

Gianfranco Fini and the Three Facets of Italy in the U.S.

Letizia Airos (February 06, 2010)



An impressive dinner organized by the Italian community at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in New York concluded the official state visit of the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Gianfranco Fini addressed the diverse components of Italian emigration to the U.S. and earned once again the kind of bipartisan respect that Speaker Nancy Pelosi expressed to him in Washington last week.

Everybody, including representatives of the press, had to wait in line on the steps and in the hallways of the [Grand Hyatt Hotel](#) [2] last Thursday evening, passing through security to participate in an evening that the Italian and the tri-state Italian-American communities will remember for a long time.

A crowd of over 1,000 guests welcomed Gianfranco Fini, President of the [Italian Chamber of Deputies](#) [3]: a veritable ocean of our diverse Italian community in America. And, with tickets at \$150 per plate, there were many celebrities present.

Sitting at the table of honor with President Fini was the Italian [Ambassador to Washington Giulio Terzi](#) [4] and [U.N. Ambassador Cesare Maria Ragalini](#) [5], [Consul General Francesco Maria Talò](#) [6], Apostolic Nuncio to the United Nations Monsignor Celestino Migliore, President of the Molise Region



Michele Iorio, and Deputies Amato Berardi and Alessandro Ruben.

Prominent guests included, to cite only a few names, New York State Governor David Paterson, Vice Governor of the State of Connecticut Michael Fedele, former New York State Governor Mario Cuomo with his wife Matilda, former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, former U.S. Senator Alphonse D'Amato as well as several members of the legislatures in the tri-state area, U.S. Marshal Joseph Guccione, and Minister of Tourism for the Region of Sicily Nino Strano. Particularly important was the presence, alongside the U.N. Apostolic Nuncio Mons. Migliore, of Rabbi Arthur Schneier of Park East Synagogue.

After initial confusion while in line, stemming from the inevitable difficulty of directing so many guests at an event that required serious security measures, everything went smooth, which can be credited to the efforts of the organizers, who appeared justifiably satisfied: [New York Supreme Court Justice Dominic Massaro](#) [7], President of the [Italian Academy Foundation](#) [8] and Honorary Consul of Westchester County Steve Acunto, President of [GEI and the Wine and Food Institute](#) [9] Lucio Caputo and Consul General of Italy in New York Francesco Maria Talò, four pilasters of the Italian community in New York, and high representatives of its culture and history in the United States, were finally deeply pleased with the successful event resulted from their collaboration

In the eyes of those around us, the event was the manifestation of a heterogeneous community that within the context of one evening had found a place to come together, and to celebrate.

President Fini was first welcomed by the excited voices of students from [Scuola d'Italia Guglielmo Marconi](#) [10] who sang the national anthems. We closely followed their emotional rehearsals in recent days behind the scenes at the only bilingual Italian school in the United States, and we know that the youngsters practiced with sincere pride. The pastor of Saint Augustine's Church in Ossining, Hilary C. Franco then recited a blessing. Ambassador Giulio Terzi, after the requisite acknowledgements, wanted to repeat the importance of disseminating the Italian language, an issue that has always been at the center of his diplomatic mission, from the time he was Ambassador of Italy to the UN in New York.

Judge Dominic Massaro introduced President Fini with heartfelt words. He recalled his friend's first successful visit to New York, which dates back to 15 years ago, and how the city warmly welcomed him, just as today. His speech showed that reciprocal consideration, appreciation, and esteem have always bonded him to the Italian politician.

Gianfranco Fini's speech focused not only on Italy-U.S. relationships but also on the meaningful presence of millions of Italians and Italy's descendants in America. The President of the Chamber, who had just visited Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi in Washington—an Italian American herself—offered the bipartisan greetings of all Italy's parliamentarians:

"I greet all of you not only personally, but also on behalf of all members of the Italian Parliament, without any political distinction whatsoever. When speaking of Italians in America, when speaking of Italian-Americans, the children and grandchildren of our emigrants, when it comes to all of you and what you represent, there is no distinction between right, center, and left in the House. Tonight I offer you the greetings of all Members."

Fini then defined the three diverse "components" of emigration from Italy now present in the U.S.: the group of Italians with Italian blood whose parents and grandparents left Italy for America; those who were born in Italy and have maintained a strong connection to their homeland, and feel both Italian and American at the same time; and the group that embodies the new emigration, made of people who excel in business, culture, scholarship, and research. All these Italians have put down roots here and have become a great resource for American society. "All that you have done in the past and continue to do in the present, all that your children will do in the future, is a heritage that not only belongs to one part, but one that belongs to the entire nation," he said.

The President was also able to show his sensitivity to a subject that is strongly felt in our community these days by picking up the main theme that Ambassador Terzi addressed in his speech earlier in the evening—language—and connecting it to the evolving experience of Italian emigration:



“It’s a point of great satisfaction that the desire to speak our language is growing within the United States. We have a duty to continue to work together in many sectors, especially business, culture, and education. Today the Italian minds that come to the United States represent our excellence and I think that this is particularly gratifying for those Italians who came here nearly illiterate, without knowing a word of English, and who were often looked upon with mistrust if not suspicion.”

Rhetoric was remarkably absent from Fini’s speech. And even when he told the audience “You are the true ambassadors of Italy in the United States,” he soon added that he did not mean to employ a mere rhetorical expression, and explained that the massive Italian presence in the U.S. also contributes to reinforce friendship between the two countries.

“There is always the risk on occasions such as these to fall back on rhetoric, the risk of speaking more to the heart than to the mind. I believe that institutions must know how to simultaneously speak to the heart and to reason. Speaking to reason means remembering that our alliance, our friendship, our being children of common ideals and values is not only the heritage of yesterday, it is something that I was able to see during these days, in the meetings that I had in Congress with representatives of both the Republican and Democratic parties. In a democracy, the color of the government changes, but the values of friendship remain, regardless of whoever governs either in Italy or the United States. Because we are not united by a political party, but we are united by common values, which are those of democracy.”

In the dining room the “three components” listened in rapt attention. We met the eyes of many, and they reflected a sense of respect – not only for the office but for the politician. And later, talking to the invitees we noticed that all those present, regardless of their political opinions, looked at Fini as an Italian leader who at this moment can more effectively bring Italy closer to America.

This echoed Nancy Pelosi’s remarks after their meeting in Washington last week, when she praised Fini’s “commitment to human rights, to strong fundamental values as the basis for our relationships and our governments.” Indeed, as President of the Chamber Fini has shown real concern with acceptance and tolerance of immigrants in Italy these days, an important theme for the descendants of Italian emigrants who read so often in the press worrying stories about racism and xenophobia in Italy.

And the large bipartisan appreciation that surrounded Fini must also be connected to the very peculiar experience of this leader of the Right who has come to play a top institutional role in a political context where the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, is a former Communist: a symbolic image of the new “post-Cold War” Italy that is still largely unknown abroad.

Italy is changing in ways that many who read about it in English find difficult to understand, given the many old-fashioned stereotypes that are still common in the media. “Know Italy better” is definitely the message that Gianfranco Fini has been launching during his trip.

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