

Happy Birthday, Divo

Judith Harris (January 13, 2009)



One of the best known Italian politicians, former Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, turns 90. Nicknamed "Il Divo" after the recent Italian film starring Toni Servillo, his political life covers the whole history of Italy.



Rome - On January 14 [Giulio Andreotti](#) [2] celebrates his ninetieth birthday, which is another way of saying he begins his tenth decade of grandeur, Italian style. This grandson of a hatter, born in 1919 in the town of Segni, near Rome, is the closest Italy has to a Mazarin; and indeed, both Louis XIV's chief minister Jules Mazarin, aka Giulio Raimondo Mazarino of Pescina in the Abruzzo, attended the same Collegio Romano Latin high school in Rome.

Despite his age Andreotti is still "[il Divo](#) [3]" in reality, even more than in last year's movie starring Toni Servillo. During the past year hardly an important political event has taken place where Andreotti has not been present, curving forward over the speakers' table, head tucked between his shoulders, until his apparent somnolence is contradicted by lightning-quick glances and whiplash remarks.

Famous for his wit, Andreotti is even better known for his reticence. This makes it all the more important that, most notably, Andreotti unbuttoned himself for Massimo Franco, author and noted political correspondent for the *Corriere della Sera*. In writing Andreotti, *La vita di un uomo politico, la storia di un'epoca* (Mondadori, 2008, 371 pp.) Franco enjoyed an extraordinary degree of access to Andreotti, who justified this with customary irony, saying, "I don't much like biographies of people who are still living. But I understand that some people take interest in my life. On reflection, in a certain sense I'm a survivor of myself." Franco will be speaking in New York Friday, Jan. 23, 6 pm, at the [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [4], New York University, to present the English translation of his acclaimed earlier book, *Parallel Empires: The Vatican and the United States--Two Centuries of Alliance and Conflict*, translated by Roland Flamini (Doubleday, 2009).

In another breach in Andreotti's famous wall of privacy, last week it was announced that after two months of work the transfer of his immense private archives, all 1,800 linear feet of them, is complete. What satirist Beppe Grillo has dubbed "the Black Box" are now being catalogued in a well protected area of the Luigi Sturzo Institute, where consultation of all but his most personal documents will eventually be possible. Among other things, Andreotti's files cover the periods of Fascism, the rebirth of [Christian Democratic Italy](#) [5], the changes in the Church under Pope John XXIII, the drama of [Aldo Moro](#) [6]'s kidnap and murder and the "years of lead." They also include 80 filing boxes on relations with the U.S.A. and two hundred on the Vatican, according to Italian press reports.

Massimo Franco admits being impressed by the portrait of Andreotti painted by the Futurist maestro Giorgio De Chirico in the late 1950's, for it reveals yet another closely guarded secret, Andreotti's neck. "The portrait shows him looking younger by half a century, wearing a white shirt with the top buttons open and a casual jacket, from which a long, candid and surprising Andreotti neck emerges," writes Franco. "The man painted by De Chirico almost seems a fake—he doesn't correspond with the myth." In fact, as Andreotti confided, during the five sittings for the portrait, the politician would tend to doze off; hence, perhaps, the sole picture of the Divo when he is truly off stage.

The heroic leader of early Italian Christian Democracy [Alcide De Gasperi](#) [7] once called Andreotti "an old youth." A notorious insomniac, Andreotti slept reportedly only a few hours every night, which meant that he could and did read an immense amount. He was also omnipresent; this reporter recalls seeing him again and again in the early Sixties at political events one would have considered unimportant save for his presence.

This omnipresence meant that it was generally assumed that he was somehow involved, no matter what happened, no matter where. Once while Andreotti was on an official mission in sub-Saharan Africa, where phone lines had been cut for days after a mining disaster, a consular official finally managed to speak with him and tell him of the latest, whopping political scandalback home in Rome.

"You watch," Andreotti told his companion, "they'll be saying that I'm managing the scandal from here." And in fact "they," meaning the Italian politicians and their press sympathizers, said just that.

Does he have regrets? In a pre-birthday interview with the Vatican official daily *Osservatore Romano* Andreotti says he regrets not having studied foreign languages. He also spoke of De Gasperi, for whom, "Borders were not walls, on the contrary." For Andreotti, De Gasperi "did much to foster a



certain international awareness...his political experience was first in Innsbruck and then in Vienna—in a school of pluralism, with the habit of knowing another culture and its language.”

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