



Once Upon a Time, the President Rode into Italy on a Sea of Love

Rodrigo Praino (June 09, 2008)



Bush is taking off for his European farewell tour but it looks as though the President won't be getting a rock star's welcome from the people, in Italy or elsewhere. Beyond the platitudes and hand shakes from heads of state is the soaring disapproval of many Europeans themselves. We examine how almost 100 years ago, before the seemingly irreparable debacles of this administration, an American President traveling to Italy could, if anything, count on a veritable lovefest of popular support

On Monday, June 9, President George W. Bush will cross the Atlantic Ocean once again to embark on what critics have already dubbed as his "Farewell Tour of Europe". The trip is planned to coincide with the annual U.S.-European Union summit to be held in Slovenia. Bush will visit Germany, Italy, the Vatican City, France and the United Kingdom. According to White House Press Secretary Dana Perino, the President will be meeting "some new friends and some old friends of our country" to discuss matters related to war, terrorism and trade.



President Bush will be in Italy on June 12 and 13 where he will meet with Italian President Giorgio Napolitano and Premier Silvio Berlusconi. Before heading to France he will also pay a visit to the Pope at Vatican City. While no exultant crowds are expected to greet the U.S. President – rather, protesters may very well gather to contest him and his administration – we thought it would be interesting to take a look at how American Presidents have been received in the Bel Paese in the past, with special attention to how they have been treated by the Italian people, the Italian political elite and the Vatican.

The first sitting American President to travel outside the United States was Theodore Roosevelt, when he decided to go to Panama with the First Lady in 1906 to inspect the construction of the Panama Canal. Teddy Roosevelt didn't go to Italy on official business, but shortly after leaving office – and before his comeback third-party campaign in 1912 – he left the United States for a year-long tour of the world focused on the African continent, where he could best exercise his famous passion for hunting. On his way to Africa and on his way back home, the ex-President stopped in several Italian locations.

Roosevelt left from New York on board the S.S. Hamburg on March 23, 1909. Waiting for him on the pier at 23rd St. and 6th Ave. was a teeming crowd of Italian-Americans, accompanied by an entire band playing “My Country 'Tis of Thee”. The President was presented with a bronze tablet from the Italian Chamber of Commerce and was warmly saluted by the cheering throng. It was their way of showing gratitude to a man and a country that had helped the populations of Calabria and Sicily, stricken by a terrible earthquake not long before. After crossing the ocean, the Presidential party had to change ships in Naples before reaching Mombasa. Roosevelt stayed in the Southern Italian city only a few hours, but the locals were so thrilled at his arrival they had wanted to greet him with mirthful affirmations of friendship. A number of boats, yachts and warships converged in the Gulf of Naples ahead of his approach, and the newspapers at the time reported that Roosevelt was “astonished” by the enthusiasm of well-wishers, who had filled the streets. The few hours he spent in Naples were only enough to meet with some local notables and institutional figures at his hotel, and then to pay a visit to the Duke and Duchess of Aosta at their magnificent castle, Capodimonte.

After Naples the next stop was Messina, where Roosevelt could inspect the ruins of the recent earthquake and the efforts – also by workers sent by the U.S. government and coordinated by the U.S. Navy – to rebuild the destroyed city. Meanwhile, the King of Italy Victor Emmanuel III sailed from Rome to the Sicilian coast to “casually” meet with Mr. Roosevelt on board his battleship *Re Umberto*. The King had said he was glad to meet with “the man who had earned the esteem of the whole American people and had rendered valuable service to Italian emigrants”. The city of Messina welcomed Teddy Roosevelt crying “long live our President!”

The following year, after his hunting tour of the African continent, and before going back to the United States, the former President decided to return to Italy. Roosevelt met his wife there and wanted to relive with her the golden moments of his Italian honeymoon – yes, Teddy and Edith Roosevelt's honeymoon had taken place in Italy! After another brief stay in Naples he moved to Rome, accepting an invitation made by King Victor Emmanuel the year before. He was welcomed at the Quirinal like a head of state and saluted by the people of Rome like a hero. Ernesto Nathan, the mayor of Rome, compared Roosevelt to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the warrior-philosopher famous for his imposing equestrian statue. A few days later in Liguria, while visiting the city of Porto Maurizio – which today is part of the city of Imperia – Roosevelt was proclaimed an honorary citizen and had a street, *Corso Teodoro Roosevelt*, named after him.

The Italian people, public officials and institutional figures were greeting Roosevelt as a national hero. The *New York Times* wrote on April 3, 1910 that “the great hunter is now a more popular man in Italy than any other foreigner has ever been, and can be compared only with some of the great heroes of the National epoch”. That praise notwithstanding, there had been at least one problematic



relationship during his Italian tour: Mr. Roosevelt could not pay a visit to the Pope at Vatican City. Relations between the Vatican and the Italian government at the time were strained. Until 1929, the Catholic Church refused to recognize a unified Italy and the Pope had since been confined within the Vatican walls. There was a very strict protocol to follow for official visits to the Pope: a foreign leader could not move from “Italian territory” directly into the presence of the Holy Father, but first had to go to his own country’s Embassy – hence leaving from foreign land – and only then could go to the Vatican without riding any transportation provided by the excommunicated government of Italy. While all protocol questions were easy to resolve, President Roosevelt did not accept the Pope’s request that he not contact any other religious groups in Rome before their meeting. This was a clear reference to a papal audience conceded, and later cancelled, to ex-Vice President Charles Warren Fairbanks who had had a meeting with Roman Methodists. Roosevelt refused to comply with the Pope’s requests on a completely theoretical basis – he had no intention to meet with religious groups – stating that he must refuse to submit to any conditions that might limit his “freedom of conduct”.

It seems that in terms of conquering the favor, sympathy and admiration of the Italian people, and that of the Italian political elite and the Vatican, Teddy Roosevelt just got 2 out of 3.

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