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February 12, 1963

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Dear Arthur:

In accordance with our conversation concerning Saragat's visit I have attached a memorandum setting forth my own personal and informal views and impressions regarding the PSDI leader. I do not claim to be an expert on Saragat--he is a rather complex person and I am sure that others who know him well hold somewhat different opinions. Nevertheless, he was one of my most frequent political contacts throughout my four years at Rome, and I called on him, at his home or at Party headquarters, on an average of at least once a week. I have seen him at times of great stress, and have been alone with him in moments of victory and defeat. I have included some informal recommendations at the end of the memorandum.

Sincerely yours,

George Lister
Special Assistant

Mr. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.,
Special Assistant to the President,
The White House.

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As you know, Saragat broke with the Socialists in 1947, when the latter were preparing to continue their close collaboration with the Communists. Since then his Social Democratic Party (PSDI) has been in and out of various coalition governments with the Christian Democrats. The PSDI has lost strength over the years (although it has improved its position slightly in recent by-elections). On the other hand it has frequently played a crucial role, by either giving or withholding support in the delicate balance of Italian politics. Quite a few political observers have come to regard the PSDI with some condescension and contempt, as a pseudo working class party with no real contact with the masses, as a one man party infested with grubby little politicians interested only in whatever few cabinet crumbs the Christian Democrats may throw them occasionally, as a party with no future--especially now that the Nenni Socialists are moving into the democratic area, and as a party with a quite unpredictable leader who is hopelessly unrealistic and periodically subject to moods verging on hysteria and paranoia.

There is some truth in some of these gibes, but I think it is very unfair to Saragat and the PSDI, as well as most misleading, to omit some of the other things which may be, and ought to be, mentioned. Since the war the PSDI has performed a great service to Italy, and to us, by stoutly and faithfully supporting democracy at home and a strong alliance with us in foreign affairs. At least until recently one of the things which Saragat felt most keenly was that the PSDI had been exploited by the Christian Democrats and by others to protect Italian democracy all these years, while sacrificing the Social Democrats and exposing them to the attacks of the Socialists and Communists by failing to put through badly needed social and economic reforms. Also Saragat certainly is very well aware, although I do not think he would ever admit it, of the basic and decisive weakness and the amateurish quality of the PSDI which contribute to the Social Democrats' generally low morale and their inferiority complex vis-a-vis the Socialists, corresponding to the Socialists' inferiority complex vis-a-vis the Communists.

Still another recurrent nightmare tormenting Saragat is the danger that the Christian Democrats, or the British, or ourselves, might decide to bypass the Social Democrats and reach an "understanding" with the Nenni Socialists which would explode the PSDI or at least leave it out in the cold and deprive it of any bargaining power it still might have in negotiating with Nenni as regards future Socialist reunification or other political problems. On occasion his fears on this score have been deliberately fostered by some Socialists and Christian Democrats, as well as some personal rivals and enemies, both Italian and foreign, who have argued maliciously that the PSDI was completely washed up, had served its purpose, could hardly expect to exist or hold together more than another year or two, etc. There were some people who were talking this way five years ago and who were

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so prone to wishful thinking as regards the Nenni Socialists that they interpreted even the slightest and most ambiguous gesture by Nenni as indicative of a complete Socialist break with the Communists. At one time the British, and not just the Labourites, indulged in a great deal of this sort of thing and aroused Saragat's lasting resentment against them. One man in particular in the British Embassy, Hannaford, who had served for many years in Italy and enjoyed contacts in fantastic depth throughout the country, developed an exaggerated bias in favor of the Socialists and against Saragat to the point where there arose a personal feud which was actively pursued by both parties. I am sure Hannaford was instrumental in effecting some important defections from the PSDI to the Socialists. Saragat even protested to the British Embassy and tried to get Hannaford removed, and he may have been successful in this endeavor because Hannaford did leave the British Embassy while I was there. It seemed to me that all of this was a great pity for both Saragat and Hannaford were intelligent, useful men who undoubtedly held very similar political views. I always thought it most unfortunate that some persons who became friends of the Socialists (PSI) felt that this compelled them to be anti-PSDI.

It has been no easy task to preside over the PSDI, which has been buffeted about in Italian politics and is riddled with all sorts of internal petty rivalries as well as perennially desperately in need of money. Of course Saragat is partly responsible for these difficulties, for he is not a good organizer and there is something to the accusation that he deliberately has surrounded himself with second rate men because he can brook no rival to his leadership and, at all events, can no longer perform (if he ever could) in any role other than that of the leader whose word should be accepted instantly and unquestioningly. But even if Saragat possessed the patience of Job and the organizational and tactical skill of a Lenin it would have been very difficult for him to convert the PSDI into a winner in the situation existing in Italy. In my judgment he is the only man of really national and international stature in the party. He takes the broad view of Italian politics and tries to see them in the perspective of world affairs. He does not suffer from the provincialism of so many Italian politicians.

I would describe Saragat's more significant personal characteristics as follows. He is high strung, mercurial, sensitive, proud and easily moved to anger. At his worst he can become pretty ugly, especially when he loses control of his temper. On such occasions, at various Directorate and Central Committee meetings,

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he has really shaken his victims with his withering blasts to the point where they have seriously considered leaving the Party. This has been true at various times of Vigianesi (the head of the UIL labor union), Luigi Preti (the present Minister of Foreign Trade whom you met recently), and Margherita Barnabei, the pleasant and cultured leader of the small faction on the far left. In the case of the latter, who is fairly well known for her amorous adventures, Saragat stooped to the level of making some pretty pungent remarks on her morals in her presence at a Directorate meeting. Unfortunately, these characteristics of his tend to produce a situation in which those closest to him are mediocrites who accept without question his habit of speaking and acting unilaterally for the entire PSDI. On the other hand, even most of Saragat's severest critics will admit, when pressed, that he is a fundamentally decent man and quite courageous and honest by Italian domestic political standards. The longer I stayed in Italy the more I came to value these qualities. For example, during the tense days of the spring of 1960, when the Fascist supported government of Tambroni obviously was at least flirting with the idea of staying in power through undemocratic means, and some Italian politicians were quite obviously frightened, Saragat was in the forefront of the fight, in the Chamber and outside, to oust the Prime Minister. Furthermore, Saragat has been consistently aggressively pro-democratic and pro-American, and his anti-Fascist and anti-Communist record is long and excellent. It is for these qualities that even those who have suffered most recently from his attacks will give him their respect, and even love. A good example of this was provided by the very moving funeral of Saragat's wife, which brought out politicians, intellectuals, and leaders of all branches of Italian life from the democratic right to the democratic left (the Nenni Socialists left the procession as it entered the church).

The matter of Saragat's "inconsistency" probably merits a paragraph by itself. It is true that in his tactics he can shift from one position to another overnight, and vehemently attack as a thorough scoundrel a man whom he was eulogizing the day before. When I called on him I knew I might get anything from the exuberant full embrace treatment to a resentful fishy eyed stare. The latter was usually followed by a bitter account of PSDI difficulties, for some of which he thought we shared the responsibility, at least indirectly. But on basic policies and positions I think Saragat has been very consistent. I feel he is one of the best friends we have in Italy and I never had the slightest doubt of his firm and all out opposition to both the Communists and Fascists. I think that should count for a great deal in Italy. Nor do I wish to exaggerate his emotionalism. During most of my talks with him he has been quite genial, calm and urbane.

The death

The death of Saragat's wife a couple of years ago really hit him hard. They had been through a great deal together, and she had supported the family by working as a seamstress during the hard exile days in France. One time when I was talking to him soon after her death he broke down and cried. His grandchild is a great consolation to him. He also has a son in the Italian diplomatic service.

One difficulty in talking with Saragat lies in the fact that many times he is not completely frank with foreign visitors or hosts, even when he believes they are favorably disposed towards him. I think that this is partly due to his experience with some foreign representatives who understood very little of Italian domestic affairs but were sometimes playing, or getting ready to play, an active role therein. Saragat feels with a keen sense of frustration that most foreigners do not understand the intricacies of Italian politics, much less his own personal trials and tribulations. In such cases he almost invariably uses the broad brush treatment with considerable exaggeration. For example, this might take the form of grossly exaggerating the power and influence of the PSDI and distorting the shortcomings of the Nenni Socialists. Also, when Saragat feels it is a question of little steps for tiny feet, he has a tendency to pontificate and to speak down to the foreigner. I remember one occasion when a very well meaning and sympathetic visitor passed through Rome and I was sent by the Embassy to interpret for him with Saragat. The visitor asked me to tell Saragat that he would like to hear his views on Italian politics but unfortunately had only fifteen minutes. Saragat stared at the man and then remarked drily that in that case he might remember the following: "Italy is noteworthy for three reasons. It has a Communist Party which is outnumbered by only the Soviets and Chinese. It has the only Socialist Party in Western Europe which collaborates with the Communists. And it has the stupidest bourgeoisie in the entire world". Saragat has sometimes made the most scathing comments to me about some of the British Labourites, for example Crossman, who came to Italy thinking that they understood Italian politics because they were British leftists, and who spent their time drinking Italian wine and handing out cheap advice on how he ought to run his party.

I think that perhaps another reason why Saragat tends to exaggerate the strength and role of the PSDI is that he suspects or fears that the foreigner may feel his Party is finished and has no future, and so he will sometimes make wildly optimistic predictions as to how many seats and votes the PSDI may win at coming elections.

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One interesting aspect of Saragat's character comes out in his relationship with Nenni. My strong impression is that Nenni likes and respects Saragat more than vice-versa. For example, the former always sends the PSDI leader a Christmas card. Of course it is easier for Nenni to be more generous, for he is in a stronger position, but I think this is genuinely indicative of the real feelings between the two men. I would say that of the two Nenni is much more mellow, is more tolerant and earthy, and has much more of the common touch. Saragat has more education and is certainly more of a highbrow. I remember that on one occasion, when I was walking back to my Milan hotel from a long session of the Socialist Congress, I stepped into a tobacco shop and saw several persons eagerly studying a football pool ticket (in which one tries to predict the results of next week's games) signed by Pietro Nenni. I cannot imagine Saragat's filling out such a ticket.

Some of the things which Saragat was most interested about in the United States was ascertaining the extent of the firmness and intelligence of our leadership and our capability and determination to stay ahead of the Soviet Union. He questioned me repeatedly as to whether the Soviets were overtaking us in production and national growth. He was thoroughly disgusted with us for letting the Soviets get the jump in outer space, and he was immensely pleased and reassured with our later successes.

I think that on this trip he will have in mind, among other things, improving his own personal prestige before the upcoming elections by meeting the President, ascertaining our feelings on Italian politics and world affairs, and trying to convince us that the PSDI has an important role to play and that the Socialists have by no means come completely away from the Communists. He may well fear that we are getting ready to go overboard on the PSI. Perhaps that is one reason so much of his visit concentrates on meetings with labor union leaders.

My own vote would be in favor of: thanking Saragat eloquently for his long and faithful support of Italian democracy and the Free World; assuring him that while we are pleased with Socialist progress away from the Communists we fully realize that much remains to be done in that regard and that the PSDI has an important role to play; consulting with him as to his own views on Italian and foreign affairs; and, emphasizing that the United States is determined to do more than hold its own with the Sino-Soviet Bloc.

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