



A War President Who Wasn't a Loser and His Trip to Italy

Rodrigo Praino (June 13, 2008)



Woodrow Wilson may have been a "war President", as Bush is today, but when it came to earning international approval, Wilson had the significant advantage of winning his war. When he traveled to Italy, the spoils of victory came in the form of unending popular praise and streams of flowers

In time with President Bush's visit to Italy, let's continue to glimpse at how past Presidents were received in the Bel Paese. After Teddy Roosevelt's tour of the country, taken in somewhat incidental fashion, we'll explore what happened during the first official state visit of a U.S. President to Italy. The first sitting President to travel to Italy was Woodrow Wilson shortly after the First World War in 1919. On his way to the Paris Peace Conference, the President had wanted to stop through the



United Kingdom and Italy. The following is a brief summary of how Italy welcomed a “war President”.

Between January 1 and January 6, 1919, President Wilson, Mrs. Wilson and their daughter visited Rome, Genoa, Turin and Milan. There were rumors of a possible visit to Naples, but as it happened the presidential party made no such last-minute fugue to Southern Italy. Wilson was first greeted at the Franco-Italian border by the Duke of Lante, an envoy for the King of Italy, and traveled to Rome via a special royal train, stopping briefly in Turin and Genoa. Wherever he passed, crowds gathered to salute the President, shouting “Viva l’America!”. Be it in mountain towns, large cities or hamlets in the plains, people waved the Italian tricolore together with the stars and stripes to greet a leader they admired.

The Wilsons were hosted by the King and Queen of Italy at the Quirinal. Upon their arrival in Rome, Via Nazionale, the street that leads from the train station to the royal residence –today the residence of the Italian President, was festooned with flags. Soldiers had to be deployed along its entire length in order to contain the rapturous people, intent on celebrating someone they looked upon as a modern hero. The masses wanted to get close enough to see him, greet him, and even kiss his hand or clothing.

The first record of an Italian position on President Wilson was written by Dr. Vincenzo de Santo, an Italian member of the Faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, and published by the Roman newspaper *Idea Nazionale* on April 12, 1917. Dr. De Santo spoke about President’s Wilson obstinacy, asserting that this character trait “when founded on justice and on a perfect knowledge of one’s duty, as is the case of Mr. Wilson, instead of being a defect may be one of the rarest virtues a great leader can possess”. During his speech to Italian Parliament Wilson had stated that “the only use to an obstacle is to be overcome”. That kind of approach to life and the future was precisely what a population tried by years of bitter, brutal war needed to hear.

King Victor Emmanuel III welcomed President Wilson and his family with every conceivable honor. The President also held a number of fruitful meetings with Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando in preparation for the Paris Peace Conference. The laundry list of gifts, honorary citizenships, praises and honors he received during his trip, from the City of Rome to the Accademia dei Lincei, is so long that it becomes almost boring to recount them all.

In compliance with Vatican protocol, President Wilson left from Ambassador Page’s residence accompanied by the Rector of the American College to see Pope Benedict XV. On his way to Vatican City, the President was trailed once more by an adoring crowd who threw him flowers as he passed. The Pope received Wilson with all due honors and presented him with a precious mosaic. Later Wilson also met with members of Rome’s Methodist community—following the Fairbanks incident and Teddy Roosevelt’s dismissal of the Pope a few years earlier, this time all conditions set by the Vatican were quietly observed.

President Wilson’s visit to Italy was, in a larger sense, also a tribute to the Italian/American community. During the state dinner arranged by Victor Emmanuel at the Quirinal palace, the monarch proposed a toast to his distinguished guests. Naturally required to respond, Mr. Wilson said: “it has been a matter of pride with us that so many Italians, (...) were in our own armies and associated with their brethren in Italy itself in the great enterprise of freedom. (...) The Italians in the United States have excited a particular degree of admiration. They, I believe, are the only people of a given nationality who have been careful to organize themselves to see that their compatriots coming to America were from month to month and year to year guided to places in industries most suitable to their previous habits. No other nationality has taken such pains as that, and in serving their fellow countrymen they have served the United States because these people have found places where they would be most useful, and would most immediately earn their own living and add to the prosperity of the country itself.”



On his way back to France the President visited Milan and made it a point return to Genoa and Turin. Despite a grisly thunderstorm, Wilson wanted to spend three hours in Genoa to pay tribute to two well-known heroes: Giuseppe Mazzini and Christopher Columbus. Wilson was a life-long admirer of Mazzini's life and ideas, and as he stood before his tomb, declared he was delighted to be able to take "some part in accomplishing the realization of the ideals to which [Mazzini's] life and thought were devoted". The President then proceeded to visit Columbus' house, where he recognized the everlasting link between the city of Genoa, Italy and the United States.

President Wilson's tour of Italy was a message of hope and a tribute to all Italians in Italy and in the United States. The first real American "war President" left the Bel Paese with shouts of "viva Wilson, god of peace!"

If one were to, again, rate the Presidential visit in terms of how warmly he was welcomed by the Italian people, the Italian political elite and the Vatican, it really seems that Woodrow Wilson got 3 out of 3—even if relations with the Pope were a little cold. The real "god of peace" in 1919 was President Wilson and not the Holy Father, as Benedict XV, who had made a peace proposal a few months earlier, had hoped would be the case.

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