

G. Frederick Reinhardt Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 11/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

G. Frederick Reinhardt (1911-1971) was the Ambassador to Italy from 1961 to 1968. This interview focuses on the political climate in Italy, the Kennedy administration's foreign policy in regard to Italy, and John F. Kennedy's popularity among Italian citizens, among other topics.

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By G. FREDERICK REINHARDT

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Oral History Interview

with

G. FREDERICK REINHARDT

November, 1966
Rome, Italy

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: Mr. Ambassador, I wish you'd say something, perhaps, about your earliest impressions of John Kennedy?

REINHARDT: I knew John Kennedy slightly for a number of years before he was elected President, those years he was in Washington as a representative and later as a senator. I really only had a greeting acquaintance with him. And I must confess, that I was surprised to find, after his election to the presidency, that he was a much deeper and more earnest person than he had appeared to be previously. My early impressions of him were of a highly intelligent, agreeable person. But I was most happily surprised to find that he was much more of a person, of much greater complexity and character than I had realized in my earlier association with him.

O'CONNOR: He has been criticized by a number of people as being kind of a playboy when he was young, and not a man of wisdom, though very intelligent, and that's why I was interested in hearing your remarks about that, to see whether or not you felt that was so or not.

REINHARDT: Well, I would confirm the impression. It was certainly my impression. On the other hand, I would hasten to add that I think the evidence during the

thousand days proved quite the contrary.

O'CONNOR: Yes, yes indeed. It's very true. Okay, you mentioned that you were much, much impressed with him later on in your personal dealings with him as Ambassador, specifically in the way he dealt with foreign--well, ambassadors or foreign personnel, something of that sort. I wonder if you'd mention that.

REINHARDT: Yes, that's true. Of course, again, I must preface my remarks by saying that my contacts with him were few and limited. I think I saw him three times during his Presidency. On the first occasion, the routine call that an ambassador makes going out to a new post, I'm embarrassed to confess that I don't recall that visit very well. I think possibly the reason may have been that instead of talking about my new post to which he had appointed me, namely Italy, we probably were discussing the one I had just left, Egypt. Subsequently, some months later, I was again in Washington with some Italian statesman. I believe it was . . .

O'CONNOR: Was this the [Amintore] Fanfani visit?

REINHARDT: When Fanfani came as Prime Minister and with him was [Antonio] Segni, then Foreign Minister. I participated in their conversation with the President and in the several gatherings that were held.

The most interesting conversation I had with him though was some months after that when I was back in Washington on consultation, and had a chance to spend almost an hour with him in his private quarters in the White House because the appointment was late in the day, where we had a chance to discuss Italy, our country's relationships to Italy. And I found him extraordinarily well informed and very understanding. In fact, when I left that meeting I had a sense of knowing what the President wanted from me, much greater than I'd ever had from any meeting with any previous president. That is, of course, something highly satisfactory for a diplomat, who after all, at best, is an agent of his country and of the people who are governing his country.

O'CONNOR: Well, you say you had a better idea of what he wanted from you. Can you elaborate a little bit on that? Can you remember specifically what impression you had coming out of that meeting, or specifically what he intended . . .

REINHARDT: Well, there was one--I might just give one example. This was a period when the Italian political scene seemed to be moving toward a possible center-left coalition. This was not a new idea in Italian politics. As a matter of fact, it had been mentioned as a possible and hopeful development as far back by De Gasperi himself, though in those days there seemed a little prospect for it. The prospect, of course, only became real when the Socialist Party, following the Hungarian episode, began to pull away from the Communist Party. By 1961, or '62, the prospect had become real that it might be possible for the Christian Democrats to work out a coalition arrangement with the Socialists, and thus bring into being the first center-left government in modern Italian history. It was my understanding of American policy--and by American policy I mean the policy of, naturally, both the President and the State Department--that the United States viewed such a development with sympathy, providing, of course, that it could take place without impairing Italy's attitude toward institutions which were a keystone of our own policy, such as the Atlantic Alliance and the European community, and its several parts. There were however people around the President who were pursuing, or endeavoring to pursue a policy which was more aggressive. It was their view, apparently, that the United States ought to be pushing and working actively and openly for such a political development in Italy. I certainly didn't share this. I thought it would have been a grave political error for the United States to become too deeply involved in this movement; that it was useful for the United States, and useful for Italy for it to be understood that the United States was not offering any objections or creating any obstacles to this development. But I thought it would be certainly counter-productive in the long run and damaging to our own interests if we became too intimately associated, or, in fact, really vigorously pushed for the development. It was anybody's guess as to whether a coalition of this character could hold together, and if the United States had become committed, in

one way, and the subsequent developments had pulled this thing apart, it's quite apparent to anybody that the U.S. would have lost considerably. Furthermore, there was another element in this development, which to my mind indicated that we should maintain a position of, shall we say, friendly neutrality toward the development. And that was this: that a coalition of this kind could only be put together as a result of very intense bargaining on the part of the two parties. If we had actually pushed one way or the other we would have assumed a direct responsibility, (a.) for the success or failure of the establishment of such a coalition, and (b.) for the nature of the policies that would subsequently follow. It was my contention that the correct position for the United States was to make clear to the Socialists that we had no sympathy with their traditional attitudes toward foreign affairs, and at the same time, to let the Demo-Christians understand that--particularly the more conservative elements of that Party, which does cover a rather wide spectrum--that the United States was not interested in assisting or supporting some of the more conservative elements of the Party of the Establishment, one might say, in retaining certain positions of privilege which they had developed over the twenty years since the end of the war. In other words, it was my considered opinion that the United States should be an interested, sympathetic observer, and emanate, or demonstrate an attitude which corresponded, not only to our foreign policy interests, but to the very nature of the United States itself. Now, the point of this rather long discourse is simply to say that whereas there were a number of people associated with the President at that time who, in my view, were acting improperly, in as much as they were corresponding with personalities in Italy on White House stationery, suggesting all sorts of things and creating the impression that the United States was operating actively in this field, the Embassy itself, and as far as I know, any of the traditional agencies of the U.S. government were not. I felt it necessary to bring this matter to the attention of the President, and although the people involved in this other activity were, some of them, very close to him, he quickly got the point and reassured me that my interpretation of his attitude and the Government's policy was a correct one, and that I was not to be misled or pushed one way or the other by these people, who, I've forgotten to say, were also working on me as well as they were working on Italians. This

little example is, I think, the kind of thing that is very reassuring to a diplomat, particularly in a government as large as ours where the complexities are great, and a clear statement of policy is often arrived at only with a good deal of difficulty.

O'CONNOR: I wanted to ask you also, this somewhat sympathetic attitude of the United States, does this represent a major change in American policy, specifically with the emergence of the Kennedy Administration? In other words I was told by several people that this represented a more enlightened policy toward Italian domestic politics from that of 1959 and '60, from that of the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower Administration. Would you agree with that or not?

REINHARDT: Yes, though I don't think one should overstate that point. In other words, the Embassy in Rome, prior to the Kennedy Administration, was not reflecting, shall we say, this sympathetic attitude toward a possible development of this kind. On the other hand, it was certainly doing nothing to obstruct it. The Embassy maintained the contact with the important personalities of the Socialist Party, particularly those that were interested in moving the Socialist Party away from its long term alliance with the Communists. And I think it would be incorrect to go as far as to say that the American Embassy, or that American policy was discouraging such a development. I think we're dealing here, really, in nuances. Now I know that there are certain individuals who will describe this in black and white terms, but I think that would not be an accurate presentation of it. Of course, though, even a nuance, in political matters of this kind, can be pretty important because the parties at interest, can, and do usually, exploit such a, shall we say, slight or limited shift of attitude and try to make out of it what they can in their own interest.

O'CONNOR: The name Arthur Schlesinger has been connected with this Italian policy specifically. Is he one of the men you had in mind, or are there others that you would care to name?

REINHARDT: Well, no, I would name him primarily, because he was the best known name, and he is also the person who, I believe in his writings, has really over-

stated this development. But he certainly was one of those who was--and according to my understanding, he had no mandate to do this; it was not his field of responsibility. Nevertheless, he was very active in Italy in spreading the impression that the United States was pushing vigorously for this political development. And so, and quite correctly I think, reflects this in his description of that period in his writings. However, what he fails to point out is that this did not really correspond to the official policy of the United States Government, nor does he at any time give any evidence that he had a mandate from the President to be so active in this sector.

O'CONNOR: He's also mentioned, Arthur Schlesinger in his writing, in his book on John Kennedy, has also mentioned the name Robert Komer and, in fact, Robert Kennedy. And I wondered if this, you know, if you had had any contact under the board from these people?

REINHARDT: No, their impact was not felt here in Italy as far as I'm aware. Schlesinger, of course, is a well-known historian, and his correspondence with people there was the sort of thing that I was confronted with.

O'CONNOR: You said that pressure had been put, indirect perhaps, on you as well as on the State Department at home and the President himself, to be more sympathetic toward a center-left coalition development.

REINHARDT: Well, I don't think the term sympathy is quite-- permit me to interrupt you there--that's really the point. Sympathy is one thing, but an active campaign is something else. And it was the latter that these people were working for.

O'CONNOR: Well, can you tell me specifically something about how pressure was applied in Italy to you, or towards other people?

REINHARDT: Well, in two ways. One, in a sense, by spreading this impression abroad, which as I say, in my view, was not a correct reflection of U.S. policy. And

secondly, it was apparent in the machinery of government at home, perhaps pressure less directly on me than on the State Department, and that section of the Department to which I report. But it was quite apparent that there was a cabal, so to speak, trying to move American policy in this field into a more aggressive and active stance.

O'CONNOR: Well, one other question before we leave this particular subject. Schlesinger also mentions in his book that the advent of Averell Harriman to the post of Under Secretary for Political Affairs instituted a major change in State Department policy, or at least helped to make American policy more sympathetic, or helped to institute a kind of campaign. Would you agree with that at all then?

REINHARDT: I was not aware of that from this side. It may be that it had a definite impact within the Department itself and in Washington. But I just did not have that impression, that it made any particular change. I must say that, you see, when I came here a few months after the Kennedy Administration started, and I was not aware of any, so to speak, restraint on the part of the State Department over me, or over our attitude toward this possible political development. I think that I was able, without any difficulty, to be pretty well synchronized with the Department, and I found them quite flexible. They were interested in this thing. I think that they would have been interested in it just as much under the previous administration. But we're really making a distinction here between whether the United States was going to get out, in front and say, "What Italy needs is the center-left, and we're here to support it and do everything we can," or whether the United States was to make it clear that it was not, in any way, impeding, or putting any obstacles in the front of such a development, but wished it to be truly natural and, what shall I say, autochthonous development of the Italian body politic, and not something artificial created from the outside.

O'CONNOR: Alright. Another problem that involved Italy during the . . .

REINHARDT: Of course, it was very hard to keep one's sense of proportion in these things, because it may well have been that even if the United States had taken a more aggressive stance it wouldn't have changed the outcome very much, because there are always limits to what an outside influence an outside view or effort can have in the development of any specific political scene.

O'CONNOR: Okay, another problem that involved Italy during the Kennedy Administration was the question of Jupiter missiles in Italy. Were you involved in this at all, in the removal of these missiles?

REINHARDT: Well, I was involved in the removal, but not in their placement. They had been set up here . . .

O'CONNOR: Oh, yes I know. They had been set up before.

REINHARDT: . . . previously.

O'CONNOR: Yes. Well, it had been said that President Kennedy had wished those missiles to be removed earlier in the Administration than they actually were, 1961, early '62, before the Cuban missile crisis.

REINHARDT: I'm not aware of that, I don't know anything about that.

O'CONNOR: Well, I had wondered whether you were aware of it or not. Well, did that present any major problems for you in dealing with the . . .

REINHARDT: Well, it did. It presented a problem which I think we survived alright, but from the Italian point of view--when I say that I'm really thinking though of those sectors of the Italian society that were involved in this business, primarily, of course, the armed forces, and secondarily, the government. They did not like the withdrawal of the missiles, --granted the fact that they were experimental weapons and did not represent really a developed arm. They had never gone beyond the experimental stage really, and it caused a great deal of

difficulty in their maintenance. So there were a lot of reasons for taking them out apart from purely strategic ones, if you will. Nevertheless, they did constitute, I mean for Italy, an involvement in a very modern form of weaponry. The Italians set up a whole special brigade of airmen who were trained to handle these missiles and installations, at certain expense, no doubt, and effort. And to have this thing suddenly removed was, from their point of view, a step backwards. Now, I'm sure that many of the thoughtful people understood the reasons for this, and, if you will, the logic of it. But it had a negative effect, at the time, without any question. And to say that the assignment of these missiles was going to be taken up by two or three submarines that nobody ever saw, which were going to be quietly moving around below the surface of the Mediterranean, was hardly a satisfactory recompense, particularly since the Italians themselves did not participate in this other activity.

O'CONNOR: Was it ever suggested to you by any Italian leaders that this was a political deal between the United States and the Soviet Union, that this was a quid pro quo for the Cuban missile crisis victory?

REINHARDT: It was never suggested to me by any of the political leaders, but it was an idea that was very current at the time. Not only here, but in other countries as well.

O'CONNOR: Surely. I wondered if this, whether or not you could tell that this undermined the confidence of political leaders in John Kennedy, or in American will to resist?

REINHARDT: I don't think it did. I think that the success of the Cuban confrontation was so much more important that this did not have that effect. And I'm not at all sure that the removal of the missiles had an effect on Italy as a whole. It affected the people who were involved. Of course, there was another thing about those missiles. In a sense, there were people who understood that they were, at best, a difficult form of defense. They sat glistening on the Plain of Apulia for everyone to see, and it was quite apparent that their destruction by a sudden hostile air strike might not have been too difficult a thing to achieve. The defense of Italy, of course, are up to

the North, along the Alps, and along the Yugoslav frontier, and there wasn't very much down there to defend these missiles.

O'CONNOR: Okay, this really leads into the question of the feeling on the part of the Italian leaders, your understanding of their feeling, toward John Kennedy. Some of them met John Kennedy. I wondered what their impressions were, whether they were confident in his ability as the leader of the West.

REINHARDT: Certainly, my impression is that they were. He was greatly admired. I saw no evidence to the contrary. And I think that this leads me to say, what, perhaps, is the most important thing I can say on this subject. And that is that, Kennedy, for reasons which probably never will be fully analyzed or understood, had the capability of, to use the fashionable term, communicating better than--with Europe--better than most of our leaders seemed to have, or have had. It was extraordinary how his statements had so much more impact on the European audience than those of other Americans. There must have been something in the way he expressed himself, something in his manner, too, that made them feel that he was much nearer to them than the average American. I've asked a number of Italians, people of official and responsible position, if they had any explanation they could give me of his extraordinary popularity here in Italy and elsewhere abroad. The answer is always the same. They aren't able to define it, but they do say, "Well, we understood what he was trying to say better than we have any others." And they all refer to this element I've mentioned, of his unusual capability for communicating his thoughts, and also thoughts that were sympathetic and well received by the audience.

O'CONNOR: An interesting comment that you made about his popularity in Italy brings me to another subject, we can cover it very briefly, and that might be it.

REINHARDT: Can I say one word about his popularity?

O'CONNOR: Sure.

REINHARDT: There's a story, which, I don't know if it ever got

currency or not, I shouldn't call it a story, it was a fact: a friend of mine overheard two young women in Amalfi coming out of a Church, two Italian women of simple, apparently very simple background, coming out of a church. I believe it was a memorial service for Kennedy, and it is the comment which he overheard, and which he reported to me, which is so striking, and indicates the attitude that so many people abroad had of our President. He heard one girl say to the other, "What an awful year this has been. We lost our Pope, and now we've lost our President."

O'CONNOR: That's incredible. That goes against, in effect, what I was going to say to you. John Kennedy when he visited Italy, drew a great crowd in Naples. He drew the smallest crowd of his tour, a very, very scant crowd here in Rome. I know you weren't here in Rome at that time, but I wondered if you had heard . . .

REINHARDT: No, but I know the answer to that. It's very easy.

O'CONNOR: The fact that the crowning of the Pope . . .

REINHARDT: No, no. Rome; nobody draws a crowd in Rome. That is a rule, or a fact of life. It can be explained, I suppose, in many ways. This is an old imperial city, it's seen a good many of the great come and go for a period of two thousand years or more. In fact, the story's told that some years ago, when [Charles] DeGaulle made an official visit to Italy--I can't remember the date, but obviously it was after his return to power--he was so insulted by the lack of a crowd, the public reception in Rome, that he was on the verge of cutting off his visit and returning to Paris, but was dissuaded from doing so by his entourage and the French Ambassador here. But that is not--there is nothing unique in that. That's a standard experience.

O'CONNOR: Alright. That just about covers my list of questions, unless you have any other thing, any other comment to make about the President or American policy in Italy and Europe during his Administration. We can end this.

REINHARDT: I don't think so. The points I've made are the ones that stand out most sharply in my mind, in my brief and superficial, but as I've certainly indicated in what I had to say, very satisfactory relationship with President Kennedy.

Reference copy 1

For those people who are interested in seeing a discussion by Arthur Schlesinger of some of the points made by G. Frederick Reinhardt in this interview, Mr. Schlesinger has asked that a paragraph from a letter of his to Mr. John F. Campbell, editor of Foreign Policy, dated February 16, 1971, be made available to researchers. This portion of the letter is available on request.

[NLC: Schlesinger Correspondence File: General Correspondence, 4/68 -]
Statement follows

As for the contention over Italian policy (44-7), your interpretation of this as a conflict between White House activism and State Department prudence seems to me quite wrong. It surely can be far more plausibly seen as a conflict between White House prudence and State Department activism. After all, American policy, as devised and executed by the State Department and the Foreign Service, had been for years one of active intervention in Italian internal affairs in order to oppose the apertura. Your account entirely and oddly leaves out, for example, the role of that emblem of the Foreign Service, Outerbridge Horsey. Horsey had been interfering in Italian politics for a long time (and punishing younger FSOs who dared doubt his theory of the ineradicable wickedness of Pietro Nenni). Moreover, Horsey had a disciple on the Italian desk in Washington -- his name, as I recall, was Knight -- who was doing his best to continue this policy of intervention in the Kennedy years. Komer and I (with the full support of Kennedy, whatever Reinhardt may claim, and as Bundy, I believe, would confirm) were only trying to induce the State Department and the Foreign Service to cease and desist in their policy of intervention in Italian affairs. We felt, contrary to the State Department, that the question of the apertura was a decision the Italians should be free to make for themselves; and we felt it important that the Italians understand this since the United States Foreign Service had been informing them to the contrary for years. I didn't want the Rome Embassy to "do something." I wanted it to stop trying to tell the Italians how they could and should solve their own problems. Which policy was prudence and which activism?