



## US Elections: "But Why Not an Obama Here in Italy?"

Judith Harris (November 06, 2008)



"Handsome, youthful and also suntanned"? When a compliment becomes a gaffe...

ROME - Italians cringed this evening as news reports arrived from Moscow, where Premier Silvio Berlusconi said in a press conference today that the U.S. President-elect Barack Obama is "handsome, youthful and also suntanned." When reporters gasped, he reportedly said, "But it's totally nice [una carineria assoluta], a big compliment."



Already Berlusconi had volunteered, presumably half in jest, that as an older man, he was ready and willing to give helpful hints to Obama.

The compliments are more comprehensible in consideration of the fire storm unleashed by Senator Maurizio Gasparri of Berlusconi's own Partito della Liberta' after Gasparri told a reporter

on Rai's GR 3 radio at 8:45 yesterday morning, "many questions weigh upon" Obama's position on the efforts to combat international terrorism, "the real testing ground for Obama." The implication was that Obama was somehow soft on terrorism, and a swift reaction came from Anna Finocchiaro, leader in the Senate of the Partito Democratico (PD) group. "People do grasp that these are words that risk undermining relations between Italy and its foremost ally, and that the government, with such affirmations, puts itself into a very serious situation."

Invited to back down, Gasparri said that he was simply referring press reports. Interior Minister Roberto Maroni of the Northern League contradicted Gasparri flatly, saying that both Senators McCain and Obama had, in their campaigns, guaranteed "total continuity in the struggle against international terrorism."

Center-right majority figures have also accused the left of exploiting the Obama victory for their own political purposes.

Speaking for that left was PD leader Walter Veltroni, who called the Obama victory "a choice of hope

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over fear." He added that, "The Bush values will be replaced in the world by new values of solidarity, multilateralism, equal opportunities, the environment—all things that we haven't heard about in years," and which will leave their mark on European politics. To an excited crowd celebrating at dawn in Piazza del Pantheon, he said that an era of American history is ended—the Bush presidency, "eight difficult years. I think of this in exactly the opposite way from the President of the Council of Ministers, who has said that the Bush administration has been the best in recent years."

Elsewhere, the discussion down at Remo's bar in our piazza came with an edge. Usually at Remo's no one talks of anything but il football, but the crowd yesterday and today buzzed with excited, even thrilled election talk. Only Remo himself, a notorious conservative, was terse, keeping to himself and saying, "I'm not saying anything." The most eloquent shouted: "Welcome back, American dream!" "Why can't we have an Obama here in Italy?" asked another of the denizens. "It could only happen in America, think of it!" said our local PD group. "This is exciting! The U.S. has a young person in charge, and we've got these old fogies we can't get rid of."

Results were clear by 4 am in Italy, and Obama's election seemed certain by 6 am. Democrats Abroad had registered some 5,000 voters in Italy, and through dawn of that morning hundreds of its members had remained jammed into Rome's Stazione Termini, at a lively spot called Roadhouse Grill run by a Pakistan-Brit everyone calls "Mo," short for Mohammed. Five big TV screens and a pancake breakfast with sausages and orange juice gave food for thought and survival. One Obama backer showed up with his dog, so that every time the crowd burst into applause ("We're taking Ohio! Yeaahhh!"), the dog barked.

Two photographs in the dailies deserve mention. The best was the election day cover in L'Unità, showing a lonely President George W. Bush walking down an empty corridor. The headline: "One thing is clear: Bush is out."

Worst: a nastily manipulated drawing of Obama's face covering the front page of the daily Libero, with an accompanying sly editorial under the headline, "Strano ma nero," strange but black. This



was intended as a play on words for Strano ma vero (strange but true).

We're not laughing.

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