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Carlucci's successful ways in Portugal

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If there is one even remotely political Portuguese who does not have a favorite story about Frank Carlucci, the White House's new national security adviser, I have yet to find him on these sunny streets. From my own little poll, I can testify that the favorite by far about Mr. Carlucci's crucial time here as ambassador in the 1975-76 days of the "Portuguese Revolution," is this one:

It was the spring of 1975 and, some years after the end of the old Salazar dictatorship, Portugal was being run by the Communist Party through the leftists in the armed forces. As the new U.S. ambassador, Mr. Carlucci was naturally hated by the left.

One day, the leading leftist military man, Otelo Sariva de Carvalho, arrived at the Lisbon airport from a trip abroad and immediately made some pointedly menacing threats about Mr. Carlucci. He said he could "not assure his safety," which was an ominous go-ahead to the leftists.

Those were strange and violent

days, a time when nobody really ruled and the streets were constantly filled with mobs and demonstrations. Indeed, as the man spoke at the airport, an unruly and unfriendly crowd estimated at 20,000 persons was milling in front of the American Embassy.

An enraged Ambassador Carlucci immediately telephoned Mr. Sariva. He had heard the threats on television, Mr. Carlucci told him. Then, "I am leaving the embassy in 10 minutes," Mr. Carlucci went on, "and I want you to make sure nothing happens to me."

After those 10 minutes, Mr. Carlucci walked alone, his defiant head up, through the crowd, saying, "Excuse me, excuse me," went around the corner, got into his car and drove home.

This story clearly demonstrates the Carlucci talents that were so amply and repeatedly shown during his time here: an Italian-American street sense and an ability to judge power balances, a sure knowledge of the society he was working in and with, and sheer guts.

What does his time in Portugal show about the man who, at an unprecedented time of scandal for the White House, will take over at the National Security Council on Jan. 2?

When Mr. Carlucci came to Portugal in its moment of modern upheaval, Secretary of State Henry

Kissinger had written it off; the country would go directly from the old rightist dictatorship to the Communists, but he thought its tragedy would be the "vaccination of Western Europe," in effect serving as an antibody to the Communist infection threatening the rest of the Continent.

Mr. Carlucci violently disagreed. He did not forget the important fact that 85 percent of the country's population lived in largely rural areas from Lisbon north: the great majority of the Portuguese were conservative, sober, Catholic, and totally anti-Communist.

With his good political sense, Mr. Carlucci knew that the Communist Party had its apparatus readied outside the country to take over. It needed only to be transplanted inside, and at this time their leader, Alvaro Cunhal, controlled the streets. But Mr. Carlucci also was convinced that the right man on the democratic side still could save the country, and that man, like him a man of intellect and courage, was the socialist leader Mario Soares.

It was, of course, Mr. Soares, who went on to become the first democratic prime minister and now president, and the Portuguese people who "saved" Portugal. But Mr. Carlucci offered them the support and the spirit of the United States.

"Mr. Carlucci is a legend here, a

myth," is the way one Portuguese man typically put it to me. "He is also a great actor; he was part of a great drama of good and evil."

But even after the socialists, and now the Social Democrats, came to power, Mr. Carlucci kept his interest in — and, indeed, love for — Portugal. He helped form the Luso-American Business Council, a group of some 30 American companies that work with Portuguese companies, and he has maintained many personal relationships.

Mr. Carlucci unquestionably has had failures in his multifaceted career, as in the case of covert action against South Yemen in 1979 when he was with the CIA. But his personal qualities, shown with greatest drama and effectiveness in this beautiful country, not only are impressive, but are exactly what the United States needs at this time.

His intellectual and personal sense of Portugal, for instance, were exactly the opposite of the White House cowboys' lack of any sense at all about the reality of Iran. His canny street sense was exactly what the foolish Irangate arms philanders did not have. Maybe there still is hope.