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In Memoriam: Natale H. Bellocchi

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In Memoriam

Natale H. Bellocchi

The American Association for Chinese Studies pays tribute to Natale H. Bellocchi, devoted former AACS Board member and former Chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan.

Born in Little Falls, New York, Ambassador Bellocchi studied industrial management in college. After serving in the United States Army during the Korean War, he went on to receive his master's degree from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service of Georgetown University in 1954. In 1955, he joined the United States Foreign Service and began a distinguished diplomatic career spanning four decades, with overseas assignments in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Laos, Vietnam, India, and Japan, as well as Washington appointments in the Departments of State and the Treasury. In 1985, he was appointed ambassador to Botswana and served until 1988. From 1990 to 1995, Bellocchi was chairman of the American Institute in Taiwan.

As AIT chairman, Bellocchi presided over a challenging but ultimately transformative period in U.S.-Taiwan relations. He understood the importance of democracy in bonding U.S.-Taiwan relations and the desire for the people of Taiwan to gain dignity, but had to work within the prevailing parameters at the time that had become increasingly anachronistic. The greatest challenge was managing the series of momentous events of 1994-95: former ROC president Lee Teng-hui's infamous transit visit in Hawaii in 1994, seen as a disrespectful way of treating the leader of a friendly country, the 1994 Taiwan Policy Review, the U.S. Congress's overwhelming approval of Lee's visa to visit his alma mater, Cornell University, Lee's visit, China's war games and missile tests in 1995-6, Taiwan's first direct popular presidential election in 1996, and U.S. dispatch of aircraft carrier groups to defuse the crisis. Although Bellocchi completed his service at AIT in 1995, he prophetically pointed out that the U.S. needed to update its policy in dealing with a democratic Taiwan.

In his interview for the Foreign Affairs Oral History Project by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training on March 21, 1995, he pointed out, "You cannot do in a democratic Taiwan, what you could do in an authoritarian Taiwan. And what to do about that has really perplexed everyone and that exists today among the highest thinkers of these set of relationships, Mr. Kissinger included."

It's all too easy to lean on Taiwan. Bellocchi continued, "That they can easily say, 'Well Taiwan, just don't make any noise now because we've got to deal with this big fellow who is very important for us, and you know that's it in your interest, that we have a good relationship. So you just stay down, boy, and don't make any trouble.'"

Bellocchi asserted that this would not be feasible anymore. "If you're a political leader and depend on votes, and the people have opinions over there—they're one of the most widely traveled people in the world, 20% of the people in Taiwan travel abroad every year. . .they're really very conscious of what goes on in the world, so that makes them extremely sensitive to the

fact they have no status. They have difficulty going to different countries. They have to get visas on different pieces of paper. They're getting more and more proud. . . . And that isn't given enough weight here. . . . But the fact is that there is a very, very strong undercurrent in Taiwan of this kind of feeling. And a political leader has got to be responsive to it. . . ."

During his tenure at AIT, Bellocchi worked tirelessly to reset U.S.-Taiwan relations with this additional democratic pillar. Even after his retirement he continued to speak forcefully for the importance of values and dignity and against sacrificing Taiwan for geopolitical expediency. As a long-time AACS Board member, he contributed to the quality of governance and level of discussion of our organization. As Tun-jen Cheng eulogized, "Ambassador Bellocchi was an important diplomat, a kind and unassuming gentleman, and a sincere person that, on things we ought to know, would speak his mind." We will miss this respected colleague and dear friend.

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