

Obama-Napolitano. A Friendly Meeting

Benedetta Grasso (May 26, 2010)



May 25, 2010. Italian President Giorgio Napolitano, a former Communist leader in his 80s, met Barack Obama the first African-American US President at the White House. Both stated that the meeting was held in the spirit of friendship, a friendship that in Napolitano's own words "was expressed even in our handshake, in the deep exchange of our gazes".

WASHINGTON – Encounters between Presidents, the moments in which nations come together, are always charged with great symbolic value. The first official visit of Giorgio Napolitano to Washington can hardly be an exception : a former Italian Communist leader in his 80s meeting the first African-American US President, who anagraphically could be his grandson. But regardless of their very different personal and historical backgrounds, the two leaders seemed to get along very well, as if they had something in common.

The two men have had other chances to meet, the most recent being after the terrible earthquake in L'Aquila in 2009, but this was the first time Napolitano was received at the White



House. This official visit means a great deal for both Italians and Americans. The issues at stake range from the several wars that are going on around the world to the current global economic crisis, from the domestic politics of both countries to the role of Italian culture and language abroad.

The political roles of the two heads of state are very different. In Italy, the President is elected by Parliament and has virtually no executive powers: he must ensure the country's "institutional equilibrium" and places himself above the politics of the day.

As such, Napolitano embodies a less known Italy for Americans and for Obama himself, who has often met in the past with the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi.

Giorgio Napolitano is a calm and highly educated man with a rich and fascinating personal history. He was a prominent leader of the Italian Communist Party until the party was dissolved at the end of the Cold War to give birth to different political formations including the Democratic Party, the largest opposition force in Italy today. President since 2006, Napolitano has been a great supporter of Obama. After the latter's victory in 2008 he expressed his enthusiasm for the election of the first African-American President, an event he saluted as a revolutionary moment in history.

The meeting comes at a moment in which Obama is struggling to implement his program, from last month's Health Care reform to the recently passed Financial Reform, which Napolitano publicly praised after their meeting. As of today, Obama was also busy removing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the military, which allows gays to serve in the army on condition that they do not declare their homosexuality openly.

Both Obama and Napolitano described their meeting as very cordial and intimate, in the spirit of friendship, a friendship that in Napolitano's own words "was expressed even in our handshake, in the deep exchange of our gazes".

The visit combined a lot of appointments and events. After his arrival, the Italian President was taken to the [National Gallery of Art](#) [2], where he was received by the Chief of Exhibitions Dodge Thompson and the Chief of Protocol Carol Kelley. He visited the museum and the Italian collection, and later in the Italian Embassy he had the chance to express his appreciation for the social and cultural role played in the US by millions of Americans of Italian ancestry, the descendants of early immigrants who are now an integral part of the connective tissue of the American social fabric.

As the sun was setting behind the modern-looking embassy (among the great design names are Carlo Scarpa, Achille Castiglioni, Renzo Piano, Luciano Baldassarre, Ettore Sottsass and many others.), the president greeted a group of journalists, professors, scholars, and entrepreneurs with a brief speech that also emphasized the alliance between the two countries in the field of scientific research, trade and business.

The day after, on a gloomy morning that turned into a beautiful spring day, the meeting at the White House took place "in perfect continuity with the previous one in Rome," Napolitano said. It also touched upon "the relationship between Europe and the United States in the light of the financial crisis."

For both presidents this crisis also means new opportunities. Obama stated that it is in the United States' interest to have a more cohesive, united and assertive Europe. Napolitano responded that even with the present crisis, worsened by the Greek national debt, the Euro and the European Union are not at risk. He advocated "a jump forward" towards more discipline in the Union's budget and more effective coordination in several fields, from economic policy to the environment."

As American diplomacy seems to focus on new actors on the global scene—like China, India and Brazil—both presidents emphasized that this doesn't detract from the transatlantic relationship. The military alliance embodied by the NATO remains a crucial pillar of peace, and Napolitano emphasized the important role played by Italy in Afghanistan, as well as the importance of the meeting between Foreign Minister Franco Frattini and Senator Mitchell on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Napolitano also invited Obama to visit Italy again in 2011 and take part to the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the country's unification.

The presidential visit continues with a host of other meetings, including a private discussion with the Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Napolitano will also meet Justice Antonin Scalia and Chief Justice John Roberts at the Supreme Court, former US President Bill Clinton, and the [Order of Sons of Italy in America](#) [3] (OSIA).

Over 200 years ago George Washington said that "Some day, following the example of the United States of America, there will be a United States of Europe."

Without Europe there wouldn't be the United States, but nowadays the dependance is mutual and it's also through these political encounters that one makes the other stronger.

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