



# The Per Niente



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**Vito Marcantonio**

Vito Marcantonio, a Congressman from East Harlem from 1935 to 1950, was known for his undying commitment to his constituents. In turn, his diverse ethnic constituents, which included Italian, Puerto Rican, and African Americans, joined

together to support him as he took controversial positions, maintaining him in office for 14 years as he pushed for civil rights legislation prior to the Civil Rights Movement, and fought to improve the livelihood of Americans and people throughout the world.

He almost single-handedly combated widespread defamation of the foreign-born in general and Italian Americans in particular.

Vito Marcantonio stuck by his positions despite intense opposition. He is virtually forgotten today because he was vilified by the press and the political establishment during the McCarthy Era.

Vito Marcantonio defied the truism of American politics that in the United States a radical politician has only two possible fates: defeat or co-optation. Marcantonio was the most electorally successful radical politician in modern American history. And from his first term when he proposed "reopening

and operating shut-down factories by and for the benefit of the unemployed producing for use instead of profit," until his last, when he cast the only vote against the Korean War, his commitment to radical politics never wavered. Unfortunately, to date, the remarkable story of this memorable man remains little known.

"I was born and raised in that district and I know everybody in that district: good, bad, doctors, lawyers, Indians, thieves, honest people, everybody." Vito Marcantonio's entire life and career were inextricably connected with this remarkable [East Harlem] community. The deprivations of Marc's early life and his work among Italian Harlem's poor made him receptive to the surrounding radical currents. He had the opportunity to serve a ten-year apprenticeship to the master politician and parliamentarian Fiorello LaGuardia. Marcantonio serviced the complaints of [LaGuardia's] constituents and attended to the details of the election campaigns. LaGuardia, who had lost his daughter in 1921, treated Marcantonio as a son.

[As Congressman], Marcantonio rarely missed a session and actively participated in the debates. When in 1944 an Alabama Congressman stated that Southerners had known democracy "one hundred years before the gentleman from New York ever saw the Statue of Liberty,"

Marcantonio responded: "While my people did not come over on the Mayflower [we] are an integral part of the living flesh and blood of our country."



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