

Deja Vu All Over Again: Mafia Mania Returns!

George De Stefano (February 10, 2008)



The government and the media are saying that the recent indictments of dozens of reputed gangsters prove that La Cosa Nostra's power is undiminished. But there are good reasons to be skeptical of such claims.

They're baaaack!

America's favorite characters from its longest running true crime/pop culture saga are in the news once again, with the early February arrests in New York City, Long Island, and New Jersey of 62 alleged members and associates of what the government and the media like to call "the Gambino crime family."

Also busted were a few reputed wiseguys affiliated with two other well-known Mafia brands, the Genovese and Bonanno "families."

The "massive anti-Mafia sweep" as CNN and other news outlets called the roundup, snared not only the alleged chiefs of the Gambino enterprise but also its middle management. Or as prosecutors said, using suspiciously Cosa Nostra-ish language, law enforcement lopped off not only the heads but also "the shoulders and chest."

In addition to the 62 alleged gangsters identified in the Federal indictment, state and local



prosecutors indicted another 20-odd suspects. Both groups were charged with crimes that included murder, extortion, illegal gambling, loan-sharking and labor racketeering – all the traditional, bread and butter activities of La Cosa Nostra.

The indictment provides another reassuring indication that venerable Mafia traditions have not entirely died out. Gender and ethnic diversity, de rigueur in most American businesses these days, have made only limited inroads in the Gambino organization. Nearly all those arrested were Italian American and Italian males. There were only two women among those charged, as well as a few Irish- and Jewish Americans, one Greek and one Arab.

American and international media reported the arrests with a breathless excitement not seen since the furor over the final episode of “The Sopranos.” The New York Post and Daily News brought their typical tabloid verve and color to the story, but the more sober New York Times also got caught up in the Mafia mania.

The Times’ William K. Rashbaum said of the sweep, “...if it was not the most debilitating blow ever struck against the mob, it left no doubt that organized crime, often declared as diminished or on the decline, remains a formidable force in the New York area.”

Reading the 171-page, 80-count Federal indictment evokes a warm feeling of familiarity, and cine-nostalgia. I found myself fondly recalling the scenes in “Godfather II” when the Senate panel investigating Michael Corleone reveals the Mafia’s organizational structure and its exotic terminology. There’s also a soupcon of Scorsese and a dash of Chase in the Feds’ bill of particulars.

“The Gambino family operated through groups of individuals headed by ‘captains,’ who were also referred to as ‘skippers,’ ‘caporegimes,’ and ‘capodecimas,” the indictment states. “These groups, which were referred to as ‘crews,’ ‘regimes,’ and ‘decimas,’ consisted of ‘made’ members of the Gambino family, also referred to as ‘soldiers,’ ‘friends of ours,’ ‘good fellows’ and ‘buttons, as well as associates of the Gambino family.”

“Each captain was responsible for supervising the criminal activities of his crew and providing crew members and associates with support and protection. In return, the captain received a share of the earnings of each of the crew’s members and associates.”

“Above the captains,” the indictment continues, “were the three highest-ranking ranking members of the Gambino family. The head of the Gambino family was known as the ‘boss.’ He was assisted by an ‘underboss’ and a counselor, who was known as” – yes, you guessed it – “the ‘consigliere.’” And so on.

The alleged Gambino boss is one John D’Amico, a septuagenarian known to his captains, crews, soldiers and associates as “Jackie the Nose.” D’Amico’s nom de mob, though colorful enough, isn’t one of the best. Some of the “good fellows” arrested with him have much more flamboyant monikers, and unlike their leader, many have more than one. My favorite? “Nicholas Corozzo, also known as ‘Nicky,’ ‘Little Nicky,’ ‘the Doctor,’ ‘The Little Guy,’ ‘Seymour,’ ‘Grandpa,’ and ‘Grandfather.’”

“Seymour!” Now that’s a good one. But even that isn’t as delightful as “Anthony Giammarino also known as ‘Buckwheat.’” What, does Giammarino, like the beloved African American child star of “Our Gang” fame, have a finger-in-the-light-socket hairdo and a propensity to exclaim, “Otay!”?

I’m well aware that some will think I’m being unnecessarily flippant. Many of the crimes enumerated in the indictments are pretty serious, after all. There are several alleged murders, including the 1976 slaying of court officer Joseph Gelb and the 1990 shooting of Jose Delgado Rivera during an armored truck robbery.

The labor racketeering charges also are hardly minor. The Gambinos, according to the indictment, made big bucks from extortion within the New York construction industry, long a cash cow for organized crime. Embezzlement of union assets, the provision of no-show jobs to mobsters, and the charging of bribes in exchange for union membership cards plagued the Teamsters and two locals of



the Laborers' International Union of North America. Organized crime's penetration of segments of organized labor has continued in spite of efforts to eliminate corruption, and it demands ongoing vigilance.

Some of the charges, though felonies, are less serious: the 1995 robbery of a funeral home employee, intent to sell marijuana, and illegal gambling ("joker/poker type gambling machines," bookmaking).

But do the indictments support the claim made by the Feds and echoed by the media that Italian American crime, the Mafia, La Cosa Nostra, remains a potent force in the New York metropolitan area? From the official claims and the press coverage, one would think that gangsters had been operating with impunity over the past few decades, that there had been no successful RICO prosecutions and no convictions of top bosses. You'd never know that in 2003, Joseph Massino, the Bonanno boss and purportedly the last head of New York's "five families" of crime still at large, was arrested and later convicted on murder and racketeering charges and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Then, in 2005, Massino did something unheard of for an old-time Mafia chief: he broke omertà, the venerable code of silence, and became a government witness.

Massino's betrayal, though shocking, wasn't unprecedented. The tradition of omertà had begun to collapse even before, as wiseguys increasingly chose to do the unthinkable: spill family secrets to prosecutors rather than stoically accept decades of imprisonment.

Moreover, although organized crime continues to infect parts of the construction industry, the government has had major successes in curbing labor racketeering there, as well as in the garment and waste-hauling industries, and at such profit centers as the Fulton Fish Market, JFK Airport, and the Javits Convention Center.

Not to sound too cynical about all this, but the Feds have a vested interest in promoting the notion that the power of "The Mafia" is undiminished – money. That is, the continued and generous funding of FBI and other government anti-organized crime operations.

There's another reason to be skeptical of claims that Italian American organized crime is flourishing. Most of the men recently arrested are either old or middle-aged. The new blood that would reinvigorate the various established crime organizations just isn't there.

During the 1950s-1960s heyday of organized crime, young Italian American males growing up in the ethnic enclaves of Brooklyn or the Bronx, Chicago or Philadelphia, could rub shoulders with actual gangsters. The actor and playwright Chazz Palmintieri recalled the mob's presence in the Bronx of his youth when I interviewed him a few years ago: "Oh, it was all over the place, it was all around. It was on the corners, it was in every social club."

The gangsters recruited new members from among working class young men who either lacked other opportunities or were too lazy or sociopathic to pursue them. But beginning in the 1960s, many Italian Americans left the mean streets of their urban neighborhoods for the suburbs. In the 70s, Joseph Pistone, the undercover FBI agent who, posing as "Donnie Brasco," successfully infiltrated a Brooklyn crime family, discovered that the street culture that had sustained La Cosa Nostra was dying out.

If the Mafia has not disappeared, it certainly is declining with the economic ascent of Italian Americans, as well from several decades of vigorous law enforcement.

Media reports of the February roundup also noted that authorities in Sicily had arrested a number of mafiosi who purportedly were connected to the New York Gambinos. Last year, in fact, Italian and American media reported that law enforcement figures on both sides of the Atlantic were concerned that the Inzerillo clan of Palermo was collaborating with the Gambinos to launder millions of dollars in drug and extortion money through real estate and other businesses in New York.



But the fact that Sicilian mafiosi have been forced to turn to their American counterparts to clean their dirty money is a sign of weakness. In the past, they easily could have done so in their homeland.

Authorities identified Francesco “Frank” Cali, a Sicilian immigrant living in Brooklyn, as the point man for the nascent Palermo-New York connection. Cali was one of the 62 alleged gangsters named in the February indictments. Yet this supposed lynchpin of a trans-Atlantic criminal conspiracy was charged only with attempting to shake down a NASCAR construction site on Staten Island.

One can, and I do, welcome the recent indictments of dozens of mob figures. Organized crime and its violent and venal men indisputably are a blight on society. But there’s far worse criminality in America than the Mafia’s, and it often goes unpunished. Veteran New York journalist and author Pete Hamill has observed that all the mob’s illegal profits don’t come close to those of “corporate sleazebags” like Enron and the Halliburton Corporation.

Crooks like “Jackie the Nose” and “Little Nicky,” whatever their misdeeds, are small fish indeed compared to the Anglo-Saxon dons who sit at the apex of American institutional power. “Big deal that the government has just rounded up a huge number of 20th century goombahs named ‘Fat Tony’ or the like,” wrote Ward Harkavy, a senior editor at the Village Voice. “We’re still waiting for the roundup of the government’s own 21st century gangsters, George ‘Dubya’ Bush and Richard ‘Dick’ Cheney.”

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