

BIDEN-TRUMP CONFRONTATION

US ambassadors to Italy, a clear change of course

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Ambassadors are the foremost representatives of their country who are accredited to and stationed in another country. In the United States the incoming administration of Donald Trump lost no time in selecting its ambassadors, especially to major countries. In December, President Trump chose a prominent Italian American billionaire businessman from Texas to be the next ambassador to Italy. He is Tilman J. Fertitta,

born in Galveston, Texas in 1957. He is the son of a Sicilian immigrant father who owned a fish restaurant where Tilman helped his father to clean fish when he was a young student.

Fertitta attended Texas Tech and the University of Houston but never graduated. He gravitated towards the business world starting in the familiar restaurant business. He greatly expanded his business interests successfully into real estate including hotels, casinos and a restaurant chain called Landry's of which he is chairman. He even had a stint as a TV personality. His interests extended into sports; Fertitta is the owner of the Houston Rockets basketball team that he purchased for \$2.2 billion in 2017.

Fertitta has been so successful that he is included in the *Forbes* magazine list of billionaires with an estimated fortune of \$8.4 billion as of June 2023. He is also known for his philanthropy donating to charities and non-profits dealing with children, medical facilities and law enforcement among others. He also is a donor to the Republican party and Republican candidates, contributing to local political candidates and to the Trump presidential campaign. Given his prominence, in 2021 Fertitta was nominated by Texas Governor Greg Abbott to be Chairman of the Board of Regents of the University of Houston.

In the United States, all ambassadorial nominees require Senate approval after vetting but this is usually proforma so Fertitta should find his way to Rome early this year.

The rapid appointment of Fertitta as ambassador to Italy is in sharp contrast to the Biden administration's behavior four years ago. Biden left that ambassadorial post open for nearly three years! There were two *charges d'affaires* in the Rome embassy between January 2021 and September 2023 – a total of 31 months – before Jack Markell, a former Governor of Delaware, Biden's home state, arrived as ambassador. Such a gap is unheard of in American diplomatic history.

In addition to the untoward delay regarding the ambassadorial appointment, Biden's overall attitude towards Italy during his presidency leaves much to be desired. When Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni made an official visit to Washington in July 2023, Biden received her in the White House but afterwards did not hold a joint news conference with her as he did with other European leaders even though Meloni is completely fluent in English.

This past year was Italy's turn to host the G-7 annual meetings that included a

summit held in June at an upscale resort near Bari. At the most important meeting on the last day of the three-day summit, Biden kept Meloni, the host, waiting for nearly an hour before his arrival, the last leader to do so. This prompted Meloni, diplomatically but pointedly, to say: "Don't you know that you should not keep a lady waiting?" That same day Biden snubbed President Sergio Mattarella's gala dinner, leaving early to go home to resume his ill-fated campaign for re-election.

Despite such inexplicable behavior towards Italy, Biden and his wife, Jill Tracy Jacobs (who claimed to be the first Italian American first lady given that she had paternal ancestors from Sicily who changed their surname from Giacobbo to Jacobs), will take their final trip abroad to Italy just days before Biden's term expires on January 20th.

According to a White House press statement of December 19:

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. will travel to Rome, Italy from January 9 to 12 to meet separately with His Holiness Pope Francis, President of Italy Sergio Mattarella, and Prime Minister of Italy Giorgia Meloni. On January 10, President Biden will have an audience with the Pope and discuss efforts to advance peace around the world. He will also meet with Italy's leaders to highlight the strength of the U.S.-Italy relationship, thank Prime Minister Meloni for her strong leadership of the G7 over the past year, and discuss important challenges facing the world."

Under the Biden administration the "strength of the US-Italy relationship" obviously was strained. What Biden should do on his last trip to Italy is apologize to Meloni and Mattarella for four years of disdain towards Italy. The superior diplomatic skills and benevolence of Prime Minister Meloni towards the senescent Biden and his actions will be part of history.