

## “Narcotic”: Constructing the Mafia—The Nationally Televised New York Hearings of the Kefauver Committee, March 1951

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Reflecting upon the nationally televised New York City hearings of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce (hereafter “the Kefauver Committee” or “the Committee”), in March 1951, Jack Gould, the influential *New York Times* TV critic, astutely recognized their “narcotic fascination on the viewer at home” (Gould 1951b, X13). The broadcasts seemingly had a narcotic effect on the Committee as well, which, though initially apprehensive about the impact of the new medium of television on its process, could not seem to break away from it and, in the end, could not get its fill. Narcotics, in fact, were being promoted to the Committee by Federal Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry Anslinger as the life’s blood of the Mafia, which, he maintained, was the mysterious entity behind organized crime in the United States—an international ethnic crime conspiracy headquartered in Sicily with interests pursued in this country by syndicates of Italian and Italian American racketeers. The nationally televised New York City hearings proved an unequalled vehicle for transmission of a concept of the Mafia that was in no small part motivated by the political interests of Committee members, the funding concerns of government agencies, and the commercial interests of the profit-driven media.

This analysis of the televised March 1951 Kefauver Committee hearings in New York City presents a textual and rhetorical analysis of media constructs of Italian American organized crime—and specifically the Mafia—across a spectrum of contemporaneous mass media. The focus of this essay is upon the Committee’s and media’s construction of Italian Americans and organized crime at the intersection of media and history. The hearings captured the attention of the American people as never before. But this was no mere entertainment. The Kefauver hearings presented a new way of conceiving of organized crime in the United States, one that was readily assimilated into other media products and TV programming. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) propose, analysis of stereotypes and related constructs should be carried out with an eye on the ideologies and discourses underpinning them (180). What emerges is a construction of criminality inextricably bound to historical precedents and presentations, ambition, and commerce.

Also included is an analysis of a special episode (“The Tenth Commandment” 1954) of the locally televised and New York-based *Steve Allen Show* from 1954 that can be considered as emblematic of contemporaneous media in its construction of organized crime in the wake of the Kefauver hearings. Within this context, the Allen episode, though a local production dramatizing local concerns and preoccupations about organized crime, contributed to the dialog on organized crime in New York City, the nation’s media hub and headquarters for most of the country’s nationally distributed media (including magazines, books, network radio and TV broadcasting, and film exhibition and distribution) and therefore was influential on the national discourse about organized crime and Italian Americans.

In a sense, the Committee, journalists, law enforcement officials, and various media conspired in the delivery of the Mafia “narcotic” to the American public. This article describes the role played by the televised New York City hearings of the Kefauver Committee in popularizing both a notion of Italian American domination of American organized crime and the myth of an international crime conspiracy called the Mafia. Unrivaled in timeliness by the print media and unequaled by radio in terms of spectacle, the New York broadcast’s ability to reach a nearly national audience in real time demonstrated television’s singular commercial potential. In doing so, it reflected a process by which independent TV journalism would surrender its function as the fourth estate and become ever more dependent upon the largesse of advertisers and, thereby, more obedient to their values and commercial imperatives. A kind of cultural paranoia, taking root in the postwar years and part and parcel of the national reaction to the Cold War, pervaded the Committee’s work and reception. The paranoia exploited and spread a construction of perceived moral turpitude and political corruption attributable to the primarily Italian American Other, specifically embodied in the figures of Italian American racketeers and syndicates, further othered by the construction of an international crime conspiracy called the Mafia.

### American Postwar Culture and the Committee’s Inception

Despite Anslinger’s focus on the Mafia and drug trafficking, the main impetus for the formation of the Kefauver Committee came not from a fear that illicit drugs were draining the country of its vitality but from a fear of organized crime’s corruption of the political process, largely through the large amounts of money flowing from gambling. As a result of pressure from local law enforcement officials and civic organizations such as the crime commissions flourishing in the years following World War II,

organized crime's relationship with politics became a matter of public concern and, hence, a focus of ambitious politicians looking to make names for themselves. And so, in 1951, Democrat Estes Kefauver, the junior U.S. senator from Tennessee, after a brief struggle with the junior senator from Wisconsin, Republican Joseph McCarthy, secured the chairmanship of the crime subcommittee and, as such, would lead efforts to discover and describe the extent to which organized crime was corrupting U.S. politics and politicians.

Ultimately, the Kefauver Committee, adopting Anslinger's view, would, like McCarthy's Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, define its target as an international conspiracy. The work of both reflected a general and pernicious malady afflicting the country, one noted by many observers and perhaps best characterized by noted anthropologist Margaret Mead, who described the country's cumulative mood as one of anxiety in a 1956 *New York Times* article. In her words, in this "Age of Anxiety," Americans were burdened by "an uneasy state of mind, in which one has a feeling that something unspecified and undeterminable may go wrong" (Mead 1956, 13).

Thus, while the country had emerged from World War II as an unrivaled powerhouse, it was nonetheless wracked by the anxiety of its newfound status. Paranoia and xenophobia reverberated throughout much of U.S. culture, politics, and mass media, reflecting anxieties over the expansion of consumer society: changing roles of women in the workforce, the status of African Americans at the dawn of the civil rights movement, fears of communism and nuclear annihilation, perceptions of depravity among the young, and other social dissonance generated by the striking demographic change accompanying the postwar baby boom. At hand was the irrevocable collapse of the country's historically white, Protestant dominance. That power would not be freely surrendered, however, and as the country reacted to threats beyond its shores, it also turned on itself, as it had at other times in its history, searching for the enemies within.

A greater integration of Italian Americans into the country's social fabric followed their much-touted record of service during World War II and the concomitant cultural elevation of Italian Americans, Italians, and many of the culturally and commercially transferable signs and values of their constructed ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> However, distorting, antisocial elements proved resilient in the nation's discourse concerning Italian Americans. This is reflected in the Committee's most spectacular "discovery," broadcast to the TV audience and reported in the press, that there operated in the United States "a shadowy, international criminal organization known as the Mafia" (Kefauver 1951, 14). This organization was "a secret international government-within-a-government" headed by Charles "Lucky" Luciano

(deported to Italy in 1946) and with its “Grand Council” in Sicily. Further, the Committee maintained that the Mafia was administered through national and district heads in the countries in which it operated, including the United States, where “Mafia members [had] cunningly infiltrated some legitimate businesses—such as olive oil, cheese, candy, fruit, and coffee importing agencies—as fronts for their nefarious activities” (Kefauver 1951, 21–22). This construction of Italian Americans was a constant feature of 1950s mass-mediated culture and entertainment. As Lee Bernstein (2002) observes, “virtually the only Italian Americans who appeared on television in the 1950s were criminals,” fostering in some viewers an impression that “criminality and Italian American ethnicity were interconnected—even interchangeable—categories” (159).<sup>2</sup>

The media image(s) of Italian American criminality had a lengthy history in the press, film, and other mass media, and long-lived biases permeated the hearings and the media constructs generated by and in response to them. The construction of Italian American organized crime represented a counterweight to the greater acceptance enjoyed by Italian Americans following World War II. The construction of organized crime as “foreign” and ostensibly an Italian American phenomenon occurs within the context of an ongoing separation of Americans along racial and ethnic lines that dates back to the mass influx of Italian immigrants in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the highly racialized United States, immigrants and Americans of Italian descent occupied a “problematic racial position” (Alba 1985, 68).<sup>3</sup> It was only the much-vaunted service of Italian Americans in the war that created an environment in which Italian Americans transcended their racial status and attained an ethnic one. This transition was not immediate, however. Old prejudices remained. It is within this context that the Committee’s and media’s construction of Italian Americans and Italian/Italian American-dominated criminal syndicates must be understood. What Shohat and Stam (1994), citing Albert Memmi (1991), note as the “mark of the plural,” as related specifically to colonized people, may be said to apply in the United States in a limited fashion to certain groups of European descent: There is a tendency to take any negative behavior of any member of an oppressed community and generalize it “as typical, as pointing to a perpetual backsliding toward some presumed negative essence” (Shohat and Stam 1994, 183); while *largely* not susceptible to the same prejudices of those others who are marginalized on racial grounds, newly minted “ethnics” like Italian Americans nevertheless were often faced with a cultural antipathy based on perceptions of a proclivity for criminal behavior within the group as a whole. This antipathy was informed by a long history of negative media constructs.

### The Televised New York Hearings

The Kefauver Committee traveled to fourteen cities—visiting some of them multiple times—Miami, Tampa, Kansas City, Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Detroit, St. Louis, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Public interest grew, particularly after the televised proceedings in New Orleans, on January 25 and 26, 1951. There the public demanded and received expanded local TV coverage from WSDU-TV, at the time the city's only TV station. Thereafter, the hearings' entertainment value and, therefore, commercial potential were quickly established: In Detroit on February 8 and 9, the interest exceeded that for the prize fights of heavyweight champion Joe Louis, a hometown favorite, and led to the preemption of "sure fire" shows like *Howdy Doody*; in St. Louis on February 23 and 24, the Committee broadcast's audience was said to exceed that for the World Series ("Kefauver Show" 1951, 54; Lacey 1991, 194–195). In Los Angeles the ABC affiliate KECA-TV, the first station to anticipate the public's interest, televised the entirety of the Committee's hearings there—a total of sixteen hours over two days. At the next stop, San Francisco, viewers could watch live coverage on two of that city's three stations (Doherty 1998, 365). Even at this early date, Kefauver was being coaxed into molding his hearings to the desires of advertisers: Fearful of the disruptive impact the new technology was having on the Committee's work, Kefauver attempted to ban TV cameras from the proceedings in San Francisco but was forced to accede to the desires of local TV stations after being informed that commitments had already been made (Lisby 1985, 237). By the time the Committee caravan arrived in New York City, the country's central media and entertainment hub, the hearings' popularity with TV audiences was firmly established.

While there had been only 8 million TV sets in use by 1950, there were nearly 12 million by the time of the hearings, served by 107 stations in sixty-three markets.<sup>4</sup> The first national—or nearly national—TV event, the Kefauver hearings were broadcast live by twenty-five stations in twenty-one cities along the East Coast and in the Midwest, with the Far West and Southwest broadcasting kinescopes of the hearings (Doherty 1998, 365, 369). Research firms estimated an audience of 20 to 30 million viewers and a daytime viewing audience twenty times higher than normal (Lisby 1985, 239–240; Doherty 1998, 366). In total, New York City's WPIX carried forty-four hours of the hearings, sponsored nationally by *Time* magazine (then in the midst of a subscription drive [Repetto 2004, 263]), which featured Kefauver and the hearings on its March 12 cover.

While *Time* provided sponsorship, independent broadcaster WPIX was responsible for the actual production, which was made available to a

pool of broadcasters and employed eight microphones and two cameras. The number of cameras was increased to four when, on the third day, the hearings moved into a bigger room to accommodate the TV and newsreel cameras, press, and public. The hearings were broadcast live by five of the city's seven stations, and DuMont's WABD broadcast them in their entirety. On the first two days, while packed into a small, ultimately inadequate room, the Committee had sat at a raised table with, from the Committee's perspective, the witness's table lower and perpendicular to the left end of the Committee's seats. In the larger room, the orientation of the tables in the original venue was retained. The cameras were located in front and slightly to the right (from the Committee's perspective), in a corner at the back of the first, smaller room; in the larger room, the cameras were brought closer to the Committee and witnesses. In both spaces, as noted by Thomas Doherty (1998, 365), equipment limitations imposed a simple shot-reverse-shot grammar that actually benefited the creation of a mano-a-mano battle between the interrogator and the witness. Out of the hundreds of witnesses giving testimony during the Committee's investigation, the "best remembered" were New York witnesses Tony Anastasio and Frank Costello (*The Twentieth Century* 1958).

Anastasio, brother of Murder, Inc. leader Albert Anastasia (who assumed the position after the execution of Louis Lepke in 1944), was questioned on Monday, March 19, by Assistant Counsel Joseph Nellis about Anastasio's activities as a strikebreaker and labor contractor and his role as president of the A. A. Stevedoring Company. Video footage from the session reveals Chief Counsel Rudolph Halley's exasperation at Anastasio's uncommunicativeness and lack of memory of the events under consideration (*The Twentieth Century* 1958). As the lead counsel rubs his eyes, a federal marshal sitting behind Anastasio laughs, amused not only by Anastasio's answers but also, perhaps, by Halley's reaction. The shots alternated between a wide shot of the courtroom (with the Committee framed to the left and running away from the camera), used primarily during Committee questions and statements, and medium shots of the responding witnesses. For the TV audience, the back and forth captures the spectacle of an alleged mobster not merely weathering the intense grilling of his interrogator but, perhaps, also besting him. Further, as noted by Courtney Ritter (2014), citing Bernstein (2002, 48), the visual component was loaded with meaning: During the hearings, Italian American criminality was visually rendered in opposition to "the respectable businessman, the 'icon of the middle-class white male—the man in the gray flannel suit,'" the Italian suit at once signifying ethnic authenticity and a "menacing Otherness" as well as a "malignant individualism" (203–204). Thus, Anastasio's garb—a



pinstripe suit with wide lapels—was itself a mark of otherness. Nellis pressed Anastasio on previous testimony that Anastasio was “leader of a gang of thugs who were brought to this area in order to break a strike that was on from January to July 1946” at Phelps Dodge Copper Company in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Anastasio sat confidently, replying to Nellis’s accusations in a heavy Italian accent and nonstandard English (further augmenting his otherness and foreignness):

Anastasio: That’s a lie, sir.

Nellis: Were you ever on the premises there?

Anastasio: Yes, sir.

Nellis: And what was your function on the premises?

Anastasio: I used to be the only contract for the United States Army Engineer Corps (pause). I used to be the only stevedore in the United States for the manufacture [of] the cable for the invasion of the Africa.

Nellis: Did you ever boast to anyone you were getting a thousand dollars a day from the Phelps Dodge Company?

Anastasio: Uh, sir, I got eight dollars and forty cents in the bank when I bought in, in business, and I still got eight dollars and forty cents in the bank today (laughter in the chamber, and a brief pause). No diamond ring (he holds up his right hand to the Committee), no property, no real estate, sir. (“Selections from the Kefauver Hearings” 1951)

Anastasio’s disregard for the Committee’s work was palpable as he played to the courtroom audience at the expense of his questioner. The video footage captures Anastasio’s seeming pleasure in drawing the laughter of those gathered to witness the testimony. Even when confronted with his criminal record and questioned about his brother’s wealth, Anastasio remained calm, apparently enjoying himself and breaking into a slight smile:

Nellis: Mr. Anastasio, have you ever been arrested on any other occasion?

Anastasio: Yes, sir.

Nellis: In connection with what?

Anastasio: (After a long pause as he looks at the ceiling as if trying to remember the cause for his arrest, he finally answers in his heavily accented voice.) In connection with, uh, I did some work in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Nellis: And what was that about?

Anastasio: Some, uh, labor, they accuse me, some Communist, they accuse me ’cause hurt somebody over there.

Whether a tactical ploy or coincidence, in an exchange in which Anastasio turns the spotlight back on the Committee by declaring his allegiance in

the war against the international Communist Communist conspiracy, he gives nothing away, forcing Nellis to sharpen his questioning:

Nellis: Well, what kind of accusation was it?

Anastasio: Assault, I believe.

Nellis: And when was that?

Anastasio: If I recall, it was 1946.

Nellis: It was a felonious assault with an iron pipe, wasn't it?

Anastasio: That's what I believe so, sir.

Nellis: And you were tried on that?

Anastasio: Yes, sir.

Nellis: And what was the result of the trial?

Anastasio: Come out free from the grand jury.

Nellis: You were acquitted, is that right?

Anastasio: Yes, sir. (*The Twentieth Century* 1958)

Nellis then turned his questioning toward the role of Anastasio's brother Albert Anastasia in his stevedoring company:

Nellis: Did your brother make his money in your AA Stevedoring Company?

Anastasio: Little bit.

Nellis: How much?

Anastasio: Salary.

Nellis: What was his salary?

Anastasio: I'm no sure, sir. Whatever it was I don't want to lie to you if it was ninety, if it was one hundred, if it was one hundred and a quarter, one hundred and ten.

Nellis: A hundred and a quarter a week?

Anastasio: Between twenty-nine and a hundred and a quarter, somewhere in there, like that.

Nellis: Did you ever hear that the house out at Palisades that belongs to your brother is worth in excess of seventy thousand dollars?

Anastasio: No, sir.

Nellis: What do you think it's worth?

Anastasio: Sixty-five, sixty, or sixty-five thousand (laughter in the gallery, as Anastasio nods and breaks into a smile). (*The Twentieth Century* 1958)

For many in the broadcast audience, Anastasio had held his own—perhaps even triumphed—in the adversarial struggle encoded in the broadcast's shot-reverse-shot grammar, but the Committee would have the last laugh: Anastasio's testimony regarding his and his four brothers' illegal entry into the country led directly to lengthy but ultimately unsuccessful deportation



proceedings against them ("Anastasio, Brother of Underworld Leader" 1951, 25; "Anastasia Wins Plea" 1955, 14).

The threat of deportation of witnesses, made time and again by Committee members during the hearings, helped to further establish the threat of organized crime as a foreign and ethnic one. Frank Costello, ultimately also a subject of deportation proceedings, was the Committee's prime target, having already been declared by the media to be the "Prime Minister" of the underworld, a gangster with nationwide reach, and a focal point for all of the anxieties harbored about gambling and political influence.<sup>5</sup> In response to Costello's concern that the TV cameras would make a spectacle of his testimony before the Committee, Senator Herbert O'Connor, presiding over the hearings on Costello's first day of testimony, March 13, ordered the TV cameras to turn away from Costello. The cameras instead alternated between shots of the Committee and of Costello's hands. This "headless" performance was, perhaps, the most commented-upon aspect of the hearings and has been described by numerous academics, journalists, and commentators (Doherty 1998, 366; Gould 1951a, 1; Hallett 1951b, 9; Lisby 1985, 238; Moore 1974, 189; Reppetto 2004, 263; "The Biggest Show" 1951, 52). Yet, Costello's visage was filmed freely by the newsreel cameras on hand and, in fact, was carried on the evening TV news broadcasts. Far more important for the purposes of this study is the centrality of Costello within the construction of Italian American criminality that the Committee fostered and disseminated.

Costello, having weathered thirteen hours of closed-session testimony before the Committee in February, was confident that he could manage the Committee's public interrogation, despite the recent publication of the interim report declaring him one of the most powerful criminals in the country. Reacting to the report during his first day of testimony, he challenged the Committee to prove him a crime lord or else quit portraying him as such: "I am begging you to treat me as a human being," he said. Admitting in his opening statement to gambling and bootlegging activities in the past, "of which I am not particularly proud," he expressed the hope that he would "not . . . be eternally punished" ("Wealth Data" 1951, 6). Costello's appeal to be treated "as a human being" was not unwarranted. The "meticulously dressed man," as we have seen—the phrase a kind of code for his otherness—was further characterized by the *Christian Science Monitor's* coverage of the first day of testimony as "swarthy" ("Video Glare" 1951, 16). That article's recap of the hearings and Costello's testimony noted how the "swarthy, uneducated but powerful" Costello was "cleverly trapped by the committee" ("TV Meets Costello" 1951, 9). If the degraded nature of Costello's humanity was not clear enough for readers, this article

was accompanied by an editorial cartoon depicting a ramrod-straight Kefauver and Halley, bowed in concentration, as Costello waits to answer the question of a finger-wagging Tobey. Costello is depicted as a brute, his brow thick, almost simian.

Efforts to vilify Costello were in fact out of proportion to what was known of his record: First, within law enforcement there was a great deal of disagreement over Costello's status as a crime boss—even Anslinger's Federal Bureau of Narcotics ranked him no higher than twelfth on its internal list of organized crime figures, due to his being largely uninvolved in narcotics (Repetto 2004, 266). Second, while Costello admitted to his involvement in gambling, it was, at the time, a "quasi-legitimate but no less respectable" enterprise (Bell [1962] 2000, 148). So widespread and lucrative was the activity that an editorial in the *New York Times* appearing shortly after the Committee concluded the New York City hearings, in noting the failure of Prohibition and the money that was flowing from gambling into corrupting politics and law enforcement, questioned the efficacy of an outright ban ("The Quandary on Gambling" 1951, 24). Yet, the Committee was determined to make an example of its star witness, a noted gambler, rum runner, bootlegger, political kingmaker, and reputed mob boss, who had already been convicted in the press and court of public opinion.

Other factors eroded his position. His unresponsiveness to questions, much of it reflecting an unwillingness to admit to having undeclared income,<sup>6</sup> was interpreted by the Committee as evidence of his elevated status in the underworld and adherence to the code of *omertà* and, therefore, consistent with its theory of organized crime in the United States. Furthermore, Costello's position was impacted by his desire for respectability.<sup>7</sup> On the third day of his televised testimony, Thursday, March 15, Costello opened himself up to a contempt charge when, during a particularly heated exchange over the veracity of earlier testimony, he claimed illness and walked out of the hearings; yet, as one journalist noted at the time, Costello's action may have been motivated by his "outraged pride": "It was possible . . . to imagine him saying to himself: 'What do these fellows take me for, a common criminal?'" (Folliard 1951, B1).

Because the Committee had cast Costello in the role of the "big boss" ("Wealth Data" 1951, 1), there was no lengths to which it was not willing to go to demonstrate his wickedness. Particularly useful versus this perceived "foreign" threat was the questioning of witnesses' loyalty to their adopted country, and such assertions of treachery would remain common in discourse about Italian and Italian American organized crime. On Wednesday, March 21, the eighth and final day of the New York City hearings, Senator Tobey, searching for "a possible basis for revocation of his citizenship" (Hagerty

1951, 25), mounted a prolonged assault on Costello. Much of the questioning, focused upon Costello's activities during Prohibition, was a replay of the first day of his testimony but was recast as a vehicle for impugning the witness's patriotism, thereby providing the big finish desired by the increasingly TV-savvy Committee (*The Twentieth Century* 1958). Referring to Costello's days as a rum runner importing alcohol from Canada during Prohibition, Tobey commented, "And when you did that you broke the laws and flouted the Constitution, did you not?" Costello affirmed that he had ("Well, you can call it that . . ."), at which Tobey wondered, "Do you realize, with me and all good citizens, that there can be no qualified allegiance to the Constitution of the United States?" Costello responded defensively, "Well, I wasn't the only one." Then, Tobey, playing to the audience in the chamber and at home, posed a litany of questions challenging Costello's patriotism—the camera focused throughout on a medium shot of Costello listening and responding to Tobey:

During these years since you have been here, have you prized the privilege of being a citizen of the United States? . . . Do you appreciate the rights that are yours as an American citizen? . . . Has this country come up to your expectations? . . . In the years which have elapsed since you became a citizen, you have fared pretty well in material things, have you not? . . . When you signed or had someone sign your naturalization papers, what did you promise to do as a citizen of the United States? (*The Twentieth Century* 1958)

Costello answered repeatedly in the affirmative, responding to this last question, "Well, I promised to obey, naturally . . . the Constitution." "And the laws," continued Tobey. Costello agreed ("That's right"). Tobey's interrogation proceeded: "Have you always upheld the Constitution and the laws of your state and nation?" (Costello: "I believe I have"). "Have you ever offered your services to any war effort of this country?" (Costello, after a pause: "No"). "Bearing in mind all that you have gained and received in wealth, what have you ever done for your country as a good citizen?" (Costello: "Well, I don't know what you claim, what you mean by that"). "You must have in your mind some things that you've done that you can speak of to your credit as an American citizen. If so, what are they?" Costello, obviously agitated, wiped his lip with a handkerchief and after a pause answered, "Paid my tax," at which point laughter erupted in the chamber and, in response, Costello grinned (*The Twentieth Century* 1958).

One can only imagine Costello's anger and exasperation at his treatment by the Committee and especially Tobey. While Committee members frequently indicated that theirs was not a prosecutorial function (Hallett

1951a, 1), a law enforcement perspective was adopted that sent Costello to prison for contempt of the Senate and had him fighting in court for years to retain his citizenship;<sup>8</sup> yet he fared better than twenty-four other aliens and naturalized citizens identified by the Committee, who were deported (Moore 1974, 238–239). In retrospect, society's "retribution," as Daniel Bell ([1962] 2000, 148–149) characterized it, was "little more than a trumped-up morality that disguised a social hypocrisy."

### Entertainment and the Myth of the Mafia in an "Age of Anxiety"

While this article focuses on the televised Kefauver hearings' perpetuation and embellishment of distorting stereotypes of and about Italian American criminality, these media constructions should be understood within the context of a broader media environment and public culture that was also populated with more nuanced and varied representations of Italian Americans. During the war<sup>9</sup> and in the years following it, Italian Americans and Italian American culture were sewn into the social fabric of the country as never before, and the media were filled with Italian American images and role models, including numerous sports heroes such as New York Yankee Joe DiMaggio, boxers Rocky Graziano, Rocky Marciano, and Carmine Basilio, crooners like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, among others. Yet, while much in postwar culture reflected greater acceptance and assimilation of those of Italian descent as ethnic Americans, countervailing forces remained and stereotypes were resilient. "In the wake of the Kefauver hearing," notes John Dickie (2004, 233), "the United States rediscovered its fear of the Mafia—a fear that had last gripped the nation nearly half a century earlier." It also drew from an extensive catalog of film and other mass-mediated constructs of criminality among those of Italian descent that were well known to much of the audience of the hearings. While the Committee's claims far exceeded the evidence presented, they nevertheless found fertile ground in the imaginations of an American public that had long marveled at media presentations of the activities of Italian American organized crime.

Given the popularity and cultural resonance of the early gangster films, such as *Little Caesar* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932), it is not surprising that the classical gangster genre would provide a reference point for conceptualizing, describing, and understanding the Kefauver hearings; nor, importantly for the matter at hand, is it surprising that the media should often frame the hearings as entertainment. The Kefauver Committee, according to a *Life* magazine article ("The U.S. Gets a Close Look at Crime" 1951), "one of the most spectacular dramatic hits in the history of U.S.

congressional investigation," concluded its "run" in New York City with a "climactic galaxy of underworld stars, uneasy politicians and reluctant policemen." Its "greatest accomplishment" was its revelation of crime as an "actuality, close up" to a public "who knew crime only dimly through news columns or mistakenly through B movies" (33). In view of the fact that a "great deal of the testimony and the 'revelations' were old stuff which had been heard by many grand juries and had been printed many times in newspapers and magazines," the *New York Herald Tribune's* John Crosby (1951, B13), in an article reprinted in the *Washington Post*, theorized as to the unprecedented magnitude of public interest in the hearings and found that the fact of "so great an audience," made possible by television, had "charged [the hearings] with emotion, not all of it rational." In particular, Crosby wondered about some "decidedly curious" reactions from the public. "Even Senator Kefauver," wrote Crosby, had "noted with some alarm that large segments of the populace showed a tendency to sympathize with the witnesses, no matter how shady their past." Further, Tobey, as "God's Angry Man," and Halley, as the "coldly relentless inquisitor," were not "universally popular" but were, rather, "decidedly unpopular with many people." Parts of the audience, it seemed, were receiving the media messages in unexpected ways. To put it into terms defined in Stuart Hall's (1999, 515–517) influential "Encoding, Decoding" model, first theorized in the early 1970s, some audience members were rejecting the "dominant-hegemonic position" encoded in the message—the *preferred* message intended by the Committee—in favor of "negotiated," or even oppositional, decodings of the message. While the "well-heeled matrons" of the suburbs may have favored "matinee idol" Estes Kefauver, the sentiment was far from universal. "To be quite honest about it," reasoned Crosby (1951, B13), "we have been conditioned by the movies, by the theater, by books to dislike the prosecutor." Women in the audience, in particular, had exhibited a "tendency to confuse some of these hoodlums, the well-dressed and successful ones in particular, with Humphrey Bogart.

The *Christian Science Monitor*, perhaps ironically, commented on the "realistic drama" of the hearings, which were punctuated by the "climax" of the "third act," in which Costello, pleading illness, walked out of the hearings ("Costello Defies Senators" 1951, 1). Even more startling was the climax provided on the third day, during which Frank C. Bals, former New York City deputy police commissioner, provided an "ad lib" that was the "'clincher' to his story," affirming that, in 1941, Abe "Kid" Reles, a former Murder, Inc. hit man providing information to law enforcement officials, accidentally fell to his death from a hotel window while in the custody of "six husky policemen . . . The officers were all oddly asleep in the same



room at the identical moment during which the witness played his grim ‘prank’” (Shayon 1951, 10).

The hearings, disclosing nothing new factually, nevertheless were a commercial success and mass entertainment milestone. Serving up reputed gangsters, constructed and defined by the Committee and much of the media as conspirators in an international crime cartel, and often in relation to past constructions of film and other mass-mediated gangsters, proved irresistible entertainment for the TV audience. As if accentuating the entertainment atmosphere of the hearings, it is worth noting that the WPIX courtroom commentator Harry T. Brundidge approached Costello at the end of his testimony: Noting that “Mr. Costello is willing to face the camera and let you have a good look at him,” Brundidge bent over the seated Costello, with his left arm braced on either Costello’s back or the back of his seat, jokingly turned to the witness and said, “Mr. Costello, as the photographer says to the little boy, ‘can you smile a little bit?’” at which Costello, shaking Brundidge’s hand, turned and gave a broad smile to the gathered photographers and film crews, seeming more talk show guest than subpoenaed witness (“Frank Costello Paid His Tax Speech” 2014). Further undermining the seriousness of the proceedings was a report in *Variety* that some witnesses had been purchasing kinescopes of their testimony for personal use (Lisby 1985, 238).

Prior to the Committee’s televised New York City hearings, it had already released a preliminary report with “facts” that were repeated over and over again, including allegations that American crime was controlled by two major crime syndicates—one built in Chicago, around Al Capone’s mob and run by Tony Accardo, the Fischetti brothers, and Jake Guzik, and the other run out of New York City by Frank Costello and Joey Adonis. Lucky Luciano reportedly acted as arbiter between the two within a trans-Atlantic combination controlled by the Mafia (Hinton 1951b, 22). Though there would be no testimony given to corroborate the existence of an international crime conspiracy at work in the United States, essentially the same allegations—with little development—were made in the aftermath of the New York City hearings and repeated in the nation’s media.

Bell ([1962] 2000) notes that even law enforcement officials, among them Burton Turkus, the Brooklyn prosecutor who had broken up Murder, Inc., doubted the Committee’s conclusions regarding the power of the Mafia (139). In fact, according to Bell, with the exception of a couple of Hearst reporters and the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, nobody “believed that the Mafia exists as such” (140n). William Howard Moore (1974), criticizing the Committee for promulgation of the “tragic myth” of the Mafia (131), notes that it expended little effort tracing the links necessary to prove



such an international conspiracy. Even members of the Committee staff had concerns about the conclusion. Kefauver had been advised against overemphasizing in Committee reports the role of the Mafia by at least one member of his team, Henry Patrick Kiley, who had rightly pointed out that as many Irish Americans and Jews as Italian Americans appeared in the Committee's "wanted" list and that there was little to gain by stressing the presence of the Italians, or, as he put it, awarding them "all the oak leaf clusters" (Kiley to Kefauver, n.d., Crime Box 37, Kefauver Papers; quoted in Moore 1974, 130). The Committee's legislative counsel Rufus G. King, while commenting that the Committee had, with "lucidity and éclat," established that the "interstate gangster is prominent in our national life, operating freely and on a challenging national scale" (King 1951, 52), nevertheless took issue with the "only unconvincing conclusion" contained in the Committee's penultimate *Third Interim Report*, namely, its rendering of the Mafia as a "'secret conspiracy against law and order' extending through all the flesh-and-blood syndicates." Noting the source of his and others' ambivalence, he added, "The cumulative denials and professed ignorance which were recorded by every witness who was questioned about the Mafia suggest that it is either a *very* 'elusive, shadowy sinister organization'—or else, equally credibly, a romantic myth" (King 1951, 52, note 4). As Moore notes, even Kefauver and Chief Counsel Rudolph Halley appeared confused by the Committee's conclusions about the Mafia. Appearing on *Meet the Press* as the Committee's report was being distributed, the chairman stated only that he thought the Mafia was more a way of life than an organization, and when questioned about the "Maffia [sic] supergovernment in America," Halley told *Collier's* writer Leslie Velie, "If there had been two years' time instead of just eleven months, and if there had been a staff of 200 investigators instead of just a dozen . . . we might have learned the truth about the Maffia [sic]" (Velie 1951, 82; quoted in part in Moore 1974, 133).

While Kefauver and Halley retreated from earlier, more strident, claims as to the operation of an international ethnic conspiracy at work in the United States, the media continued to play up this angle, giving rise to what crime and justice historian Alan Block (2009) called the "Mafia and Cosa Nostra demonologists" (130). This cadre of politicians, journalists, pundits, and purveyors of mass culture would thrive by repeating and embellishing claims about an Italian/Italian American combination dominating U.S. and global organized crime. The "marketability" of this aspect of the hearings was established early on: Mortimer cautioned Kefauver that the Committee's focus upon gambling and the wire service made "bad theater" and that it should, instead, focus on the growing control of

the Mafia over organized crime and legitimate business, further indicating that Senator McCarthy's approach to committee work provided a model for pursuit of the Mafia question (Moore 1974, 143).

What, then, prompted the Committee to come to the Mafia domination conclusion despite the lack of evidence? Understaffed and underfunded, like many such tribunals, the Committee was susceptible to conspiracy interpretations and concerted pressure. One source was the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and its chief, Commissioner Harry J. Anslinger, who, while admitting that it could not be said that criminal interests in one part of the country controlled those of any other part, nevertheless maintained that organized crime in the United States was part of an ethnic conspiracy originating in Sicily. In this instance, it could be said to have simply publicized the views of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and more reactionary portions of the press. At least as early as June 1950, it was reported that Anslinger had begun to press the Committee toward a conspiratorial interpretation of the facts at hand, telling it that he believed the Mafia to be "behind an 800-man crime, vice, and narcotics ring in this country" ("International Crime Angles" 1950, 1). Anslinger, alone among the heads of federal law enforcement agencies, maintained that the Mafia, fueled by profits arising from the narcotics trade, controlled the country's organized criminal activities through an international ethnic crime conspiracy and, thus, required a federal enforcement response. J. Edgar Hoover, on the other hand, maintained that there was no Mafia, no national crime syndicate, and that the Italian American-dominated gangs and rackets, such as gambling, were local problems (Lacey 1991, 204; Reppetto 2004, xiii, 14; Doherty 1998, 360; Mangione and Morreale 1993, 260).

Whatever else may have motivated Anslinger's focus upon an international ethnic conspiracy, the strength and status of his bureau were of paramount concern, and he and his agents rarely passed up an opportunity to call for more appropriations. The *New York Times* reported in June 1951 that Anslinger told the Committee that his agency was "exercising all the control of the traffic that was possible with the 180 men [it] had" and asked that the Senate reinstate funds that had recently been cut from his budget by the House of Representatives (Hinton 1951a, 1). Clearly, Anslinger was trying to claim some of the attention and funding enjoyed by Hoover and his Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and was aided in this effort by the Committee, which endorsed an expansion of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics' enforcement staff in April ("Senate Group Shapes Anti-Crime Program" 1951, 14). Kefauver (1951), in *Crime in America*, declared that he "strongly favor[ed] increased appropriations to give this bureau more manpower with which to carry on the fight against the Mafia-dominated

narcotics traffic" (20). The senator noted the role played by the bureau in uncovering the Mafia conspiracy: "Our greatest help in tracking down the trail of the Mafia came from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. . . . Because of the Mafia's dominance in the dope trade, the Narcotics Bureau has become the leading authority on this sinister organization" (Kefauver 1951, 19).

Anslinger's definition of the problem was trumpeted by his confederates and allies in the press. *Washington Post* columnists proved to be big supporters of the commissioner's position. Jack Anderson and Tom McNamara (1950), filling in for Drew Pearson on his muckraking "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column in August 1950, revealed the "[s]ecret testimony" before the Committee, putting the "finger on the Mafia or 'Black Hand'" as the "real 'brains' behind organized crime in this country" (B5). Lucky Luciano, the deported "former vice lord of New York," was allegedly "running the underworld from Rome." Mafia members, who "live by a strict code or 'omertà,' which forbids them to admit their membership or ever to appeal to the law," had, according to Anslinger, "penetrated many legitimate businesses, such as the olive-oil industry" (Anderson and McNamara 1950, B5). Pearson (1950a), writing in early October, noted that "Lucky Luciano, the international head [of the Mafia] still exercises a mysterious control over the American underworld from Italy" and added, "A total of fifty men control most of the big rackets in the United States. All are members of the Mafia, and all but one are either Italian-born or of Italo-American descent" (B13). In the following days, Pearson published two more articles providing information likely leaked by members of the Committee or the Bureau of Narcotics, the "hitherto unpublished roll call" of the "most powerful rulers of crime in the United States," followed by "the most secret list of criminals in the United States," which named specific individuals alleged to be part of the Mafia (Pearson 1950b, C13; 1950c, B15). Yet, while *Post* writers continued to promote Anslinger's agenda, no journalists had more impact on the Committee's deliberations than "the peephole writing team" of Jack Lait and, especially, Lee Mortimer, of the tabloid *New York Daily Mirror* (Bell [1962] 2000, 139).

Lait and Mortimer were purveyors of a most virulent and paranoid brand of journalism, a reactionary pulp pornography masquerading as the product of a loyal fourth estate. One in a series of best-selling crime books, including *New York Confidential* (1948), *Washington Confidential*, and *U.S.A. Confidential*, in 1951 and 1952, respectively, the pair's *Chicago Confidential* (Lait and Mortimer 1950) heavily influenced Kefauver's thinking as he prepared for the hearings and bore all of the hallmarks of the authors' worldview, including indexed entries for "homos" and "hookers"

and jingoist/racist references to “Japs” and “Beans.”<sup>10</sup> The pairs’ greatest derision, however, was reserved for the Mafia—“the *Unione Siciliano*, the super-government which now has tentacles reaching into the Cabinet and the White House itself” (Lait and Mortimer 1950, 176). Overseeing the workings of this wicked combine was its “board of directors . . . the Grand Council,” with Charles “Lucky” Luciano acting as “president of the international crime cartel” and Frank Costello holding the post of “president” of the “American Crime Corporation” (181). The similarities between Lait’s and Mortimer’s diatribe and the views of the Committee are hard to ignore, and, as Michael Woodiwiss (1987) indicates, the Committee’s conclusions are aptly characterized as a “more temperate version” of the conspiracy theory put forward by the pair (13). In addition, Lait and Mortimer, like Kefauver, were champions of Anslinger’s Federal Bureau of Narcotics, “one of the more thorough enforcement agencies of the government, despite the handicaps of its limited personnel and niggardly government appropriations” (Lait and Mortimer 1950, 151).

Thus, the Committee came into the hearings with a rubric already established for understanding the issues under consideration. In this reading, organized crime in the United States—far from being the result of complex domestic sociological and economic factors—was the doing of the Mafia, an international ethnic organized crime conspiracy.

### The Committee’s Adoption of the Mafia Model

While Anslinger and a handful of journalists may have given the most immediate stimulus to the Committee’s adoption of an international ethnic criminal conspiracy model for understanding organized crime in the United States, there were other factors that may have predisposed the Committee to come to its conclusions. At issue is why the Committee accepted and promoted such a demonstrably false definition of the country’s crime problem. The road to the Committee’s definition of the Mafia was paved with political ambition, commercial motives, and governmental agency rivalries. The terms of the public discourse on Italian Americans were profoundly affected by the makeup of the Committee, selection of hearings sites, and manifest societal tensions simmering just beneath the surface and sometimes rising into full view, including conflicts between Republican and Democrat, North and South, Protestant and Catholic worldviews, the rural and the urban, and, significantly, between “American” and “foreign.”

Fearful of creating a venue for airing the criticisms of conservative southern Democrats and Republicans, which would likely focus upon the political machines of the urban centers from which Democratic power

and political dominance were derived, the Harry S. Truman administration and Democratic leaders were hostile to a committee such as the one proposed by Kefauver, as were portions of the nation's law enforcement apparatus. Attorney General J. Howard McGrath trumpeted the views of Hoover and his FBI: namely, that, as there was no national crime syndicate, a federal investigation would be wasteful and gambling should remain in the purview and jurisdiction of local law enforcement (Raab 2005, 97). Largely bereft of senators who could point to the urban machines as the sources for their power, the Committee included, in addition to Kefauver, Lester Hunt, Democrat of Wyoming; Republicans Alexander Wiley, of Wisconsin, and Charles Tobey, of New Hampshire; and Maryland Democrat Herbert O'Connor. In fact, the fears of the Democrats were borne out in the Committee's selection of sites for their investigation, which focused overwhelmingly on the nation's biggest cities and their political cultures. Glaringly absent were visits to any of the Committee members' states.

The selection of sites did not simply shield Committee members from embarrassing and perhaps career-ending revelations about the wielding of political power in their constituencies; it also reflected and promoted a destructive and, as noted at the time by Princeton University scholar H. H. Wilson in *The Nation*, essentially Jeffersonian belief in a small-town and rural monopoly on virtue (Wilson 1951, 46).<sup>11</sup> This prejudice was implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the pronouncements of Senator Tobey. Calling a press conference following an executive session in which the Committee had taken testimony from, among others, various associates of disgraced former New York City Mayor William O'Dwyer and racketeers Albert Anastasia and Meyer Lansky (cumulatively referred to by the senator as "a motley crew"), he remarked, "I suppose there are some fine people in New York"—to which Kefauver, more prudent in his assessment, felt it necessary to note that conditions in New York City were not significantly different from those in other cities visited by the Committee (Moscow 1951, 20). This would not be Tobey's only injection of his essentially small-town and Protestant values into the proceedings. Apparently comfortable in his role as "the voice of moral indignation in the nation" ("Tobey Outbursts at Crime Probe" 1951, 7), the "homespun" senator, in high dudgeon during the televised hearings, dominated the proceedings of the third day with a "spell woven . . . with a touch of New England evangelism and a fund of biblical and literary aphorisms," redolent with the "genuine ring of a crusade for law and order" (Perlmutter 1951, 25). Moved by testimony concerning alleged efforts by gamblers to corrupt schoolchildren, Tobey called for a "return to religion," and, "with tears streaming down his face" ("Tobey Weeps" 1951, A1; see also, "After Calling for a Return to Religion"



1951, 25), quoted the following couplet from Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier's "Problems":

But solution there is none,  
Save in the rule of Christ alone. ("Tobey Weeps" 1951, A1)

Then, turning to the two prosecutors to whom testimony was being given, he continued:

"When the hearts of men and women are touched, they take their inspiration from the Master of Men, and then we will have a righteous and a new America, and we will have in this nation a nation in which 'Dwelleth righteousness,' and, before God, it is high time!" (Perlmutter 1951, 25). Prone to biblically tinged and poetic pronouncements and hyperbole, Tobey possessed a sense of righteousness that more than once led him to exceed the bounds of propriety.

It might be tempting to attribute much of the vitriol that flowed toward the witnesses, who were mostly Jewish people and those of Irish and Italian descent, to the Committee's composition: Kefauver was raised Baptist, Hunt was Episcopalian, Wiley was a Protestant, and Tobey was a Congregationalist deacon raised by a devout Baptist mother. O'Connor was the only Roman Catholic on the Committee, while there was no Jewish representation. Yet, with the exception of the occasional declaration by Tobey, there was little that was explicitly Protestant to the proceedings. Nevertheless, the tensions between Protestant and Catholic worldviews were implicit in the values underpinning the Committee's aims. William Howard Moore (1974), in his superb history of the hearings, *The Kefauver Committee and the Politics of Crime*, notes the moral absolutism inherent in the culture and tradition of the "Puritan conscience equating law and religion" and, hence, requiring of law enforcement that it protect religious beliefs and enforce religious proscriptions (1). Sociologist Daniel Bell ([1962] 2000), in *The End of Ideology*, was among the first to describe the Committee within the context of the "continuing feature of [U.S.] history," that is, the enforcement of public morals as a function of an overarching "ethos of suppression rarely matched in Catholic societies" (128). With regard to the postwar years, there was a widespread confidence that religion would become even more central to American culture than it had been. Even more so than in the past, polls suggested, Americans openly identified themselves as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish (Patterson 1996, 328). The country's religiosity was captured later in the decade, when a Gallup Poll from 1957 indicated that only 14 percent of Americans believed that religion was losing its influence (Hudson 1981, 415). Hence, Tobey's oratory can be viewed as reflecting a growing tendency in the American



polity: In this atmosphere, religious conservatives reaffirmed the country's Christian heritage (Lambert 2010, 132).

The Kefauver hearings remained the dominant reference point for describing the Mafia and Italian American organized crime for more than a decade, before being overshadowed by Joseph Valachi's testimony and revelations about "La Cosa Nostra" before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the U.S. Senate Committee on Government Operations in 1963. Footage from the hearings was regularly plundered for news stories and documentaries.<sup>12</sup> More than simply providing historic footage for inexpensive documentary and news programming, however, the Kefauver hearings presented a new way of conceiving of organized crime in the United States that was readily and immediately adopted into the broad mass media landscape. One early example was a locally produced television program on New York City's WNBT in 1954.

### Steve Allen's "The Tenth Commandment"

In the Sunday, August 29, 1954, edition of the *New York Times*, there were items announcing the week's media-related highlights, including radio broadcast of Rocky Marciano's defense of his world heavyweight boxing title against Ezzard Charles and a local radio station's intention to focus upon Italian opera in the fall season and its sponsorship of a "City Center Talent Search" featuring singers aged twenty-one through thirty-eight "specializing in Italian operatic roles" (planned in cooperation with the City Center for Arts and Music and the Italian-language newspaper *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*)—all of which reflected not only the strong presence of Italian Americans in the media but also the strong and constructive presence of Italian Americans in the area served by the *Times*. There was, however, a third item that carried with it the threat of Italian American ignominy. The ambitious host of a local late-night TV program was to jettison the "usual light-hearted informality" of his show for a special program that would feature comment from law enforcement officials and others "concerned with crime" (Farrell 1954, X9).

Steve Allen was the popular host of *The Steve Allen Show* and a local celebrity on the verge of his big break—within the month he was to become the first host of NBC's nationally televised *The Tonight Show*, where he would pioneer the TV talk show format. His special crime program was a marked departure from the show's usual format. The publicity generated by "The Tenth Commandment" broadcast, coming just weeks before the premier of *The Tonight Show*, convinced a few of the less-charitable members of the press corps that the special broadcast was simply a publicity stunt to drum

up interest in the new program—a view that infuriated Allen. How, he wondered, could the press “assume I worked for weeks on a story, tackling nothing less than the murderous Mafia itself, placing myself in serious physical danger and my career in jeopardy as well, purely for the purpose of getting publicity” (Alba 2005, 91). Whatever his motivation, Allen was an entertainer par excellence and constructed “The Tenth Commandment” to resemble the hard-boiled crime stories then so popular on the nation’s screens and bookstands.

Word got out that Allen was planning a special broadcast dedicated to crime in New York City, and he quickly became the target of concerted efforts by racketeers and their attorneys to prevent the program (Alba 2005, 86–91; “TV Show to Mark Arrival of Jews” 1954, 48; “N. Y. Probes ‘Pressure’” 1954, 59). Nevertheless, he went forward with preparations, and on August 29, 1954, the live program was introduced by Allen, adopting the tone of a crime film narrator: “Tonight, there will be no comedy or music on our program, as I was just explaining to our somewhat puzzled—up to this moment—studio audience . . . not doing so in my capacity as an entertainer. Tonight I’m just speaking to you as an average citizen, just a taxpayer, as the saying goes, just a guy standing on a corner getting sort of burned up at a civic situation” (“The Tenth Commandment” 1954). So began Allen’s “special one-time broadcast” concerning organized crime—“a subject of vital interest to every resident of the greater New York area” (“The Tenth Commandment” 1954).

The format for the programming was a roundtable discussion led by Allen and populated by law enforcement officials and members of the press.<sup>13</sup> Allen introduced the various topics and offered commentary, which invariably drew a response from the program’s “devil’s advocate,” “Mr. Mob,” played by character actor James Gregory, which was countered in turn by members of the panel. The entire program was scripted, with the guests reading from cue cards. Racketeers of Italian descent were the overwhelming focus in a program that explicitly identified known racketeers by name. The sense of Italian American control of crime was heightened by the absence of open discussion of another focus of the program, the mysterious “Mr. X.”<sup>14</sup>

The live broadcast was a product of its time, with numerous guests and the host smoking cigarettes and blowing smoke into the air to the point that by the end of the program there is a low haze floating just above the ash-speckled participants reading cue cards from a highly stylized script.<sup>15</sup> Illustrative of the script’s debt to the urban patois so prevalent in the crime films of the time was this exchange between Allen, Mr. Mob (his hat tilted back on this head, toothpick hanging from his mouth), and crime

writer and *New York Herald Tribune* journalist Walter Arm. Allen had just listed the various enterprises from which the mob drew its sustenance, including racketeering in the garment industry, the docks, narcotics distribution, and boxing:

Mr. Mob (in wide shot with Allen): Wait a minute. I happen to know some of these fellas you call gangsters. Some of them may be a little rough, well alright, but some of them are very nice guys.

Allen: Exactly what do you mean, "nice guys"?

Mr. Mob: You know, they're real gentlemen—well-dressed, soft-spoken, go to their mothers, give money to charity. I know a lot of big shots.

Arm (in a medium close-up shot, for effect): Oh, you're wrong, mister. Some mobsters are charming, but they're not nice guys. They'll be polite in their dealings with you; they'll give you the friendly "hello," if you play ball their way. But if you don't, well, sometimes they get so un-nice as to order your execution. If they give a cent to charity it's conscience money—maybe they hope to buy a cool spot in hell, I don't know. They may give their mothers washing machines but they don't give them piece of mind. And the fact that they know a lot of big shots—and brother, they sure do—why, that's nothing to brag about. That's a national disgrace.

Mr. Mob (wide shot): Look now, now, well hold on about that execution stuff. Maybe there's a little gunplay once in a while, some of the boys get a little hot-headed, well, but look—they're usually just shooting at each other.

Allen (wide shot with Mr. Mob): Well, maybe not often enough, and not always—by a very long shot. They can be very rough on anybody. ("The Tenth Commandment" 1954)

At one point, Allen admonishes Mr. Mob that "the mob actually takes money out of your pocket." Mr. Mob shoots back, "Baloney." Allen, in the deadpan delivery of the weary film noir protagonist, counters, "Well, sometimes you have to pay more for that, too," and segues to another panel member, "a gentleman who does a very fine job of exposing the mob's operations in the field of organized labor. Here's Mr. Victor Riesel." Riesel<sup>16</sup> read his lines:

Thanks, Steve. Yes, believe it or not, organized crime costs you a lot of money. There's a man who comes to dinner every time your wife sets the table—a strong-arm man. He's unseen, he's uninvited and he's still uncontrolled. He's the racketeer, and he operates through those unions he sees, and he sees plenty. He boosts the cost of every bit of food your family eats, imposes his own terror tax, and he's backed up by murder, by dynamite, and by the purchase of political power, and a lot of it.

But, of course, racketeering wasn't simply a concern for wives setting the table for their families. John O'Mara, manager of the New York City Anti-Crime Committee, provided a history of racketeering in the garment industry, boxing, the docks of the Port of New York, narcotics distribution, and the music industry ("The Tenth Commandment" 1954).

Former New York County assistant district attorney and staff counsel for the New York City Anti-Crime Committee, William Keating described the operation of "the Shape-Up," which assigned work on the docks and was run "by professional toughs," some of whom were named.<sup>17</sup> He also ventured into the topic of war profiteering, further distancing the racketeers from other, "patriotic," Americans.<sup>18</sup> George White, a "Federal Narcotics Agent holding Treasury's highest honor, the Treasury Medal for Exceptional Service," and an agent lent by Anslinger to the Kefauver Committee to make sure that the conclusions it drew remained favorable to his "Mafia-centric" model (Woodiwiss 1987, 4), discussed the drug trade originating in Italy and coming through the New York City waterfront and elsewhere and named names, including Eddie Coco, Lucky Luciano, Nick DeMarco, and others.<sup>19</sup> Drawing near the end of the program, Allen summarized the modus operandi of racketeers: "Move in, use muscle, be tough, buy your way or slug your way in, and then when you get powerful, stifle competition." To make the point even more clearly, Arm completed his lines for the evening, "It's certainly not the American way."

In closing, Allen called on public action: "Only you men, you people watching the show, can defeat the fellas whose business it is to break—The Tenth Commandment." Whether a callous effort to gain press for his impending step up to a nationally televised program, a heartfelt plea for action against organized crime, or a combination of the two, "The Tenth Commandment" had caught and held the attention of the public, and the program remained in the news over the following days.

## Conclusion

In just over one week, the televised New York City Kefauver hearings demonstrated the commercial potential of the young medium, of televised daytime and reality-based shows, of news coverage and political programming, and also the medium's capacity for an unprecedented, nearly instantaneous, address of an audience of a national scope. Within a decade, the newsreel would be all but defunct as a source of news information for the public, surrendering to television a role that it had filled for more than thirty years. The hearings marked the beginning of the end for truly independent TV news reportage, as news would thereafter become more

attractive to commercial interests and, hence, more prone to the whims and wishes of advertisers, fostering a news–entertainment nexus ultimately compromising journalism’s functioning as a fourth estate.

In an “Age of Anxiety,” the Kefauver hearings presented the perceived national malaise as resulting from the moral turpitude of a cadre defined as foreign. The press and academia would, for the most part, remain tragically silent as to the Committee’s claims about the Mafia and Italian/Italian American organized crime. In essence, the evolution of the image of the Italian/Italian American from Other to American, a process reaching a zenith during and immediately following the much-vaunted action of Italian American servicemen in the U.S. armed forces during World War II, would now be buffeted by an ill-informed but nevertheless increasingly widespread belief in the Mafia as an international ethnic organized crime conspiracy centered in Sicily and manipulated on America’s shores by a foreign, primarily Italian and Italian American, criminal organization. Though flying in the face of facts known at the time, this became the main narrative to emerge from the hearings and to dominate the dialog on crime in the United States—not only among law enforcement officials but also in the mass-mediated popular culture of the country and beyond. For many in the United States the Kefauver hearings, one of the events inaugurating the TV age, were an introduction to organized crime and the Mafia and ushered in a period during which organized crime would be a dominant part of the discourse concerning Italian Americans.

The hearings, ultimately, were little more than a series of show trials, a commercial and political spectacle—above all, an entertainment—the form and content of which owed to the commercial interests of advertisers, the political ambition of politicians, and interagency rivalries between organizations in competition for limited federal resources and, like so much commercial entertainment, bent on exploiting the baser instincts of the American public. As to the construction of an internationally hegemonic Mafia, the Italian American presence simply evinced participation in a patchwork of criminal activity nurtured by domestic economic and social inequities. Nevertheless, national media produced by companies located primarily in New York City had long dealt in media constructs—such as the urban gangster—that were at once responsive to both localized phenomena and the desires of the national audience; in the wake of the Kefauver hearings, those constructs would be expanded to take on a national and international aspect. Now the media construct would be one in which U.S. crime was dominated by a largely unified Italian American underworld closely linked to—perhaps controlled by—a foreign international criminal organization called the Mafia.

As entertainment, the telecasts provided a visual and audio complement to the tabloid journalism upon which much of the Committee's ill-founded conclusions were based. It is one of history's iniquities, then, that a factually suspect construct of the Mafia, nevertheless efficacious to the politically ambitious and economically rewarding to a profit-driven media, should become a core element of discourse about Italian Americans, with an almost narcotic ability to dominate its abuser.

## Notes

1. For an informative collection of analyses of this cultural incorporation of symbols and aspects of Italian American ethnicity in the postwar period, see Simone Cinotto (2014).
2. While Bernstein's point is taken, it is worth noting that there was programming such as *The Abbott and Costello Show*, *Life with Luigi*, and *Marty*, that complicate assessment of construct of Italian Americans in this period, as does the image of Perry Como, the popular singer and TV star who pioneered the musical variety show program and who was constructed as an all-American family man reflecting suburban values and mores. Of course, these programs were received as entertainment, while the hearings, regardless of how they may have been received, were presented as a "reality."
3. Jacobson (1999) and Roediger (2002), among others, have described in detail the relationship of race, whiteness, and Americanness in the assimilation of immigrant groups and others in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With regard to analysis of the experience of those of Italian descent and its evolution from a race-based identity to an ethnicity-based one, see Orsi (1992).
4. Forty-seven markets were equipped with coaxial cable or microwave relay and capable of carrying live network transmissions, though the far West and Southwest were reliant upon kinescopes for broadcast of the New York City hearings (Doherty 1998, 369).
5. A two-part portrait appearing in *Collier's* in April 1947, "America's Number One Mystery Man," defined Costello as "the real big shot of the underworld . . . the Prime Minister" (Asbury 1947, 16).
6. Costello steadfastly resisted Committee attempts to force him to divulge his assets ("Costello Defies Senators" 1951, 1; "Excerpts from Final Day's Proceedings" 1951, 26).
7. Costello's desire for respectability was a theme for press coverage of his abrupt departure from the hearings on the third day of his testimony, published on March 18. For an interesting contemporary account of Costello's desire for acceptance and respectability, see Edward Folliard's "Respectability is Costello's Dream" in the *Washington Post* (Folliard 1951, E10).
8. After nearly a decade of proceedings to have him deported, Costello was stripped of his citizenship in 1959 and ordered out of the country by the Justice Department in 1961 but finally won the right to remain in the country when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his deportation order in 1964. ("Summary of Supreme Court's Action" 1964, 32; "High Court Ruling Halts U.S. Efforts to Deport Costello" 1964, A10).
9. Italian American war heroes, in particular Medal of Honor recipients, were icons of patriotism and "Americanness" during World War II. For analysis of the media construction of Italian American servicemen as "American," see the author's "Becoming American: 'Manila John' Basilone, the Medal of Honor, and Italian-American Image, 1943-1945" (Frontani 2014).



10. See "Little Tokyo" (Lait and Mortimer 1950, ch. 9), wherein, while applauding the "constant loyalty" of the Nisei, many of whom were confined in "relocation centers" during World War II, the authors nevertheless refer to people of Japanese descent as Japs throughout. Hispanics fare even worse—a section called "Jumping Beans" notes, "Young Mexican girls, because of their Indian blood, bloom extremely beautiful, but as they approach maturity they begin to fade and get sloppy. Many are professional prostitutes. The non-professionals don't play hard to get either" (Lait and Mortimer 1950, 79).
11. In Jefferson's ([1785] 1999, 170) estimation, "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God . . . , whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."
12. *Presidential Timber: Senator Estes Kefauver* (1952), broadcast on CBS in April 1952, barely a year after the conclusion of the New York City hearings, and narrated by Walter Cronkite, future anchor of the *CBS Evening News*, was among the first programs to repurpose footage from the Kefauver hearings. Cronkite returned to the topic of the Kefauver hearings as host of the popular weekly historical documentary program, *The Twentieth Century* (CBS, 1957–1966), which was broadcast on Sundays from 6:30 to 7:00 pm. Introducing the February 16, 1958, edition, focusing on the Kefauver hearings and titled "Crime and the Committee," Cronkite characterized the hearings: "It was Kefauver versus crime, and a nation watched fascinated." He continued: "Most people had never seen a gangster except in a gangster movie. The hearings raised questions in people's minds: What did they really accomplish? Were they a great call to action to stamp out crime, or were they merely a great entertainment binge for the American public?"
13. The panel comprised William Keating, former assistant district attorney for New York County and staff counsel for the privately funded New York City Anti-Crime Committee; John M. O'Mara, manager of the Committee; Victor Riesel, author of the syndicated "Inside Labor" column for the *New York Mirror*; Sol Marks, assistant deputy director of the U.S. Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service; Walter Arm, reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* and author of *The Payoff*; and George White, the supervisor-at-large of the U.S. Narcotics Bureau. Actor James Gregory played the role of Mr. Mob.
14. By the next day, enterprising journalists had figured out who Mr. X was, and Benjamin "Benny" Levine's name was spread across numerous city newspapers. Yet the immediate effect of Levine's absence from the broadcast was to lay organized crime almost solely at the feet of Italian and Italian American racketeers.
15. Allen's script compared well to its film and pulp antecedents; during his introduction of the program the audience was treated to this exchange:
 

Allen: Big-time crime is your problem because it takes money out of your pocket. In many instances, if you work in New York City it actually endangers your life.

Mr. Mob interrupted: Well look, hold on there, chief. I'm one of these average citizens you're talking about. Why don't you stick to your jokes tonight. Like you said, we can read about this stuff in the papers.

Allen: I guess you're not angry at the mob, huh?

Mr. Mob: Well, why should I be? They get theirs, I get mine. Besides, people exaggerate things—what's a little gambling money or something here or there? ("The Tenth Commandment" 1954)
16. Riesel and the Hearst Publishing Corporation, publisher of his column in the *Daily Mirror*, had previously been sued by Anthony Anastasio in a \$1 million suit for libel over Riesel's accusing Anastasio of being a "mobster, hoodlum, and corrupt union official" in one of his columns (Riesel 1954, 4).

17. Those mentioned included Alex Caprese, head of Local 920 Staten Island Longshoremen's Association, Ed Florio, on the Hoboken docks, Mike Clemente, on the East River piers and a bootlegger, and "Tough Tony" Anastasio, brother of Albert Anastasia, "Lord High Executioner of Murder Inc."
18. Keating took a dig at the loyalty of one of the "toughs," Mike Clemente, noting, "He got the ILA [i.e., International Longshoreman's Association] jobs in 1940. Three years later, while his country was at war, his patriotic reactions took a form quite different from that of many lesser longshoremen who joined the armed forces. He decided with eight others to operate an illicit alcohol still at 13 Lewis Street, so that his government could be bilked at his own profit of taxes on 550 gallons per day while the only trouble with his scheme was that he was caught while American forces were fighting through North Africa" ("The Tenth Commandment" 1954). Recall Senator Tobey's attack on Costello's wartime record and patriotism: This was a popular theme in discussions of racketeers—setting off their nefarious wartime activities against the patriotism of those who fought in the war, thus heightening the sense of their foreignness and status as a kind of "enemy within."
19. It was noted that mobsters involved in drug trafficking were listed in "The Blacklist" a book containing seven hundred names, photos, descriptions, and addresses of racketeers.

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