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UNITED STATES OF MAFIA

Directed by Antoine Vitkine
Produced by Yami2 & ARTE France

3x45'

CATCHLINE & SYNOPSIS

United States of Mafia explores the historic and enduring ties between the mafia and the American presidents using Donald Trump's rise to power as the guiding thread. From Roosevelt to Trump including Kennedy and Nixon, historians, investigative journalists, former FBI agents and repentant mobsters outline the influence of the Italian-American and Russian-American mafia on both the United States' politics and economy since the 1930s.

This docuseries reveals an unknown chapter of American history – that of a democracy shaped, infiltrated and sometimes corrupted by organized crime groups. From the early days of the United States through the post-war period, the mafia infiltrated the heart of power, mixing criminal interests and political agendas. Through the eyes of mobsters, the documentary explores the rise of individuals like Lansky, Costello and Giancana, and their ties to presidents such as Roosevelt, Kennedy and Reagan. Beyond the historical narrative, the series raises a troubling question: what is left of democracy when such a powerful criminal organization approaches and influences it without being stopped? Lansky's dream of politics and organized crime serving one another may be on the verge of coming true. A burning alert as Donald Trump's return to power revives concerns about the weaknesses of the American system.



‘I’ve been indicted more than Alphonse Capone!’
Donald Trump, President of the United States, 2024

THE DOCUSERIES

“I’ve been indicted more than Alphonse Capone, the great guy” bragged Donald Trump in June 2024 in front of a crowd who was applauding him wildly. “Scarface!”, he then said, which caused the audience to laugh very hard. Coming from a man who would be elected for the second time only a few months after that but who could also have spent the rest of his life in prison, this was a calculated move.

As usual, it aimed to draw attention away from his true intentions. Indeed, one might wonder: did the mafia put someone indebted to them, or even an accomplice, at the head of the United States eight years earlier, back in 2017?

Of course, Trump is not a member of the mafia, but he made a deal with the Italian-American mob in the early 1980s, back at a time when the Genovese family and the Costellos ruled over New York City, where he built his towers and over Atlantic City, where his casinos are. Then, as Italian families began to lose their grip on their territory, Trump was able to keep rising to power and stay afloat financially thanks to another deal he made, a Faustian one, but this time, it was with the Russian-American mafia in Little Odessa, who used to be allies with the Italians. This deal would eventually make him dependant on the Russians.

Contrary to what the vigorous American democracy and its equally powerful repressive system might suggest, between the end of World War II and the 1980s, the Italian-American mafia literally ‘asphyxiated American political life’, according to journalist Michael Dorman, before the Russian-American mafia took over and once again approached the White House. Donald Trump links these two mafias together and is the perfect embodiment of an older and more complex phenomenon.

Taking Trump as its starting point, this documentary series reveals the dark side of American politics. Indeed, isn't there something profoundly wrong with the American system, of which Trump is the latest and most spectacular manifestation?

It tells the story of an America shaped, since the beginning of its history, by violence, corruption and organized crime. After the Second World War, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and even Obama had to deal with the mafia some way or another: whether it was out of pragmatism, to get themselves elected, to get rich or to get their friends rich. Or sometimes it was simply because they had no choice, because they had become officials in cities where there is no politics without compromising with the powerful local mobs.

By exploring these ties, this docuseries depicts America's melting pot, where immigrants fight to get their share of the American Dream, and where criminal organizations are inevitably attracted to power, which is a source of wealth and protection. It also tells the story of a ruthless capitalist system, that of an elite who always saw the mafia as an example of social stability and economic success, especially during the Cold War.

This story will be told from the bottom up. Through the eyes of the mafia, in order to convey this feeling of two worlds colliding: on the one side you have the underworld with its dark alleys and on the other, that of politics with the gilded halls of the White House. This will enable us not just to tell the story of the careers of the American presidents, but also to look at them through the lens of the mafia. Many mobsters are at the heart of this story and many of them like Costello, Meyer Lansky, the Gambinos, the Genovese family, Roy Cohn and Sam Giancana, played an important role in the careers of several U.S. presidents.

This series sounds the alarm about democracy being in danger, not only in the United States, but everywhere else on the planet. The mafia does not have a favorite political party; it only serves its own interests. A democracy does not let such a sophisticated entity get close to political power without risking to be corrupted in the process. Didn't someone close to Meyer Lansky, a mafia consigliere once wrote: "Lansky's dream was to bind the political and criminal worlds together so tightly, that one doesn't survive without the other. Those among us who truly understand how powerful the underworld is in our country, understand how his dream and our nightmare are close to coming true."? What was true back in the 1990s, isn't any less true today as Donald Trump is about to become president of the United States for the second time.

A MULTI-PART CHRONOLOGICAL STORYLINE

1933

ROOSEVELT AND LUCKY LUCIANO: THE DEAL

During the Second World War, Roosevelt asked the mafia for help. He asked Lucky Luciano to help him protect the American harbors from the Nazi saboteurs. This deal is considered the starting point of the strong relationship between the White House and the mafia.

1945

TRUMAN, EISENHOWER, EDGAR HOOVER: MAKING THE MAFIA AMERICA’S GUARDIAN ANGEL

Thanks to his ties to the Kansas City mob, Truman came to power and reinforced the influence organized crime already had on both American politics and the country’s economy. Hoover on the other hand, who was obsessed with getting rid of communism, turned a blind eye on what the mafia was doing. The elite for their part, considered them a safeguard against instability.

1961

THE KENNEDYS, GIANCANA, COSTELLO: AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

Backed by the mafia who helped them rise to power, the Kennedy family quickly turned their backs on the mob and triggered an open war that Bobby took to the legal field. Between secret alliances, betrayals and suspicions surrounding JFK’s assassination, this battle shows the deadly ambiguity of the relationship binding Cosa Nostra and the American political power.

1969

TRICKY DICK

Helped since the beginning by mob bosses like Mickey Cohen and Jimmy Hoffa, Richard Nixon is the embodiment of a corrupt president who did some spy work for the mafia and even did them favors. Elected in 1968, he protected his allies in the mafia by making political decisions and handing out pardons, thus living up to his ‘Tricky Dick’ reputation.

1981

REAGAN: LAW & ORDER... AND THE MAFIA

Elected for his strict policies, Reagan launched a “war on organized crime” that was more symbolic than it was effective, while his own ties to the mafia dated back to Hollywood. Supported by people who had connections to the Gambino family and John Gotti, he embodied the ambiguity between overt repression and hidden compromise.

1993

CLINTON: HOT SPRINGS, WELCOME TO MAFIA CITY

Born in Hot Springs, the city of illegal gambling and corruption, Bill Clinton grew up in a state that was corrupted by the mafia’s influence. His uncle Raymond, who helped him financially, had ties to Carlos Marcello’s business. He started his political career at a moment where organized crime and local politics were one and the same.

2009

OBAMA, THE “SLUM LORD,” AND AL CAPONE: THE COMPROMISES OF AN INCORRUPTIBLE MAN

Despite his reputation for being a morally upright man, Obama owes his political breakthrough in Chicago to controversial supporters such as Tony Rezko, a corrupt financier, and Alexi Giannoulas, who has connections to the mafia. These shady ties are a reminder that in Chicago, even a president-to-be can't escape organized crime.

2017

TRUMP, FROM THE ITALIANS TO THE RUSSIANS: WHEN THE MAFIA RULES THE COUNTRY

Starting in the 1970s, Trump built his fortune by relying on Italian families who controlled the concrete industry and New York City unions, then he established himself in Atlantic City, where casinos were riddled with organized crime. With the help of his mentor Roy Cohn, he learned how to deal with the mob and to take advantage of a corrupt system. The Russian mafia getting its grip on the city in the 1990s marked a new phase: oligarchs and mob bosses invested in Trump's real estate projects and used his towers to launder billions of dollars. From Cohen to Sater, these intermediaries were with him right up to his presidential campaign, making him the most successful heir to the dangerous liaisons between the mafia and political power.

2021

BIDEN, THREADING THE NEEDLE

Joe Biden appears to have no known ties to the mafia. Although he presents himself as a man with principles, he has had to navigate a political system where the mafia's influence is omnipresent: he was elected in Delaware, a tax haven, and was supported by the truckers' union, which was created by Jimmy Hoffa.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This documentary series aims to explore the dark side of American democracy. To reveal what is there, latent but invisible. One of the reasons for the American mafias - which have been around since the country's inception - being so powerful, lies in the fact that they embrace certain American values such as the use of violence, entrepreneurship, the desire to neutralize the government, and a sense of community spirit.

Mafias can also be very useful in countering external threats (communism, terrorism) or helping to finance huge presidential campaigns. What's more, this documentary series brings together all the great American myths: immigration, casinos, Hollywood, the building of New York City, truckers always on the road.

The series' early development outlines the different periods in a fairly chronological manner, by decade and by president, in order to give the audience an idea of the scope of the story that will be told. But we want to build a narrative, a chronological one, centered around prominent figures of the mafia. For example, we could tell Nixon's story starting in the 1940s, through "Bugsy" Siegel and Mickey Cohen, with whom he became close friends and who helped him in his career, rather than starting the narrative only when he became president.

Extraordinary archives, such as those of the Senate committee that was led by Robert Kennedy who investigated corruption and gangsterism in the truckers' union and grilled James Hoffa, will support this documentary work.

POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS



Michael Cohen

Donald Trump's fixer and attorney



Kenneth McCallion

A former New York prosecutor, he specialized in organized crime and tried to put Trump behind bars



Felix Sater

A Russian-American businessman, former advisor to the Trump Organization, he is known for having connections to the Russian mob and for being an FBI informant



Sandra Lansky Lombardo

Daughter of Meyer Lansky, business associate of Lucky Luciano, a notorious mobster



Joaquín "Jack" García

A retired FBI agent, he is best known for his undercover work and having infiltrated the Gambino crime family



Michael Franzese

Former caporegime of a New York crime family



Antoinette Giancana

Daughter of the famous mobster Sam Giancana, author of Mafia Princess (1984) and co-author of JFK and Sam (2005)



Dan Moldea

Investigative journalist, author of an investigative piece on Reagan he wrote in 1986

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