

NYTimes

JAN 9 1976

# Cash and Crisis

By Tom Wicker

Whether the Central Intelligence Agency did or did not recently pour \$6 million into the coffers of various non-Communist Italian politicians seems to have nothing to do with the most recent Italian governing crisis. But the coincidence of the crisis coming just as the C.I.A. payments were being reported illustrates how hopeless it probably is for the United States to attempt such methods of un-tangling the thickets of Italian politics.

Actually, William Colby, the C.I.A.'s lame-duck director, says the agency has not spent a nickel in Italy in the past few months. But he refused to say, in an interview on the National Broadcasting Company's "Today" show, if there were plans for such expenditures. White House sources, meanwhile, confirmed that the C.I.A. had been authorized by President Ford to lay out the \$6 million, and Congressional committees apparently have been briefed on the matter.

If the money, or any part thereof, has not yet actually been spent it might make more sense for Mr. Colby to turn it over to the new fund for American Presidential candidates. This is not just because, as Representative Wayne Hays of Ohio has cynically suggested, some of the intended Italian beneficiaries might have numbered bank accounts in Switzerland.

It is more importantly because this kind of American meddling in another country's politics is likely to help the Communist Party, not hurt it, as Washington's cumbersome intelligence machinery intended. That party, working as hard and as successfully as it has in recent years to picture itself as independent of Moscow, will welcome the opportunity to accuse its rivals of being subservient to Washington—"sold out" to the Americans.

It was always a dubious proposition that the C.I.A. payments, or intention to pay, could have been kept secret in the post-Watergate era of more aggressive journalism, when the C.I.A. itself is under sustained investigation by Congress, and when the law requires this kind of "covert" operation to be reported to the Congress.

But even if secrecy could have been maintained, the undercover payments were ill-conceived. All political parties and candidates can use money, of course, but the besetting problem of the leading Italian non-Communist parties is not their lack of funds but their decades of incompetent and corrupt government. To the extent that the United States subsidizes or plans to subsidize these parties, it is subsidizing inefficiency, ineptitude, laziness, graft and favoritism. That,

too, plays into the hands of the disciplined, imaginative and effective Communists, since American funds simply help the non-Communist parties to go about their business as usual, rather than seeking the internal reform, new leadership and programs that might rescue their prospects.

As an American official pointed out to Seymour Hersh of The New York Times, \$6 million is "peanuts" anyway, in a modern election campaign. That sum could not have helped the non-Communist parties to any degree commensurate with the risks involved—and probably not half as much as some blunt American advice to get their political houses in order, so that they could compete effectively with the Communists.

The coincidental Government crisis suggests, furthermore, the kind of

## IN THE NATION

complexities into which the C.I.A. has bumbled with its open wallet. It was not the Communists who precipitated the crisis, but the Socialists—presumably one of the target parties for the \$6 million slush fund. Why did the Socialists do it? Not least because they have been sharing some Government responsibility with the Christian Democrats, while the Communists—from their positions of strength in the labor unions, local governments, and popular opinion—have had more influence with the Government although accepting none of the responsibility.

The Socialists may well want new elections sooner than those scheduled for 1977, in the hope that the Communists may be forced more openly into some form of Government responsibility—while the Communists are opposed to early elections in fear of the same outcome. Why should they want to be associated in any formal sense with the unpopular governing parties when through the peculiarly Italian arrangement of "confronto" (which does not mean confrontation but a vague form of consultation) they already have great informal influence on the Government?

It is by no means clear as yet that the Italian Communists are as independent of Moscow and as tolerant of democratic institutions as they say they are; and even if these claims are true, it still is hard to reconcile a Communist presence in the Government of Italy with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other Western institutions. Washington is rightly concerned, therefore, about Communist political gains in Italy; but American cash is not likely to reverse a tide that flows primarily from the gross deficiencies of the very parties it would reward.