solid family upbringing and respect for the law are a tradition and the rule.”

⁴⁴ Whether or not these statements were genuine or simply made to attract a newly mobilized Italian-American voting bloc can be speculated on, but nevertheless the community greatly appreciated the gesture from these politicians.

With a number of high profile politicians in support of the Italian-American Civil Rights League or at least its goals, the group’s next target was the media. *The New York Times* has always been one of the world’s leading publications; the paper prides itself on credibility and accuracy. These, or the public’s belief in these, is what lands prestige. As vice president of the league, Joe Colombo was in charge of mobilizing protesters and organizing demonstrations, ranging from letter writing campaigns to picket lines. ⁴⁵ Colombo knew if he wanted to gather as much publicity as possible following the success of Unity Day, he would need to target a large media outlet. Colombo organized a human blockade of the *New York Times*’ delivery entrance; “it would be the first and only time in the paper’s history that delivery was halted as the result of a peaceful protest.”

Not all of the league’s goals or activities were “big picture.” As a grassroots organization, the I.A.C.R.L. also paid attention to local issues which pertained to the Italian-American

⁴⁴ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 188.

⁴⁵ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 191.

community. For instance, leaders of the league became involved with a group of residents whom were dubbed “the Corona fighting 69.” These residents in the Queens neighborhood of Corona were fighting to save the demolition of their homes where their families had lived for a few generations. The home owners’ pleas were ignored by city officials and they were being offered significantly less money for their homes compared to their actual worth. Colombo worked with a few state assemblymen and a lawyer named Mario Cuomo who would go on to become the fifty-second governor of New York State and an outspoken critic of *The Godfather*.⁴⁶

The I.A.C.R.L. worked with a number of famous citizens, as well as politicians ranging from local to high profile positions in government. For instance, Frank Sinatra was not only a supporter of the league but a friend of Joe Colombo. Celebrities like Sinatra contributed a substantial amount money and time towards a variety of fundraising efforts. One event in particular in which Sinatra took the control of the reigns was held in the Felt Forum at Madison Square Garden in the fall of 1970.⁴⁷ The lavish fundraiser was star studded with numerous artists like Connie Francis and Sammy Davis Jr., as well as television producers from NBC. The event raised thousands of dollars and the league was able to establish a summer camp for underprivileged urban youth called Camp Unity.

According to people close to Joe Colombo, the F.B.I. became increasingly interested in him as the Italian-American Civil Rights League became more popular and widespread. This could have been partly due to Colombo’s growing reputation as a humanitarian or the expansion of the bureau’s jurisdiction. While the league was enjoying a number of successes throughout 1970, the federal government assumed control over criminal cases which involved gambling.

⁴⁶ Colombo: *The Unsolved Murder*, 197.

⁴⁷ Colombo: *The Unsolved Murder*, 221.

Wiretapping at the federal level was also no longer banned after Attorney General John Mitchell overturned a previous ban.⁴⁸ Following the revocation of the ban, a widespread wiretapping campaign began in an attempt to catch Colombo in any involvement with gambling rings on Long Island, crimes which were largely ignored by local law enforcement. The pressure of maintaining public appearances, conducting business, and avoiding F.B.I. persecution were all taking their toll on Colombo.

As the second Unity Day was approaching, Colombo and the I.A.C.R.L. continued to grow in popularity. Colombo never hesitated to speak with the press. There has never been a suspected mobster who willingly spoke to the media and placed himself in the public eye as often as Joe Colombo. A full fledged investigation began on Colombo and his crime organization. The F.B.I. sought to gather more informants and to continue to delegitimize the league. Dissidence was allegedly spreading within *La Cosa Nostra* as suspected gangsters were pressuring local Italians to take down their posters which were promoting Unity Day, however most supporters did not budge.⁴⁹ The stress of organizing events for the league, battling the F.B.I., and conducting business as usual had begun to take its toll on Colombo. Lack of sleep and increased stress caused his condition of Bell's Palsy to return, but Colombo would not back down from his work with the league.

Joe Colombo was without a doubt a frustrating target for the F.B.I. and other law enforcement agencies. The Colombo crime family operated in an unprecedented manner; Colombo valued professionalism and legitimacy amongst those who worked for him. Colombo's crime organization, including leadership positions, was also made up of men who were much

⁴⁸ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 232.

⁴⁹ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 303.

younger than the typical crime family.⁵⁰ These men continued worked for actual businesses at the request of Colombo in order to create a front to slow down the numerous investigations into his life by law enforcement. Most of Colombo's operations were conducted in Brooklyn and Long Island, thus creating some jurisdictional conflicts for law enforcement to work around as well. Perhaps the most important distinction of Colombo's organization is the value he placed on loyalty. Trust and a conflict-free family were very important to Colombo for protection, however the close relationships he fostered with people around him would not save him from the law or other mobsters.

The fate of Joe Colombo was sealed during the second Unity Day rally in the summer of 1971. The event was already bigger than the first Unity Day, with vendors preparing food for half a million people. There were also roughly fifteen hundred uniformed police officers as well as a number of F.B.I. agents in attendance. Multiple city and state officials planned to make speeches including the Manhattan Borough President, the City Comptroller, and Congressman Mario Biaggi.⁵¹ Just as Joe Colombo was about to address the crowd, a gunman named Jerome Addison Johnson shot him three times in the back of the head. Police charged at the shooter while Colombo struggled to stand and eventually lost consciousness. Amidst the chaos, close friends rushed to Joe in order to carry him to an ambulance while multiple officers tackled the gunman. As Johnson was being placed under arrest, two more gunshots went off straight into the gunman's back. The second shooter managed to escape the scene, despite the thousands of law enforcement officers present at the event. The crime scene was never properly secured and as a result several mistakes were made. For instance, some of the evidence that was removed was not

⁵⁰ Nicholas Gage, "Colombo: The New Look in the Mafia," *New York Times*, May 3, 1971.

⁵¹ *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 315.

tagged properly.⁵² Numerous theories arose in regards to who planned the shooting as well as who killed the gunman. Theories spanned from a possible F.B.I. cover-up to an assassination by other mobsters, however nothing was ever proven.

The Italian-American Civil Rights League suffered tremendously after the second Unity Day in the summer of 1971. Colombo was evidently pivotal to the league's operations and the organization struggled considerably without his leadership. The year following the shooting of Colombo, the league claimed it had incurred roughly one million dollars worth of expenses; There would also be no Unity Day or Camp Unity in the summer of 1972.⁵³ Accusations of the leadership illegally mishandling funds were denied. The expenses were allegedly due to the rushed effort to open the summer camp the previous summer, which ended up costing the league roughly seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The financial hole the league dug would prove to be too deep to fix and save the organization.

The 1980's were a time of immense turmoil for the Italian-American organized crime groups within the United States. Law enforcement and the federal government were making significant strides in combating organized crime as well as obtaining information about the illusive hierarchy. The US Attorney in Manhattan at the time, Rudy Giuliani, claimed, "We keep making gains and they keep getting moved backward. If we take back the labor unions, the legitimate businesses, eventually they become just another street gang. Spiritually, psychologically, they've always been just a street gang." As Giuliani predicted, *La Cosa Nostra* continued to slowly lose its power in the United States.

⁵² *Colombo: The Unsolved Murder*, 315.

⁵³ Eric Pace, "Italian-American League is Beset by Woes," *New York Times*, June 6, 1972.

By the late 1990's another integral part of the Italian-led organized crime conglomerates took a massive hit. The overarching governing body of the five New York crime families, 'The Commission', had stopped meeting after decades. Allegedly due to weakening families via increased indictments of mobsters towards the end of the twentieth century, the remaining bosses did not feel safe enough to meet with the other families.⁵⁴ The coordination between families which was possible under the leadership of The Commission would no longer be feasible. Thus the national and international rackets which were extremely lucrative for the crime families suffered. The Italian-led organized crime groups seemed to be slowly but surely dying, however the stereotypes surrounding these associations survived in a unique way.

The stereotypes which the Italian-American Civil Rights League adamantly fought against managed to persist into the twenty-first century. However, these stereotypes became more trivial or frankly harmless compared to the stereotypes of the early and mid twentieth century. For instance, reality television exploded in popularity and several shows claimed to showcase an authentic Italian-American experience. MTV's *Jersey Shore*, which aired for six seasons from 2009 to 2012, followed the lives of young Italian-Americans as they partied their way through summer. Critics of the program ranged from organizations such as Order of the Sons of Italy and U.N.I.C.O. National, the largest Italian-American service organization in the country.⁵⁵ Much of the complaints stemmed from the supposed negative portrayal of the Italian-American community and use of the slur "guido." Nevertheless, most viewers watched the show for its face value; it was simply a show about young people having a good time. The

⁵⁴ Selwyn Raab, "Mob's 'Commission' is Believed Defunct," *New York Times*, Apr. 27, 1998.

⁵⁵ Emily Friedman, "MTV's 'Jersey Shore' Garners Critics Over Use of Term 'Guido'," *ABC News*, Dec. 11, 2009.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/mtv-show-jersey-shore-angers-italian-american-groups/story?id=9292815>

lack of widespread outrage surrounding the show displayed an interesting phenomenon which had occurred to the Italian-American community. After decades of challenging stereotypes and fighting discrimination in the United States, Italians and many other ethnicities obtained “white” status.

Another reality television program which would likely cause Joe Colombo to roll in his grave was the cleverly entitled *Mob Wives*, which aired for six seasons from 2011 to 2016. The premise of the program was to show the other side of Italian-American organized crime which had largely been ignored by the media for decades: women. The cast featured notable wives, daughters, sisters, or basically just women who had any relationship with men in organized crime or any involvement themselves. Karen Gravano, the daughter of infamous hitman and F.B.I. informant Sammy “The Bull” Gravano, was just one of the cast members who lived in the borough of Staten Island. Most of the men in the women’s lives were either currently serving or had served time in prison; some of the women even served some time themselves.

There are larger implications of *Mob Wives*’ popularity besides being an addictive reality television show with a ton of drama. The explicit usage of the term “mob” acknowledged the existence of organized crime groups, without the women having to discuss their involvement. If the five crime families had been as strong as they had been just a few decades before, this show would have never existed. The risk of exposing members or operations would not have even been a thought. Thus the overall weakening of organized crime groups seems to have also weakened the negative association between Italian-Americans and crime.

The need for the creation of an organization which would be aimed to combat discrimination of Italian-Americans in the form of unfair treatment by law enforcement and

negative portrayals in the media has historical roots in immigration. As viewed through the lens of immigration to the United States in the early twentieth century, assimilation proved to be more difficult for Italians as opposed to other European immigrants. Catholicism and other cultural attributes were significant factors in prolonging Italians assimilation in the United States. The 1920's and subsequently the Great Depression were difficult for the working class in general, and therefore the Italian-American community as well. However, the way in which Italian-Americans were treated during this period appears to be exaggerated by Colombo and his son Anthony. Even if Italian-Americans suffered more than other European immigrants, African Americans had it even worse. To take only one example, many New Deal programs which were available to Italian-Americans were not available to African Americans.

Perspective is incredibly important when examining an ethnic group and its place in history. The saying goes "winners write history" and it seems to be well supported. White elites have been the ruling class in the United States since its establishment and it is no surprise they were wary to let other groups of people into their selective enclave, figuratively or literally. Throughout the twentieth century a number of ethnic groups including the Irish, Eastern Europeans, and Italians were accepted as being white and could reap the benefits to some extent of a society built on institutional racism. When comparing the F.B.I.'s treatment of Martin Luther King Jr. and Joe Colombo, this phenomenon becomes more evident. Despite Colombo being a known mob boss, he arguably received better treatment from the F.B.I. than the widely respected and timeless Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The same logic can be used for the protesters as well. African-Americans participating in peaceful demonstrations were often met with hostility by the public and law enforcement, whereas Italian-American protesters were not nearly

treated the same way. The first steps to try to fix racially based issues today includes acknowledging the history of these issues which are rooted in discrimination and overall mistreatment. Joe Colombo and the Italian-American Civil Rights League offer an interesting narrative in regards to Americans' perceptions of race and ethnicity.