

The President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano: From Eurocommunism to the Unification of Italy

Letizia Airos (March 23, 2011)



Giorgio Napolitano will be in New York to celebrate the unification of Italy. We reflect on his meeting with President Obama last year and his first visit to the U.S. in 1978, along with Professor Joseph LaPalombara and with some words from the late Italian American journalist John Cappelli

[**<< ITALIAN VERSION**](#) [2]

We are all looking forward to the visit from President of the Italian Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, who has decided to continue the sesquicentennial anniversary celebration of Italy's unification in the United States.

The last time I saw him was in Washington during the spring of last year. I shook his hand and spoke

with him briefly.

The President of the Republic's visit in 2010 was short but intense. It was a visit which perhaps was not covered enough by the media, neglecting the historical significance of his meeting with the President of the United States. I would like to consider it again, this time to coincide with his return to the U.S.

The first former communist leader to become Italy's President met with the first African-American President in the White House. I have often wondered what was going through Giorgio Napolitano's mind that day...

Especially in light of his previous visit to the U.S. in 1978, a visit that was historic in its own right.

Those were difficult times for our country; when Napolitano landed in the U.S. on April 4, 1978 it had been 18 days since the kidnapping of Aldo Moro (president of the Democratic Christian party) by the Red Brigades. Mr. Moro had just opened the path to a new form of institutional collaboration between the Christian Democrats and the Communists in Italy called "historic compromise."

At the time Mr. Napolitano, a leader of the moderate wing of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), had come to explain to Americans what was happening in Italy, what the Italian communists were becoming, and what "Euro-communism" was.

The black and white images of "comrade Napolitano" in the U.S. show a young leader full of intellectual and political energy. I discussed that visit briefly with Professor Joseph LaPalombara of Yale University, who accompanied Napolitano on many meetings during his trip. It was truly another world, and we would like to look back on it as we welcome President Napolitano on his next visit here to celebrate the sesquicentennial anniversary of Italy's unification.

As a communist he was nicknamed "The Lord" for his elegance, poise, restraint, diplomacy, and meticulousness, while others called him the "Red Prince," or "King Umberto" for its resemblance to Umberto the Second, the King of Savoy.

There is a grain of truth to these nicknames - the nobility of spirit and elegance of a man, communist or not, who has served the State well. He was the first communist to become Interior Minister and even won the support of a hardened conservative, the late, great journalist Indro Montanelli.

"I, along with two other colleagues," recalls Professor LaPalombara, "had to engage in a fierce struggle to persuade the American government to allow him to come and visit the various leaders of so-called Eurocommunism. He was the first to arrive in '78 and we hosted him. I was the one to introduce him."

"It was great. He made a very positive impression wherever he went throughout the United States. Of course it was a fairly restricted trip; the federal government wanted to know everything, minute by minute, where this communist was. He was the first communist of a certain stature who was given permission to enter the country. They wanted there to be a detailed itinerary."

Over the course of a few days Napolitano met with prominent scholars such as James Tobin and the political scientist Robert A. Dahl. He had contacts in New York and Washington, at Princeton, Harvard, Yale, the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, the Council on Foreign Relations, Johns Hopkins, and Georgetown. He participated in seminars about Italy and the PCI.

At the time, the speakers and attendees were from the world of academia - there were no politicians, members of Congress - but it is clear that he must have been held in very high regard, not only as a political leader but also on a personal level.



“He was very happy to come,” Palombara continues. “He gave unforgettable talks. At my school we thought that we would have a small audience, but were at least 200 people there.”

“I particularly remember a meeting at the Council on Foreign Relations where he gave a speech on the economic situation in Italy and Europe with lawyers, professors, bankers. I remember their faces; they were nearly stunned and I think they were for three reasons.”

“First, he was a communist leader who spoke English fluently. Second, his speech had an unexpected depth and intensity. Third, he was dressed in the Italian style, in a beautiful, handmade suit.”

And Palombara’s memories and recollections about Napolitano’s 1978 trip nearly parallel Napolitano’s last visit to the U.S. when he met President Obama at the White House.

“The meeting of these two prominent public figures is a historic moment of great symbolic value: a black man who is the first of his race to arrive at the White House meets with a former member of a communist party, an enemy of the U.S., who goes on to become the President of the Italian Republic.”

The meeting with President Obama was most assuredly the culmination of his life’s work that has been inextricably linked to Italy’s history for almost seventy years.

And so Napolitano was the first leader of the PCI admitted into the United States thanks to a visa granted in spite of restrictive legislation. His trip last year was very different, and remarkably, an opportunity to meet Nancy Pelosi, the first Italian-American woman to be Speaker of the House, the third highest position in the State.

This time he comes to ask his fellow Italian citizens abroad and all those who love Italy for what our country needs: “A new flash of inspiration and national understanding shared by Italians of all opinions and from all regions.”

Another personal memory: in speaking to me for the first time about the trip in '78 was John Cappelli, an Italian journalist who unfortunately passed away in 2009. A correspondent for the United Nations at the time, John continued to identify as a communist until the end, despite being an American citizen.

Cappelli recounted with pride the time when the future president of the Italian Republic came to New York, how his English was excellent but needed to be edited because it was very academic, and how they worked on it together.

With his eyes moist with memories, the elderly journalist told me that while working on the text of the report it had gotten very late, and Giorgio Napolitano’s sensitivity surprised him: he was worried because John lived far away in the Bronx and would have to return home alone at night.

I fondly remembered Cappelli, who loved to describe himself as an “Italian-Italian-American,” as soon as I learned about the meeting between Barack Obama and Giorgio Napolitano, and I think of him again on the occasion of the celebration of Italy’s unification here in New York.



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