

Port 11/1/76

Italy and the CIA

IN ITALY, as in Angola, current American operations seem as myopic in purpose as they are inept in management. The United States has been preparing to shovel \$6 million into Italy's governing political parties, in the same manner in which a prudent gardner might dig fertilizer into his rose beds. The money was to be disbursed by the CIA, evidently at the behest of the State Department in its dogged but uninspired campaign to keep Communists out of the Italian cabinet. It is hard to think of any revelation that might do more harm to precisely those forces whom the State Department is trying to shore up.

This episode is another disquieting indication of misjudgment, on the Department's part, of the way things have changed both here and abroad. Aside from any more elevated consideration, the administration has had plenty of warning that the traditional procedures for keeping secrets have broken down. This latest revelation presumably comes from someone in Congress who opposes the subventions. Congress is not only sharply at odds with the administration but at odds with itself as well. Some members, isolated and frustrated, have learned to cast vetoes through leaks and public disclosure. But a government cannot really afford to embark on covert operations unless it can keep them covert. The Ford administration has been unable to work out the kind of understandings with Congress that protect the secrecy of these activities. Yet it keeps compulsively attempting to pursue them—even when they promise, at best, only trivial benefits.

It is not, after all, as though there were any great and urgent drought of political money in Italy. Money is a legitimate political weapon. The United States has apparently funneled some funds into Portugal, a country seized by economic collapse and political turbulence; it is entirely reasonable for the United States to provide, in a crisis, at least a partial counterweight to the aid that is flowing to the Portuguese Communists from the Soviet Union. By the same token, it was useful for this country to pump dollars into the Italian political system in the years after World War II. But since then there has been phenomenal economic growth in Italy; the standard of living is now in the same range as Britain's. The present generation of politicians is, if anything, too experienced; there are elaborate and well-established systems of patronage. If a party cannot raise adequate funds under these circumstances, it is a reflection on that party's competence. And here we come to the heart of the matter.

The Communists have been creeping upward in successive elections and polls for a wholly negative

reason—the Italians' mounting exasperation with the other parties. The Christian Democrats have been dominant in every Italian government for more than 30 years; parties wear out, like the men who lead them and the ideas that inform them. The Christian Democrats have presided over the transformation of their country into a modern industrial state, but now they do not seem to know how to cope with the consequences. The most recent Cabinet fell this week. While the fall of a cabinet in a parliamentary system like Italy's is not necessarily very significant, the difficulty of patching together replacements has recently begun to rise sharply.

There is a pervasive sense in Italy that profound changes are coming—changes involving, one way or another, Communists in power—and each faction is trying to position itself to take advantage of this new fact. In recent months it had been generally assumed that little would happen until the middle of 1977, when the present parliamentary term expires. But the latest collapse may make elections necessary much sooner. It appears very possible that the Communists will get a bigger vote than the Christian Democrats and, to follow the most common line of speculation, that might result in a coalition cabinet. Certainly the Communists would not take over the government entirely; they are not likely to win an absolute majority and, in any case, they do not want to frighten the opposition. They have lately been saying very explicitly that they are committed to democracy and the traditional rules of the game. It is this sharing of power, with the Communists as the legitimate and accepted partner of a conservative and Catholic party, that the Ford administration is trying to forestall.

But the United States is going to have only a marginal influence over these events. It can quite properly point out to Italians that the arrival of Communists in the cabinet will probably make relations between our two countries less comfortable, and the military alliance less reliable. But the time is long since passed when Europeans were primarily concerned with Atlantic relations and defense. In Italy the main public preoccupations are social reforms, and the reorganization of obsolete and unresponsive public services.

Under these circumstances, the wisest course for the United States is to hold itself to the standard and conventional code of open diplomacy. That means making its interests and preferences clear to the world, but doing nothing that constitutes interference in Italy's internal politics. To go beyond this limit, as the affair of the \$6 million suggests, can only push Italy toward the outcome that Mr. Kissinger wishes most strongly to avoid.