
THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION AND THE CENTER-LEFT

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I find it entirely felicitous that this topic should follow a session on Gaetano Salvemini, for it is to that grand old patriot that I owe my long-standing concern with the fate and future of Italian democracy.

The ascent to power of Mussolini produced mixed reactions in the United States in the 1920s. Many conservatives and business leaders admired Il Duce. They thought he was bringing order and discipline to an unruly people, and they regarded antifascist Italians as troublemakers and radicals. Liberals condemned Mussolini as a dictator and tyrant and sought to help the antifascists. This was my father's view, and in 1929, as chairman of the Harvard history department and with the department's and the dean's backing, he sent a cable to Salvemini, then in exile in London, inviting him to come for a semester in Cambridge as a visiting professor.

After the invitation went out and before Salvemini replied, the president of Harvard, A. Lawrence Lowell, notified my father that an influential member of the Corporation, Harvard's governing body, strongly objected to the invitation and that it must be retracted while time still permitted. My father responded that, since the department had acted with proper authorization, the offer could not in honor be withdrawn. As my father wrote later in his memoirs, "Lowell may himself have had doubts about the proceeding. In any event he did not pursue the matter further."

Salvemini, a man of passion, wit, and unconquerable zest for life, quickly captivated Cambridge, and, after James B. Conant became president in 1933, the history department secured him on a regular basis. He was a

familiar figure in our household when I was growing up. George La Piana was another friend of my father's, and I heard much talk when young of the hopes La Piana and Salvemini shared for a democratic Italy. Other antifascist Italian exiles passed through our house; so that, when war came, I followed events in Italy with particular interest while working for the Office of Strategic Services. By an odd coincidence, I rented a room in the winter of 1944 in the Paris apartment of Salvemini's second wife, from whom he had long separated and who was, by an even odder coincidence, the mother of Jean Luchaire, the notorious French collaborationist.

When I returned to Cambridge after the war, Salvemini, then in his seventies, was as vivid and vital as ever. I remember a wonderful evening when he dined at our house with Arthur Koestler, and the two survivors discussed in sardonic fashion the comparative merits of internment by Mussolini and by Franco. After he went back to Italy, I called on him in Sorrento. He fell sick in the summer of 1957 and died in September. I found in my father's papers Salvemini's last words as taken down by his friend Roberto Bolaffio. "To die smilingly," the old professor said, "this is what I should like. . . . I could not have foreseen a more serene death than this." He drifted off to sleep; then awakening a moment before he died, he said, characteristically, "I am not dead yet."

Well, the spirit of Salvemini is, I trust, not dead yet in Italy, nor is his dream of an honest, progressive, democratic republic; and I can well imagine what would have been the pungency of his reaction to the corruption of that dream in recent years. As one in deep sympathy with that dream, and ever hopeful, I have been now for many years an anxious observer of the fortunes of Italian democracy. In my effort to keep abreast of Italian developments, I must express particular gratitude to another Italian friend, this time of my own generation, Tullia Zevi, whom I first met in Paris in 1939 and saw much of when she and her husband, the architect Bruno Zevi, came to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1940. On my visits to Rome in later years, Tullia Zevi would often arrange meetings with leading politicians and journalists. It was at her salon that I first talked with Pietro Nenni and Giuseppe Saragat, and I owe much to her charm, wisdom, and generosity. I go into all this to explain why a historian of the United States who reads Italian with great difficulty and speaks it not at all become involved in U.S.-Italian relations during the presidency of John F. Kennedy.

In the immediate postwar years Italy had seemed one of the most vulnerable nations in Western Europe. An indisputably democratic country,

Italy yet had the largest Communist party outside the Soviet Union, and the most intelligent Communist leadership anywhere. It also had a Socialist party that was rich in tradition but, under Nenni's leadership, appeared to have aligned itself firmly with the Soviet side in the global civil war. Given the disquietudes that affected even Western Europe in the late 1940s, could one be sure that Italy would stay within the democratic camp?

I followed the Italian situation with keen interest, applauding the Partito d'Azione in 1945; cheering Saragat on when he led pro-democratic Socialists out of the PSI in 1947 and formed the Social Democratic party; approving too when the CIA intervened in the 1948 election to prevent a Communist victory; noting with disapproval Nenni's continuing attacks on NATO and American imperialism that in 1951 won him the Stalin Peace Prize. But a curious episode in September 1950 made me think that the situation might be more ambiguous than it appeared.

One day in London, that brilliant and iconoclastic Labour party gadfly Richard H. S. Crossman, the editor of that famed exposure of Communism *The God That Failed*, invited me to a dinner at the House of Commons. Among the other guests were Arthur Koestler, Raymond Aron, John Strachey, and assorted wives. Much drink was consumed, and after dinner the conversation became heated. Dick Crossman, who had just returned from Italy, argued that the Labour party should resume fraternal relations with the PSI. This roused Koestler to indignation that soon turned to fury. Nenni, he said, had sold out irrevocably to Stalin; Labour would fatally compromise itself if it tried to do business with him. Crossman responded with equal asperity. Finally Koestler arose, summoned his lovely wife and said, "This is intolerable. Come, Mamaine, we're leaving." Aron and I followed the Koestlers out into the corridor, begging Arthur to relax and not break his old friendship with Crossman; but he angrily declined and strode out into the night—a gesture somewhat complicated by the fact that the Koestlers were planning to stay with the Crossmans in Vincent Square. (Mamaine Koestler, however, solved that problem by phoning for a room at Grosvenor House.)

Crossman of course turned out in the end to be right. In 1952 Nenni began to favor independent PSI electoral slates, and in the spring of 1953 he indicated to the journalist Leo Wollemborg, from whose discerning and exceptionally well-informed dispatches and conversation I learned much in these years, that he was drawing away from the PCI. After the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956, Nenni gave back the Stalin Peace

Prize and gave the prize money to Hungarian refugees. By the late 1950s many observers were beginning to feel that a socialist breakaway from the Communist alliance was possible.

The American Embassy, however, refused to believe it. Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce, an intractable if charming antileftist, laid down a hard line against the PSI and refused to let the embassy staff meet with PSI leaders. When speculation arose about a reunion between Nenni and Saragat and even about PSI cooperation with the government, the Eisenhower administration made clear to Rome its profound opposition to any opening to the Left. It did not trust Nenni, believing him to be at best a neutralist, at worst a Stalinist dupe or agent; in any case it saw no urgent need for social and economic reform in Italy. In effect, the Eisenhower administration imposed an American veto on a center-left government in Italy. Mrs. Luce left in 1957, but her successor, James D. Zellerbach, while more easygoing in his attitudes, maintained the veto.

Some American officials disagreed. The *apertura a sinistra*, they thought, would both isolate the Communists and move the Italian government toward necessary and beneficial reforms, thereby undermining the basis of the Communist appeal. The debate over the opening to the Left began in the U.S. Embassy in Rome, and we are lucky indeed to have with us today a hero of this struggle, George Lister, who came to Rome in late 1957 as a first secretary. Lister's prior experience in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had instructed him in the vast differences between democratic socialism and totalitarian communism. He now proposed that he be permitted to talk to Socialists, and, with Zellerbach's approval, Lister developed a widening circle of contacts. He was soon reporting encouraging evidence of Socialist responsiveness to this dialogue. William Colby, the CIA station chief (and later CIA director), also saw the *apertura* as a means of splitting the Left and argued for subventions that would replace funds the PSI had received from Communist sources.

However, as I have described in *A Thousand Days*, the arrival in 1959 of Outerbridge Horsey as deputy chief of mission brought about a reversion to the Luce hard line. Horsey was a self-righteous fellow of exceedingly rigid right-wing views. He feared a center-left coalition as "a dangerous trap" that would lead ineluctably to the neutralization of Italy; the thing to do with the Socialists, he thought, was to "drive them back" into the arms of the Communists. Of course that is exactly what Moscow would have wanted. Horsey exerted severe pressure on Lister to cease his efforts with the Socialists; but Lister continued the meetings and, once when

Horsey was on vacation, carried his case, with his immediate superior's approval, to Zellerbach, for which Horsey never forgave him.

In January 1961 Kennedy became president. I joined the administration as one of his special assistants. Interest in Italian affairs was hardly high in the White House, but I soon learned that a member of McGeorge Bundy's National Security Council staff, Robert W. Komer, was also advocating a change in our policy toward the *apertura*. Komer, who had come to the White House from the CIA, was a very bright man, a witty memorandum writer and a relentless goad to action; he later served ably as ambassador to Turkey and undersecretary of defense for policy. He and I at once became allies in the determination to lift the Eisenhower veto on the PSI. Discussions when I went to Italy in April 1961 confirmed my sense that the time was overdue for this change in U.S. policy.

As Komer and I were discovering each other in Washington, Averell Harriman, Kennedy's newly appointed roving ambassador, visited Rome. George Lister, who served as interpreter in some of his meetings with political leaders, alerted Harriman to the embassy's hangup about the PSI and its unrelenting opposition to the center-left. Harriman, whose political instincts were generally unerring (except when it came to his native state of New York), got the Italian situation at once, was much irritated by the pontifical Horsey and, on his return to Washington, pronounced Lister the only officer in the Rome Embassy who understood the Communist problem.

A lot of good this did Lister, however; on his rotation back from Rome, where he received the department's top rating for his job performance, he was informed that the annual Promotion Panel had recommended him for "selection out" of the Foreign Service. Harriman rescued Lister and enabled him to continue to play a key role in changing U.S. Italian policy in the department, though at considerable cost to his personal career. In recent years George Lister has made notable contributions to the development and institutionalization of human rights as a major theme in American foreign policy and as a permanent bureau in the State Department. As for Outerbridge Horsey, the State Department, in the fashion of that day, rewarded him for being wrong by promoting him to become ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

As one who has worked with professional diplomats on a multitude of occasions for more than half a century, I hold the career foreign service in the highest respect—a corps of intelligent, devoted, and brave men and women. But the department that Kennedy inherited from Eisenhower

hardly represented professional diplomacy at its best. Under John Foster Dulles and his conception of "positive loyalty," the department had been effectively disciplined and purged. Independent and liberal spirits had a rough time in those Dulles years. The time-servers and reactionaries who prospered under Dulles regarded the new administration as a collection of meddling and soft-headed amateurs. I knew nothing of it at the time and find it hard to believe even now; but the researches of Alan Platt and Spencer Di Scala reveal that in November 1961 some officers in the Rome Embassy, led, according to Italian sources, by Vernon Walters, the military attaché and a man of extreme right-wing views (later Ronald Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations and George Bush's to West Germany), actually recommended U.S. military intervention if necessary to stop a center-left government. So harebrained an idea would not have got far in the Kennedy administration, but the mere discussion shows the intensity of official resistance to the *apertura*. There is no doubt that Italian opponents of the *apertura*, among them such wily politicians as Giulio Andreotti, eagerly worked on their allies in the U.S. Embassy.

In Washington, despite Averell Harriman's visit to Rome, the department's Italian desk continued to insist on the Eisenhower veto and to oppose any Italian government that would be dependent even on outside support by the PSI. The argument now was that lifting the veto would constitute impermissible intervention in internal Italian politics—a most peculiar argument, since it was the veto itself that constituted the intervention, and lifting it would leave the Italians free to make their own decisions and permit Italian politics to take its natural course.

The new U.S. ambassador in Rome, G. Frederick Reinhardt, was an urbane and likable man of conventional views, who continued, though with much less conviction than Horsey, to oppose the *apertura*. While Freddy Reinhardt supposed that the center-left development was probably inevitable at some point, he wondered what the great hurry was. I had known him in earlier times, and he was always courteous when we met. But he not unreasonably disliked White House amateurs poaching on his turf, and he complained to Kennedy (and later in his oral-history memoirs) about my meddling in Italian affairs.

Of course before getting involved at all, I had talked to Kennedy, as Bob Komer had talked to Bundy. Both the president and his special assistant for national security had no doubt in their minds that it was time for the American veto on the PSI to go. Prime Minister Fanfani's visit to Washington in June 1961 provided an opportunity to signal the change in

policy. The *apertura* was not on the State Department's agenda for the talks, but Kennedy told Fanfani privately that, if the Italian prime minister thought the center-left a good idea, we would watch developments with sympathy.

This should have ended the matter, but it did not. The embassy in Rome and the Italian desk in Foggy Bottom both continued their tactics of obstruction. Why did not Kennedy and Bundy simply order a reversal of policy? To answer this question, one must appreciate the murkiness of bureaucratic politics. Both men were preoccupied with questions of far greater urgency. Nineteen sixty-one, after all, was the year of the Bay of Pigs, the trouble in Laos, the Kennedy-Khrushchev meeting, the Berlin Crisis, the Soviet resumption of nuclear testing. Kennedy and Bundy were having arguments with the department on fronts they considered a good deal more consequential than Italy. In effect they gave Schlesinger and Komer hunting licenses, but did not choose to expend their own ammunition on so low-priority an issue. I should add that Kennedy never at any point told me to stop what he well knew I was doing on the Italian front.

Komer and I had allies inside and outside the government. In the department not only Harriman but George Ball, the undersecretary, Roger Hilsman, the chief of intelligence and research, William R. Tyler, assistant secretary for European affairs, and Richard N. Gardner, deputy assistant secretary for international organization affairs (and later a distinguished ambassador to Italy) were with us. Robert Kennedy, the attorney general; Arthur Goldberg, the influential Secretary of Labor; and the wing of the AFL-CIO led by Walter and Victor Reuther of the United Auto Workers were all on our side. As usual, no one knew where Secretary of State Dean Rusk stood.

Still, with top officials otherwise engaged, the anti-*apertura* officers who commanded the direct line of action were able to conduct a dogged rear-guard fight. I speculated on their motives in *A Thousand Days*: "It was partly, I imagine, the chronic difficulty of changing established policies; partly the patriotic conviction on the part of certain Foreign Service officers that they owned American foreign policy and, in any case, knew better than the White House [what it should be]; partly an innate Foreign Service preference for conservatives over progressives along with a traditional weakness for the Roman aristocracy. Whatever the motives, the sages of State's Italian desk spent 1961 predicting that the opening to the left would not come for years. Then, as the *apertura* gathered momentum, they produced an alternative argument: that it was coming anyway and

therefore did not require our blessing. The pervading attitude was that in no case should we encourage a development which would constitute a crushing blow to communism in Italy and throughout Europe; rather Nenni and his party must meet a series of purity tests before they could qualify for American approval."

I visited Rome again in February 1962. I had then a long talk with Nenni at Tullia Zevi's house. I pressed him on the implications of the *apertura* for foreign affairs. Nenni in his charming and candid way emphasized his dislike of the Communists, his support for the Common Market and his acceptance of NATO on a de facto basis. His party's traditional neutralism, he said, meant the preservation of the existing European equilibrium; such an action, he argued with a certain Jesuitical relish, would clearly be not neutral, so the PSI was against it.

But in May 1962 the State Department Italianists were still declaring that the Nenni Socialists were "not anti-Communist" and that their success would strengthen anti-NATO sentiment in Italy. The absorption of the top people in high-priority items permitted midlevel officials on the Italian desk to continue their obstruction, which they did with impressive assiduity. As I wrote in *A Thousand Days*, "It was an endless struggle. Meetings would be called, decisions reached, cables sent; then the next meeting would begin with the same old arguments. One felt entrapped as in a Kafka novel."

In October 1962, sixteen months after Kennedy's talk with Fanfani, I sent an exasperated memorandum to Bundy. It began: "As you will recall, the White House has been engaged for about fifty years in an effort to persuade the Department of State that an air of sympathy toward the Nenni Socialists would advance the interests of the United States and of Western democracy. . . . During this period, practically *all* the evidence has supported our view that the Nenni Socialists have split irrevocably from the Communists and are determined to bring their party into the democratic orbit. . . . During this period, however, State at every step along the way has resisted proposals to hasten the integration of the Socialists into the democratic camp."

Six weeks later State came up with a new and even more far-fetched theory: that, if the Socialists entered the Italian government, the Russians might take it as a proof of U.S. weakness and miscalculate the West's determination—as if Khrushchev based his assessment of American will on the composition of the Italian government. By this time the possibility was arising that, if the opponents of the *apertura* prevailed, this might

encourage the Christian Democrats to move right rather than left in broadening the government's base and bring into power a right-wing government with neofascist support, like the disastrous Tambroni government of 1960. In January 1963 Bob Komer and I sent Kennedy a memorandum recalling his Italian directives, describing our frustrations and concluding: "Lest you think you run the United States Government, the matter is still under debate."

However, our campaign was not altogether in vain. The center-left enthusiasts in Rome appreciated efforts and were used to foot-dragging in foreign offices. In February 1963 Anthony Sampson reported to the *London Observer* from Rome, "Nenni, the old firebrand Socialist, cannot now contain his praise for Kennedy. . . . There is hardly a word of anti-Americanism, except on the far right." In April, Harriman, who had been assistant secretary for the Far East, returned to European affairs as undersecretary for political affairs. The old crocodile was skilled and definitive in the uses of power and rapidly brought the bureaucracy under control.

In July 1963, when Kennedy himself visited Rome, he took Nenni aside at a garden party at the Quirinale Palace and engaged him in a conspicuously long conversation. Opposition to the center-left now vanished in Washington. In November 1963 the Nenni Socialists entered the government. The center-left government was at last in existence.

If only one could say that the center-left victory fulfilled our hopes of thirty years ago! But the failure of the center-left to regenerate Italian politics, to purify the administration of government, to produce economic and social reforms, and to realize Gaetano Salvemini's dream of progressive Italian democracy is another story, and one that many at this conference are far more competent than I am to tell.

As a lover of Italy, I am still waiting—and hoping.