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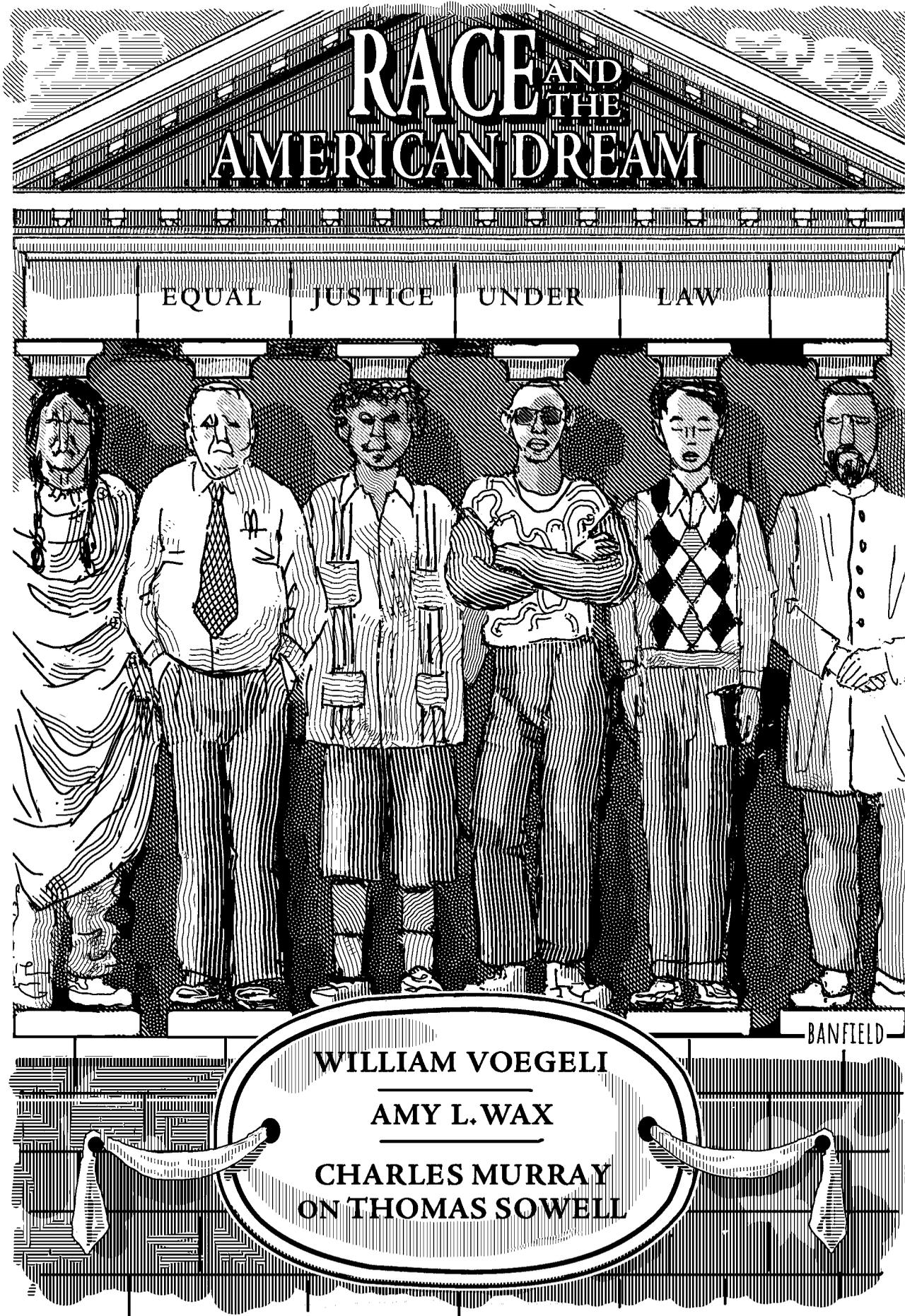
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Book Review by Kyle Smith

THIS IS THE BUSINESS WE'VE CHOSEN

Leave the Gun, Take the Cannoli: The Epic Story of the Making of The Godfather, by Mark Seal.
Gallery Books, 448 pages, \$28.99



Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Evans

IN THE FINAL DAYS OF SHOOTING *THE Godfather*, director Francis Ford Coppola turned to a young assistant and told him to always remember three things if he wanted to make pictures. One: make sure you have a definitive script before you shoot. Two: work only with people you trust. Three: make your actors comfortable so that they can do good work. Then Coppola added, “I’ve managed to do none of these things on this film,” which was shaping up to be somewhere between a disappointment and a disaster. “I was sure people would feel I had taken this exciting, bestseller novel and transformed it into a dark, ponderous, boring movie,” Coppola told journalist Mark Seal for his engaging, informative, and fast-paced book, *Leave the Gun, Take the Cannoli: The Epic Story of the Making of The Godfather*.

Published in 1969, Mario Puzo’s novel *The Godfather* was a sex-saturated, mega-selling guilty pleasure; the two things that stuck in everyone’s mind were the decapitated horse and the many awestruck references to the size of Sonny Corleone’s penis. Perhaps put off by the pulpy nature of the material, most of the big-name directors of the day—Arthur Penn, Costa-Gavras, Richard Brooks, Otto Prem-

inger, Peter Yates—turned down the project, so Paramount reached all the way down to an unknown with nothing to his credit as director except three flops (although, during filming, Coppola won an Oscar for writing *Patton* years earlier).

The director and his leading man, another nobody named Al Pacino, lived in constant fear of being fired in the opening weeks of shooting. Nervous Paramount executives couldn’t understand what the two were doing, mainly because what filmmaker and actor were up to was so different from the standard set by the kinds of glossy, forgettable pictures Paramount usually produced. Pacino played the early scenes as a lightweight college boy in order to set up the dramatic pivot to darkness later on; the suits complained that he wasn’t intense enough.

Coppola suffered miserably throughout filming, having no reputation to speak of and no true champion at Paramount. His casting choices were suspect: all of *The Godfather*’s other players were also little-known except for the one who was considered washed-up—Marlon Brando. Real-life New York City mobsters interfered both by issuing threats and begging for parts, and Coppola’s boss,

the Paramount production chief Robert Evans, complained he couldn’t see anything in cinematographer Gordon Willis’s soon-to-be-famous shadows. Coppola had nightmares about being replaced by Elia Kazan and at one point had to put down a coup by firing his film editor, Aram Avakian, and five other seditious crew members.

THE MAKING OF *THE GODFATHER*, WHICH was released 50 years ago on March 24, 1972, is unusually well-documented; prior to this book, Puzo published *The Godfather Papers and Other Confessions* (1972), Coppola gave us *The Godfather Notebook* (2016), and Coppola’s assistant Ira Zuckerman delivered an exhaustive day-by-day account, *The Godfather Journal* (1972). Many secondary works drawing on these and other sources have also appeared, so not much in the present book is surprising, although Seal did conduct interviews with many surviving players and in some cases their heirs. The film’s success begot much eagerness to discuss it by all involved, generating conflicting legends. Nearly everyone in the book, from the assistants to the publicity mongers to the studio honchos, is a swaggering Hollywood bushwa artist, ad-




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dicted to exaggerating at every turn, both for dramatic purposes and to enhance the teller's importance in the saga.

Moreover, Seal, a longtime writer for *Vanity Fair*—he unfortunately sounds like one—himself adds to the hype with an excitable prose style. His *dramatis personae* are forever running out of rooms—I'm not sure I've seen anyone but a child do that—and shouting macho ultimatums at one another during business meetings. "Stick this picture up your ass. I'm outta here!" James Caan (then a fledgling actor with no particular leverage) claims he told Coppola, et al., when he grew frustrated about the casting process, during which he was considered for the parts of both Michael and Sonny.

INCOMPATIBLE ANSWERS ARE GIVEN TO lingering questions. Seal expends much energy passing along the recollections of a Las Vegas casino pit boss named Ed Walters who explains how the term "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse" came to be overheard and absorbed by the gambler-author Puzo (the words were supposedly originally delivered to an out-of-control TV actor, David Janssen, star of *The Fugitive*, after he raised a ruckus while drinking heavily at the Sands). Yet a few pages later we learn that Puzo told Coppola that the phrase, like many others used in the book, originated with the novelist's mother, who was the chief model for Vito Corleone. If only there were a profession dedicated to sorting out which claims are true and which are not! More satisfying is the story about the titular line about the cannoli: it was an ad-lib devised by actor Richard Castellano, who was referring back to how his character Peter Clemenza's wife told him "Don't forget the cannoli" as he was leaving his house for a day in which he was determined both to secure dessert and commit murder. The bullets that burst through the windshield in that scene were real, by the way, fired by a marksman armed with a .22 rifle who sat off-camera in the back seat of the car in which the hit took place and calmly told Johnny Martino (who played the victim) not to fret because the rounds would miss his head by at least four or five inches. "Don't worry, he's really good," Coppola told the doubtful Martino.

Aside from a few instances of confusion and sloppiness, the book is a great deal of fun—gossipy and gulpable. It's hard to watch *The Godfather* with fresh eyes if you've seen it as many times as we all have (though if you're among the few who have never seen it, I envy

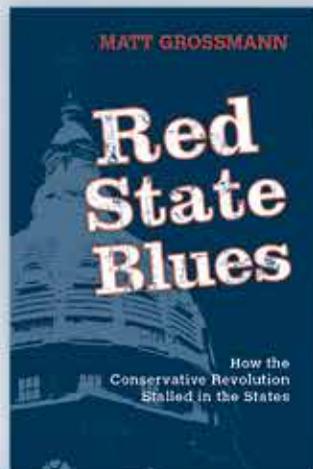
what awaits you). By detailing the various crises and comedies that dogged the creation of a glorious cinematic milestone, Seal slakes some of our collective thirst for more *Godfather* with a nearly nonstop stream of intriguing, odd, and alarming anecdotes. Spend a couple of evenings with the book, and you'll be the cynosure of your next cocktail party.

Real wiseguys, such as Gianni Russo, who played the sleazy Carlo Rizzi, Sonny's brother-in-law and betrayer, were given small parts. Al Lettieri, who played Virgil Sollozzo, was the brother-in-law of a mobster named Patsy Eboli. The 320-pound former professional wrestler Lenny Montana, who played Luca Brasi, had been collecting payments for mafia loan sharks, and won his part when he stumbled on the set while visiting his mother in Brooklyn and was spotted by producer Al Ruddy as he loomed menacingly over street barriers in the crowd. Crime boss Russell Bufalino (later played by Joe Pesci in *The Irishman* [2019]) showed up in Brando's trailer one day to tell him, "The word's out you like calamari." Another boss, Carlo Gambino, came by the set to observe filming and was himself observed by Nick Pileggi, the author of the book that was turned into the film *Goodfellas* (1990), who wrote about the incident.

ADELECTABLE INTERLUDE REMINDS US that Joe Colombo, the boss of one of New York's crime families, was brazenly running a pressure group, the Italian-American Civil Rights League, that sought to fight back against vicious pop-culture tropes depicting mobsters doing the sorts of things Colombo and his associates were, in fact, doing. "A top priority was to eradicate Mafia from the English language," Seal writes. Colombo organized rallies, including one that drew 50,000 people to Columbus Circle, and happily sat for interviews in which he complained about what are now dubbed microaggressions and more commonly associated with Swarthmore students than with career tough guys. Agreed-upon New York City shooting locations suddenly became unavailable to the film crew, until Ruddy took it upon himself to mollify Colombo. Ruddy agreed to turn the film's premiere into a fundraiser for the League's hospital fund (although he later reneged on the promise) and to delete mentions of the word "mafia" from the script. Colombo's negotiating triumph was, alas, rendered moot by a personal setback when he was shot in the back of the head during what proved to be

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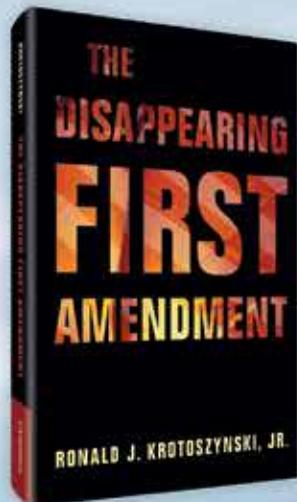


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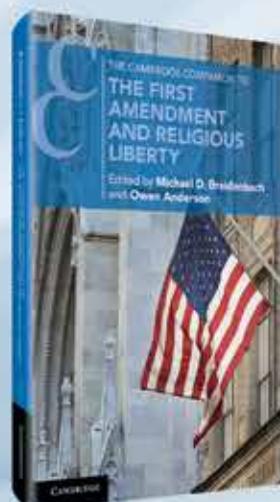
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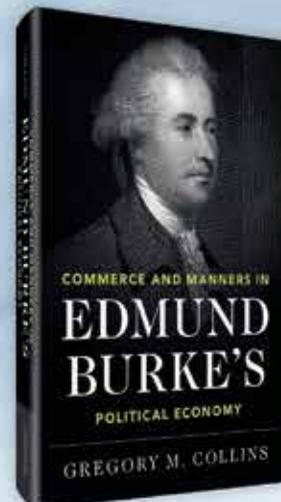
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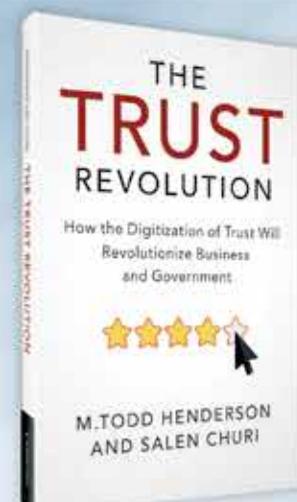
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an unwise follow-up rally, again at Columbus Circle, in June 1971. (He would spend the next seven years in a coma before his expiration in 1978.) The publicity boost to the movie's fortunes was obvious to all: before filming, Coppola had thought, "But these Mafia guys don't go around shooting each other anymore."

Though Seal is more attuned to backstage gossip than the art of filmmaking, he does occasionally pass on some fine analysis. At the time, cinematographers were inordinately fond of using the zoom lens, but Willis consciously chose to go the opposite way, designing "each frame in the movie like a painting, filled with characters who pass in and out of the picture," Seal writes. Coppola's word for the look he sought was "operatic." "Tableau," Willis insisted, "is a very strong form of statement." The director of photography was not even nominated for the Academy Award in his field, which underlines just how radical his approach was, but his influence can be seen today in any number of purposefully stygian TV shows and movies, notably *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, whose desert dwellers manage to spend most of their lives in near-total darkness illuminated only by sharp blades of light stabbing through window blinds.

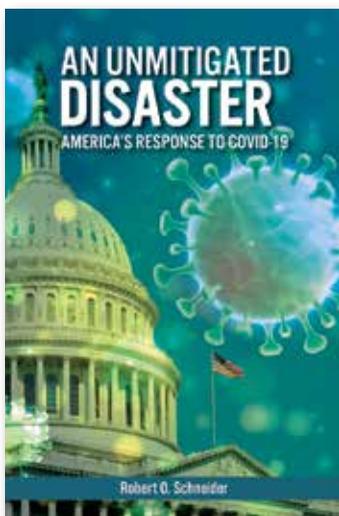
SEAL IS GENEROUS IN ASSESSING THE contributions of the artists involved, but one finishes the book convinced that most of the credit for *The Godfather* must go to Coppola. Shortly before his 2019 death, Coppola's boss, Evans, continued to plead his case with Seal. As those familiar with his memoir, *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (1994), or the documentary of the same name can testify, Evans was an incomparably oleaginous figure desperate to position himself as the true genius behind the picture for decades before his passing. But the book makes it obvious that his chief role in the movie was to try to stamp out every great idea Coppola had.

Evans fought Coppola over casting (he wanted Ryan O'Neal as Michael and Ernest Borgnine as Vito), pushed for replacing Nino Rota's somber film score with some "bright, American music," preferably by Henry Mancini, and according to Coppola, demanded a truncated initial cut that stripped the film of its greatness. Evans has always insisted that it was Coppola who brought in a two-hour version, and that he saved the picture by demanding Coppola expand it to three hours. (This must have been the only time in a career of excess that Coppola was ever accused of lacking ambition.) "We were told by

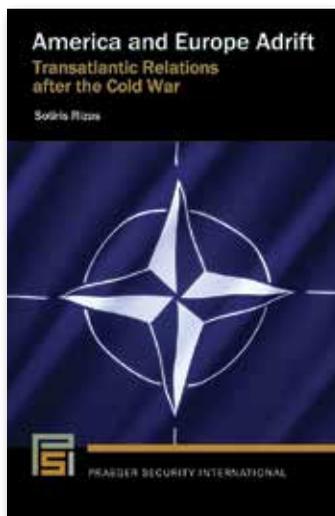
Bob Evans that if we brought in a film longer than two hours fifteen minutes, Paramount would take the print away from us," Coppola told another journalist, insisting that the final cut simply restored all of the things Evans had told him to cut. Evans groused about every choice Coppola made, claiming Pacino was disqualified on account of being "a runt," then later insisted that his zealous ministrations on the production cost him his wife, Ali MacGraw. Evans would have been wiser to leave the making of the film to an actual filmmaker and accompany his bride to Texas, where she was filming *The Getaway* while Evans was hectoring Coppola with his idiotic advice in New York. (Unwatched and neglected, MacGraw wound up in the arms of her new costar, Steve McQueen.) After filming, though Evans had been laid out flat by a freak tennis injury, he even tried to interfere with the editing of the picture. High on cocaine, he had himself wheeled into the editing suite on a gurney so he could try to trample on Coppola's efforts one more time. When Seal asked Coppola via email to state what Evans had contributed to the film, the director left the space blank.

Kyle Smith is critic-at-large for National Review and a fellow at the National Review Institute.

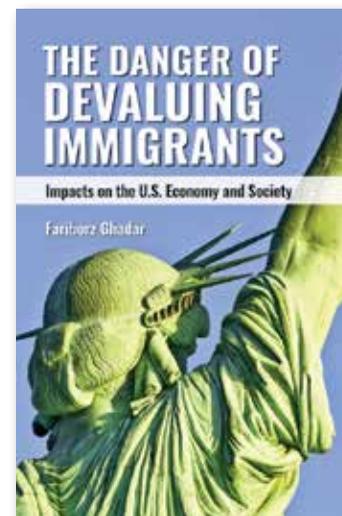
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