

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with President Francesco Cossiga of Italy (Ø)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
James A. Baker III, Secretary of State
Samuel K. Skinner, Chief of State
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
-Thomas Niles, Assistant Secretary of State, European and Canadian Affairs
Peter Secchia, Ambassador to Italy
Tony Wayne, Director for Western Europe Affairs, NSC Staff, Notetaker
Interpreter

Francesco Cossiga, President
Sergio Berlinguer, Secretary General to the President of the Republic
Bruno Bottai, Secretary General Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Boris Biancheri, Ambassador of Italy in Washington
Interpreter

DATE, TIME April 7 4:00 p.m.
AND PLACE: Oval Office

President Cossiga: I'm delighted to see you and in such splendid form. Of course, you know I see you almost daily on CNN. (U)

The President: Let me comment on that. You know about 70% of the media coverage we've been getting in recent months has been negative. But I think that is changing. A lot of the criticism relates to the economy and to the fact that five democrats and one right wing republican have been knocking my head off daily. (Ø)

President Cossiga: I think they are scared of you. (Ø)

The President: Maybe, but it's changing. The economy is showing signs of life, and as it improves so does the mood of the American people. There was a new rating issued the other day on the confidence of the American public which showed a marked improvement. (Ø)

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President Cossiga: You have many people in Europe who would vote for you. Maybe it would be best for your right wing candidate in the U.S. not to know the answer of the Italians who were asked who they would vote for. The Italian Left said they would vote for you. I will also tell you about a former Communist philosopher. He said that it's possible that if he lived in America that he would be a democrat but since he is a European he prefers voting for Bush as you provide for greater security in European affairs. (Ø)

The President: I hope you are saying that our administration wants to stay involved, in trade in NATO. We will stay involved, and we will not be pulled into protectionism. What do you make of the Italian election results? (Ø)

President Cossiga: Well, they have created a complex situation. But it is far less dramatic than it could appear. I largely foresaw the results. The changes come from the major shifts in Europe with the end of the bloc-to-bloc confrontation. As you know, we have the second largest communist party in Europe, the third largest in the world and the largest in the free world. Now this point of reference has disappeared. Therefore we are seeing a sort of thawing in political society. So what were the dominant parties in the old order, the Christian Democrats and the PDS (Democratic Party of the Left) are the ones who suffered the biggest losses in this weekend's vote. (Ø)

The President: But what is happening to the former communist party and to the lady who was the speaker of parliament? (Ø)

President Cossiga: The Italian communist party was the first communist party to evolve. It accepted NATO, and it fought with us against terrorism. The great majority of the communist party members were not marxist-leninists. It was a populist party by enlarge. I did what I could so that when the communist system collapsed the Italian communist party would evolve along social democratic lines. However, the present leadership of the communist party is not up to the task. I use a biblical reference to explain this. The communist people had to be led out of Egypt to the promised land through the Red Sea and the desert. But they've gotten bogged down somewhere between the Sea and the desert. As for your question about the former communist speaker of parliament, she wasn't re-elected. (Ø)

The President: Was this because of the party split? (Ø)

President Cossiga: Not only that but also because of some stands which she had taken. (Ø)

The President: How long will it be before the new government is established? (Ø)

President Cossiga: There is no statutory deadline. I am determined to start consultations immediately. There are two reasons for this. First, the country needs a government to deal with the economy and public finances, for meeting our European

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deadlines, and for facing our responsibilities in the Yugoslav region and the Mediterranean region. Second, on July 3 my successor will be elected and matters will be far more complicated if we haven't come up with formula for the government by then. You know the presidency will be more important. (S)

During my tenure I shifted some of the powers to the presidency. This was needed to balance the political situation. Now the fragmentation of political parties calls for a more powerful president. (S)

But I want to assure you that this will have no influence on Italy's foreign policy. For example, the most successful party in gaining votes in this election is the Lombardy league. It will support the traditional line of Italian foreign policy. (S)

I want you to know that just yesterday I gave our consent for a combined U.S.-Italian exercise against terrorism in the Mediterranean area and to asking NATO confidentially about the possibility of redeploying patriot missiles in southern Italy to deal with possible crisis in the Mediterranean related to Libya. Since the government is in crisis, they asked for my consent which I have given. Also I want you to know that relations between our two countries won't be effected by internal Italian matters. The men who may become prime minister or president are well known. (S)

The President: Well, whoever wins here, U.S.-Italian relations will remain strong. The only troubling point is that the democrats may want to do less in NATO. I don't want to prejudice you against them. But I'm just not sure because they want such cuts in defense spending. This is the only area where the election might effect the status quo. The democrats are proposing such substantial defense cuts that the only way they could carry them out would be precipitous cuts in troop levels, which I don't think is wise. (S)

President Cossiga: Yes, reductions beyond certain levels would have serious political connotations, especially for the Mediterranean region. We have already seen an example with the Congressionally-imposed cuts regarding the Crotona base. I am fully aware of the new efforts to deploy the 401st to other Italian bases. In my opinion U.S. forces within NATO in the Mediterranean, which is becoming the most sensitive area, are still very necessary. (S)

The President: I think it would be okay. We certainly haven't changed our view of the importance of staying involved. By the way, I wonder if you are looking forward to leaving the presidency? (S)

President Cossiga: The next two and half to three months will be very tough. But they are lightened by the fact that whatever happens on midnight July 3 I leave. I'm already creating some new jobs for myself. Tomorrow, we sign an agreement at Columbia University establishing a chair in Italian law. (S)

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The President: They will be very lucky to have you in that chair. (U)

President Cossiga: I am very lucky, my daughter and son-in-law used to live in New York City. Now they are in London, but I had a house which I had originally financed for them. I also have a son in France who is an aeronautic engineer, and I financed a home for him there. So, with my wife, I can become an itinerant visitor. (U)

The President: And perhaps an itinerant grandfather? (U)

President Cossiga: No, not yet. But you know, I did ask Ambassador Secchia to get me invited to the Houston convention. (U)

The President: He can arrange that. It's a deal. (U)

President Cossiga: Well, I have no answer yet. (U)

The President: He is such an operator. I'm sure he can even make you a delegate. (U)

President Cossiga: You know I can't become a count or a lord like Margaret Thatcher, but I will be a Senator for life. (U)

The President: That's very good. It was very good to see you again. (U)