

SEMPRE AVANTI

June 2007

Word Count: 1,221

SEEING DOUBLE

By Dona De Sanctis

Any doubts about the existence of a double standard when it comes to Italian Americans and political correctness were swept away for good last April during the Imus incident. You remember it, don't you?

On April 4, shock jock radio talk host Don Imus and his executive producer, Bernard McGuirk were on the air talking about basketball when Imus referred to the players on the Rutgers University women's basketball team as "nappy headed hos."

The remark was made at 6:30 in the morning and heard by about 150,000 people, but it soon wound up on YouTube which services millions of people online. Imus publicly apologized and even appeared on Al Sharpton's syndicated radio program where the good reverend accused Imus of "setting a precedent that allows racist language to be used in mainstream, federally regulated television and radio."

Soon Jesse Jackson weighed in along with the NAACP and the National Association of Black Journalists. Within a week, Imus was fired and his 40-year radio career was over.

WHAT ABOUT US?

In the ensuing media frenzy, newspaper editorials, op-eds and letters to the editor condemned Imus *ad nauseum* and labeled his remark "demeaning, racist and sexist." A number of writers produced a litany of equally outrageous and offensive remarks the 67-year old talk show host had aimed at other African Americans, Jews,

women and gay people.

Left out of the mix were the Italian Americans, who had not forgotten that back in November 2005, Imus's producer Bernard McGuirk had called then-Supreme Court nominee Samuel Alito "a meat-ball sucking wop" and "a God-fearing guido."

"First Scalia, now Alito," McGuirk commented. "What is [President Bush] doing? Interpreting the Constitution or mixing concrete?" Letters of protest that Italian American organizations and individuals sent to Imus did not even receive the courtesy of a reply much less an apology.

In the middle of last April's crisis, a coalition was quickly formed by the Columbus Citizens Foundation, the Sons of Italy CSJ and the National Italian American Foundation.

The coalition issued a joint press release pointing out that when those anti-Italian ethnic slurs were uttered on – as Sharpton put it "mainstream, federally regulated television and radio" -- there was no public outcry, calls for resignation or even an on-air apology.

To draw attention to this double standard of political correctness, the coalition placed a full-page ad in *Variety*, the most influential newspaper in show business, read by Hollywood moguls and TV executives alike.

"We hope that as a result of this latest episode, such slurs against a person's race, religion or ethnic heritage, *including that of Italian Americans*, will become culturally and socially unacceptable in this great nation of ours," the ad read in part. "The First Amendment is not a license to offend." [See www.osia.org for the full ad and the press release.]

SEEING DOUBLE

And so it was that Don Imus traveled down the Walk of Shame in the footsteps of Mel Gibson, *Seinfeld*'s Michael Richards, former Sen. George Allen, Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder and Rush Limbaugh all of whom either were fired, forced to apologize or both for remarks that offended a racial or religious community.

But relatively few of those who so loudly condemned Imus mentioned that the expression he used, "ho," is street slang for "whore," and was introduced by African American hip hop music and gangsta rappers who use it to mean "woman" – any woman.

A few did point out that racist language is used "in mainstream, federally regulated television and radio" on the Black Entertainment Network, MTV and the comedy cable network, which routinely use the "n" word and other racial slurs. Others recalled that Jesse Jackson had labeled New York City "Hymietown," but criticism of these offenders was far, far milder than that leveled at Imus.

Also a member of the Double-Speak Fraternity is Steven Spielberg, as the Coalition Against Racial, Religious and Ethnic Stereotyping (CARRES) has pointed out. In a March 9, 2004 interview with The New York Times, the powerful and wealthy producer/director gravely warned that youths need to learn "the dangers of stereotyping, the dangers of discrimination, the dangers of racial and religious hatred and vengeful rage." At the very same time he was giving that interview, his company, DreamWorks was producing *Shark Tale*, the first full-length children's Mafia movie. They spent \$75 million to create it and more than \$145 million to market it.

This despicable and frustrating double standard exists in our own Italian American community as well. Although he loudly broadcasts his pride in being of Italian heritage, Rudy Giuliani gave *Soprano* cast members the keys to the city when he was mayor of New York and, until recently, routinely tapped his “inner gangster” to warm up crowds of potential donors to his presidential campaign.

Joining him in playing “Uncle Dom” are the very talented Italian American directors, actors and writers who have contributed so significantly to creating the Mafia-as-entertainment phenomenon.

AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT?

Finally, isn't it ironic that no one mentioned the First Amendment during the Imus controversy? Americans' inalienable Right to Free Speech is the blanket response Italian Americans hear when they rightly protest the movies, novels, TV shows, commercials and anti-Italian American remarks like the ones heard on *Imus in the Morning*. “It's a free country. If you don't like it, don't listen. If it offends you, don't watch it. If you are insulted don't buy it.”

What is at the root of this double standard of political correctness? Dig a bit and you will find the all-powerful dollar sign. Each year, hip hop and rap music make more than \$4 billion for their practitioners and producers. HBO has syndicated reruns of *The Sopranos* on the A&E channel to the tune of a record \$2.5 million per episode.

Spielberg's studio made \$160.8 million on *Shark Tale* at the box office and \$80 million in home video sales in just the first week the DVD was released. And who can even begin to calculate the money that Hollywood has made in its eight

decades of Mafia movies? Francis Ford Coppola has made \$6 million plus a percentage of the profits for *The Godfather: Part III* (1990) alone.

We can only hope that the Imus controversy will help cast a more powerful light on an outrageous double standard that makes it offensive to have a dog speak Spanish (Remember “Yo chiero Taco Bell”?), but can use the religion, customs, language and traditions of Italian Americans in the most despicable contexts of violence and sex by hiding behind the First Amendment.

Imus deserved to be severely chastised for his thoughtless and hurtful remark that offended young African American college basketball players. He also owed and still owes Justice Alito an apology.

Italian Americans should not be forced to adhere to a higher standard of tolerance than other groups. We have for many, many years. It’s time to bury the double standard of political correctness.

Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization in the U.S. for men and women of Italian heritage. To join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and fight defamation, contact her at ddesanctis@osia.org or call (202) 547-2900.