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Kennedy family say JFK's heritage applies today

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ROME — Italy honored members of the Kennedy clan Thursday ahead of the 40th anniversary of JFK's death in a visit that recalled the president's "prophetic and far-reaching vision" on terrorism, nuclear conflict and a united Europe.

The Chamber of Deputies invited Jean Kennedy Smith, the president's sister and former U.S. ambassador to Ireland, former aide and historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and speechwriter and aide Ted Sorensen to launch a weeklong celebration of the life of John F. Kennedy, who visited Italy two months before he was assassinated in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, former lieutenant governor of Maryland, was also in attendance Thursday.

Addressing the Kennedy group and other lawmakers and dignitaries, Chamber speaker Pier Ferdinando Casini said Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis avoided nuclear war while his tough stance against the Soviets forced the contradictions of the communist bloc to emerge and paved the way for a united Europe.

"Forty years later, JFK's vision has proven prophetic and far-reaching," Casini said, also thanking the U.S. Senate for a motion expressing solidarity for the loss of 19 Italians in a truck bombing in southern Iraq on Nov. 12.

Schlesinger told how Kennedy, a history buff, first visited Italy at age 20 with friends in 1937, and a year later with his sister, Jean.

And when he came back on June 30, 1963, in a memorable motorcade through Rome, Kennedy recalled that there were more Italians in America than in Rome, and that the United States had 20 cities called Florence, 15 called Milan, nine called Piedmont, seven called Venice, seven called Rome, and one — in Texas — even called Italy.

In a speech on the Capitoline Hill, site of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, which founded the embryo of the European Union, Kennedy, according to Schlesinger, treated Europe "not as a rival, but as a partner."

Since Kennedy's visit, Italy has developed both a political and social cult of the Kennedys. An exhibit at the Chamber, organized with help of the Kennedy Library in Boston, retraces how Kennedy, in effect, gave America's green light to the first Italian center-left government — an alliance of the church-backed Christian Democrats and the left-leaning Socialist party.

During his 1963 visit, Kennedy met with Socialist leader Pietro Nenni at the presidential Quirinale Palace. Then, the first American Catholic president went with his wife, Jacqueline, and sister, Jean, to an audience at the Vatican with Pope Paul VI.

Sorensen, now a lawyer, reiterated his concern about the Bush administration's disregard for the United Nations and the opinion of some of its own allies during a speech Wednesday at the Italian branch of the Aspen Institute.

"Saddam Hussein could have been contained without a strike, which in effect increased the potential terrorists

by tens of millions," Sorensen said.

He said that unlike Kennedy, Bush had not shown concern for people who live in poverty and disease, and he recalled that Kennedy believed in the force of international law.

"The unity of NATO was a major concern for Kennedy, but Bush in less than two years has allowed it to crumble," Sorensen said.

On Nov. 22, the anniversary of the assassination, Rome Mayor Walter Veltroni, a lifelong Kennedy buff, will honor the group along with Foreign Minister Franco Frattini and some Vatican prelates at the same site on the Capitoline Hill from where Kennedy addressed the city.

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