



I'll Have Some Pancetta with My Mob Reference, Please

Laura E. Ruberto (January 06, 2009)



With Leon Panetta's potential return to Washington, comes a new focus on his Italian connections.

Barely 24 hours have gone by since president-elect Obama named Leon Panetta to head the CIA, and already I've come across a handful of curious (and at times rather questionable) references to his Italian background.

Panetta was born in Monterrey, California, the son of Italian immigrants. He served as Bill Clinton's Chief of Staff and was a nine-term California Congressman. There has been a lot of criticism about this particular choice—concerns about how his experience would be useful to the CIA—but my interest here lies purely in how his Italian roots have been alluded to.

A few blogs and other online sources have commented on the [similarity between his last name and delicious Italian bacon, pancetta](#) [2]—a little comical, a little stupid, but rather harmless.

And then there is the [Times](#) [3][story regarding Panetta's Italian connection](#) [3]. It's a personal piece, with quotes from one of his cousins, Domenico Panetta, of Siderno (Calabria), commenting on, among other details, the fact that Leon Panetta speaks Calabrese. What disturbs me though, is that



the article ends with this:

Calabria is home to the 'Ndrangheta, a Mafia network said by Italian police to be even more powerful and wealthy than Cosa Nostra in Sicily thanks to its control of drugs trafficking.

Calabria is home to many, many things, the 'Ndrangheta being only one. This information had no direct relationship to the rest of the story about Panetta.

For the most part, I tend to disagree with the Italian American anti-defamation position that posits mafia images as a hurtful way of representing Italians. In this case, it seems clear that it is (Southern) Italy's and Italian Americans' continued (assumed) association with organized crime that first comes to mind, even within respected international journalism circles.

Oh, and I know an Italian American academic who went to college with Panetta's son—should that Italo-connection make the papers as well?!

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