

The History of US and British Support to Mussolini's Fascism

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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A figure like Benito Mussolini could only have taken power in a nation plagued by severe illness. Italy, a resource poor state, had been virtually bankrupted by expenditure in World War One, with the Liberal-led Italian governments dispensing with more money on the conflict than during the previous half a century combined.

Italy suffered more than 1.5 million casualties in the war. Those Italian soldiers who returned home found a country where divisions ran deep, unemployment was high, opportunities were few, and inflation was soaring. It was a breeding ground for extremists to emerge, as would occur further north in Germany, one of the most harmful side effects of the war.

Despite being on the “winning side”, much of the Italian public felt their nation was then robbed at Versailles, in June 1919, by America, Britain and France – who shared almost all of the spoils of war among themselves with the Treaty of Versailles ratified.

As the war was concluding, Mussolini had looked coldly at the fractured society that lay before his eyes in Italy. He surmised that a determined, ruthless man like himself could forge a pathway to power. Mussolini was a cynical opportunist and shrewd operator who possessed notable journalistic skills. The future Duce (“leader”) also had a psychopathic streak, as revealed by his bulging, coal black eyes and sometimes timid disposition. A good psychiatric nurse would have recognised the warning signals by observing him.

Unlike with Hitler, Mussolini had no real loyalty to a particular ideology. It was inevitable that he would abandon his pre-1914 Marxist tendencies, and shift far off to the right. Mussolini was concerned more than anything with himself, and wanted power for its own sake. He intended to do so by the illegal route, a coup d’état. By the late summer of 1922, his Blackshirts had eradicated all active resistance on the streets through militant means.

With the left in Italy beaten by force, Mussolini’s three other adversaries could not be dealt with in such a manner: the Roman Catholic Church, the Monarchy and the liberals. Mussolini won over the Church and the Monarchy by renouncing his anti-Catholicism and anti-Monarchism, while offering them concessions, allowing those power-hungry and vain institutions to retain some influence in Italy.

The historian and anthropologist David Kertzer, who has analysed relations between Italian fascism and Roman Catholicism, said that “The key ingredient to Mussolini really becoming a dictator was the Church” and without its collaboration his autocracy “wouldn’t have happened. Or it could have been stopped”. To hide the truth, various myths have since been pushed by Roman Catholic apologists, claiming that religious leaders were against fascism from the outset. In actual fact the opposite was the case as, “The Church was incorporated

into the state under Mussolini”, Kertzer continued, while the Duce and Pope Pius XI “came to depend on one another, in a sense”. (1)

With the Church and Monarchy on board, Mussolini had the appearance of respectability with those who counted, leaving the liberals checkmated. He provided the final blow through his March on Rome during 28 October 1922. Once Mussolini entered office, he would enjoy increasing support from the leading Western powers.

Mussolini’s coup was described by the onlooking US ambassador to Italy, Richard Washburn Child, as “a fine young revolution here. No danger, plenty of enthusiasm and colour. We all enjoy it” (2). The New York Times, reflecting standard US media coverage, commented that the Blackshirts had achieved a “revolution of the peculiar and relatively harmless Italian type”, which, over the past three and a half years, had resulted in widespread violence and several thousand deaths.

The fascists’ arrival ended Washington’s fears of another Bolshevik-style takeover, such as had occurred in Russia five years before in October 1917. A top level inquiry, conducted by US president Woodrow Wilson’s administration in December 1917, warned of Italy that it poses “the obvious danger of social revolution and disorganisation”, as labour power intensified. A US State Department official observed privately, “If we are not careful we will have a second Russia on our hands”, adding that “The Italians are like children” and should be “assisted more than almost any other nation”.

Mussolini’s street brawlers quickly solved the problem. The US Embassy in Rome reported that the fascists are “perhaps the most potent factor in the suppression of Bolshevism in Italy”, expressing mild concern regarding the “enthusiastic and violent young men” comprising the Blackshirts. The US Embassy elaborated further on the appeal of fascism to “all patriotic Italians”, simple people who “hunger for strong leadership”. (3)

US corporations flocked to invest in Mussolini’s Italy. The American historian and analyst Noam Chomsky wrote,

“As fascist darkness settled over Italy, financial support from the US government and business climbed rapidly. Italy was offered by far the best postwar debt settlement of any country, and US investment there grew far faster than in any other country, as the fascist regime established itself, eliminating labor unrest and other democratic disorders”. (4)

The irresistible attraction of big business towards fascist rule, like moths to a flame, tells its own story. With Mussolini one year in power, the US Embassy eulogised in late 1923, “The results have been excellent, and during the last 12 months there has not been a single strike in the whole of Italy” (5). The Embassy believed that Mussolini was becoming a success because of his destruction of labour power, and therefore the erosion of a key democratic process.

The new US Ambassador to Italy from 1924, Henry Fletcher, outlined a central factor of American foreign policy which resurfaced for decades to come. Ambassador Fletcher informed the US Secretary of State, Frank Kellogg, that the choice in Italy is “between Mussolini and fascism and Giolitti and socialism”; Giovanni Giolitti being Italy’s former left-leaning prime minister. Ambassador Fletcher, and Secretary of State Kellogg, preferred the dictatorial Mussolini over the liberal-minded Giolitti.

Fletcher thought that the Italian population desired “peace and prosperity” under Mussolini in comparison to “free speech, loose administration” and “the danger and disorganisation of Bolshevism”. Kellogg, who served as US Secretary of State from 1925 to 1929, agreed with Fletcher, designating all opposition groups to Mussolini as consisting of “communists, socialists and anarchists” who must be prevented from attaining power (6). The real fear of elites, such as Fletcher and Kellogg, was the threat “to the very survival of the capitalist order” that Bolshevism supposedly presented.

With the Great Depression biting deep across Europe from early 1930, Mussolini’s regime received even greater praise from establishment circles. American diplomat Alexander Kirk wrote in 1932, “On all sides it is agreed that the future welfare of Italy is safe as it could humanly possibly be in the hands of Mussolini, but if anything should happen to him, what then? (7)”. Perish the thought.

In 1933 the New York Times Magazine noted approvingly, “there is no limiting condition imposed on any fascist project” in Italy and “whatever Mussolini commands is executed without being hampered by problems, practical or financial”. The New York-based Fortune Magazine, a major US business journal, devoted a full special issue to fascist Italy in 1934. It declared that, “The Wops are unwopping themselves”. A “wop” is a derogatory term for an Italian, and the headline suggested that under Mussolini the Italian people are no longer backward and dismal.

Between 1925 and 1938, Mussolini’s economic strategy had actually lowered the real wages of Italian workers by 11%. Before the Great Depression had even struck, the numbers of Italian unemployed under Mussolini were rising fast – more than doubling in the space of two years, from 181,000 out of work in 1926, to 439,000 in 1928. By 1932, over 1.1 million Italians would be unemployed (8), so much then for the immunity of fascist Italy to the Depression.

Mussolini’s policies had also driven up the cost of production, while his stabilisation of the currency at 90 lire to the pound “placed tremendous strain on the Italian economy”, as recognised by academic and scholar David F. Schmitz, who has closely studied US foreign policy with Mussolini. The Duce was able to keep the currency stable only because he took drastic actions, like incurring severe inflations followed by deflations.

All of this had somehow escaped the attention of the Western business press; in spite of telling public comments from exiled Italian historians, like Gaetano Salvemini. In 1932 Salvemini informed the US think tank, the Council on Foreign Relations, that “business in Italy has been hit by the depression as elsewhere” and “is just as bad as here in the United States”.

National debt in Mussolini’s Italy was growing year-on-year, while he placed the Italian economy increasingly on a war footing; “this military dilettante”, as Hitler’s close adviser Wilhelm Keitel contemptuously described Mussolini, was seeking to create a 20th century Roman Empire by force of arms. Schmitz discerned that, “American officials, impressed by the political stability of Italy, ignored such warnings of trouble”. (9)

As early as 1923 Mussolini “made a very favourable impression” on US delegates, according to Morgan Bank representative Nelson Dean Jay, after the Duce delivered the opening address at the International Chamber of Commerce in Rome. Why had Mussolini so

impressed? During his speech, he said it was time for European governments to privatise enterprises that had been nationalised during World War One. The German military leader, Erich Ludendorff, whose reign expanded across most of Europe in the war, had nationalised an array of industries in central and eastern Europe (10), including newspaper and cigarette companies. This process, of placing industry under state control, was later reversed after Ludendorff was forced to resign at war's end. For Western elites, privatisation ruled.



From left to right: Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler, Mussolini, and Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano, as they prepare to sign the Munich Agreement (CC BY-SA 3.0 de)

The prominent US judge, Elbert Henry Gary, a co-founder of the US Steel Corporation, said of Mussolini while on a trip to Rome in 1923, “A master hand has, indeed, strongly grasped the helm of the Italian state”. Judge Gary felt “like turning to my American friends and asking them whether they don’t think we, too, need a man like Mussolini” (11). The judge was obviously impressed by Mussolini’s ability to crush labour strikes.

Henry Stimson, the US Secretary of State and future Secretary of War, outlined in 1933, “American relations with Italy were of the most cordial character”. After World War Two, Stimson recalled that he and US president Herbert Hoover believed Mussolini to be “a sound and useful leader”. When US General Smedley Butler made unflattering remarks about Mussolini in 1931, Stimson went so far as to bring court-martial proceedings against him.

Hoover’s successor Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democratic president, labelled Mussolini an “admirable Italian gentleman” in 1933, as Washington’s support for the dictator continued. Roosevelt’s Ambassador to Italy, Breckinridge Long, was enthusiastic about the “new experiment in government” that fascism presented which “works most successfully in Italy”.

The US State Department considered Mussolini’s murderous 1935 invasion of Ethiopia a

“magnificent” achievement, and that the Blackshirts “brought order out of chaos, discipline out of licence, and solvency out of bankruptcy”. In 1937, the State Department regarded both Italian and German fascism as political movements which “must succeed or the masses, this time reinforced by the disillusioned middle classes, will again turn to the Left”. (12)

In 1939 as a second war loomed, president Roosevelt said that Italian fascism was “of great importance to the world” but was “still in the experimental stage” (13). Powerful multi-millionaire American bankers, like Thomas Lamont for example, was a fervent Mussolini admirer. Lamont, a partner of US banking institution J.P. Morgan, called Mussolini “a very upstanding chap” who had “done a great job for Italy” with his “sound ideas”. Otto Kahn, another influential US banker, praised Italy under “the clear sighted and masterful guidance of that remarkable man, Benito Mussolini”.

Backing for Mussolini likewise extended across the British establishment. Mussolini’s ties to London in fact date to 1917, when he was hired in the autumn of that year as a British agent by MI5, the intelligence service (14). The then 34-year-old Mussolini, as editor of the *Il Popolo d’Italia* newspaper in Milan, was paid £100 a week by MI5 for at least a year, equivalent to £7,000 weekly today. These payments were dispensed to ensure that Mussolini would continue publishing warmongering articles, urging Italy to remain on the Allied side against Germany.

British funds to Mussolini were authorised by the Conservative politician Samuel Hoare, MI5’s man in Rome. Mussolini told Hoare, an MP, that he would send Italian Army veterans to beat up peace protesters, news that apparently did not discourage his British paymasters.

Italy’s dictator received glowing plaudits from high-ranking British statesmen, such as Conservative Party MP Winston Churchill. In 1927 the 52-year-old Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, embarked on a visit to Rome where he met the Duce. Churchill subsequently informed the press,

“I could not help being charmed, like so many other people have been, by Signor Mussolini’s gentle and simple bearing and by his calm and detached pose, in spite of so many dangers and burdens... If I had been an Italian, I am sure that I should have been wholeheartedly with you from start to finish, in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism”. (15)

Churchill’s obsequious comments are perhaps not surprising, considering that he hated trade unionists, socialists and communists as much as Mussolini did. The English educator John Simkin wrote, “The historical record shows that Churchill was a great admirer of fascism”, as revealed in addition by “his speeches and articles he produced in the 1920s and 1930s”, including letters to his wife (16). Much of this has been disappeared from history, however.

“Signor Mussolini” would only become a problem for Churchill and colleagues in the latter stages of his fascist rule, when British interests were threatened by the despot’s colonial ambitions.

Chomsky reflected that,

“Mussolini was portrayed as a ‘moderate’ with enormous popular appeal, who

had brought efficient administration and prosperity, slaying the beast and opening the doors to profitable investment and trade". (17)

Conservative Party MP Austen Chamberlain, the British Foreign Secretary from 1924 to 1929, was a personal friend of Mussolini's. Chamberlain, a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1925, had twice served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and was the half-brother of future prime minister Neville Chamberlain.

As Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain said of Mussolini, "I am confident that he is a patriot and a sincere man; I trust his word when given, and I think that we might easily go far before finding an Italian with whom it would be as easy for the British government to work" (18). Ronald Graham, the British Ambassador to Italy from 1921 to 1933, also viewed the fascist dictatorship with approval. The Eton-educated Graham dispatched to London a number of supportive accounts of Mussolini's rule, which were read eagerly by British Foreign Office and Cabinet officials.

With Mussolini having consolidated his power, the London-based newspaper the Times, one of England's leading dailies, outlined its view in June 1928 that Mussolini was "indefatigable and successful" in securing Italy's place as a major state. The London Times, bought in 1922 by wealthy US-born Conservative politician John Jacob Astor, was clearly pro-Mussolini. The Times applauded the dictator's "wonderful judgment", observing that he even had "a sense of humour"; while the newspaper was worried that Mussolini's regime could fall some day, calling it "too horrible to contemplate"; the Times praised him again in February 1929 for his "great daring and great statesmanship". (19)

In December 1928 the Daily Telegraph professed Mussolini to be an "uncompromising realist" who had an "honourable record" of peaceful intent. Conveniently forgotten was Mussolini's invasion and bombardment of the Greek island of Corfu, in autumn 1923, which resulted in over a dozen civilian deaths.

The Telegraph, moreover, approved of Mussolini's labour laws, which it considered a "daring innovation" rooted in "pure patriotism". The anti-fascist historian Salvemini remarked in 1936 that the Telegraph "always backed Mussolini". Italian fascism was firmly supported by other British newspapers, like the extreme anti-Bolshevik Daily Mail and Morning Post, the latter taken over in 1937 by the Telegraph. Australian author Richard Bosworth, who focuses on fascist Italy, revealed that the only mainstream British journal which condemned Mussolini outright was, "The Spectator, whose early enthusiasm for Mussolini had waned". (20)

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Notes

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6 Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, p. 39

7 David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Fascist Italy, 1922-1940* (University of North Carolina Press, 30 Jan. 1988) Chapter 5, Italy and the Great Depression

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13 Ibid.

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18 Lawrence R. Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939* (Cambridge University Press; 1st edition, 13 Oct. 2008) p. 16

19 R. J. B. Bosworth, *The British press, the Conservatives and Mussolini, 1920-1934*, Jstor, pp. 172 & 174

20 Ibid., p. 173

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