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Friendly Fire: Italy, America and the War in Iraq

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On March 6, Italians witnessed what has become a ritual of increasing frequency at the Vittorio Emmanuele II memorial in Rome: honoring victims of the war in Iraq. The body of secret service agent Nicola Calipari, felled by an American bullet, lay in state from Sunday until Monday morning as one hundred thousand visitors filed past the bier of “Nicola the Just,” as the Italian press has dubbed him. Just a year and a half ago, the 19 Carabinieri killed by a suicide bomber in Nasiriyah, Iraq were honored in the same imposing neoclassical monument to Italy’s unification. At Calipari’s state funeral, the Prime Minister’s undersecretary of state read a eulogy worthy of an ancient Roman tribute: “Your death restored faith and country to Italy, just like those who fell at Nasiriyah.”

His death has also restored ambivalent sentiments about Italy’s close alliance with the United States, especially concerning the costs of war and American sensitivity towards its allies. In the first two years of the Iraq war, a newfound national pride at playing a part in the “war on terror” appeared to be winning out over Italy’s sizeable domestic pacifist bloc. Back in February 2003, it seemed that the collective spirit summoned by three million demonstrators in an anti-war rally—the largest demonstration in postwar history—might weaken the government’s resolve. But the relatively steady stream of bad news from Iraq had the paradoxical effect of strengthening the government’s position. The spirit of the anti-war rally was eclipsed half a year later in a cathartic moment of collective grief and patriotism following the largest single military loss in postwar history at Nasiriyah. Those deaths ended calls for an Italian withdrawal from Iraq and temporarily quieted disputes over the war: there was an enemy to be fought.

Italy’s loyalty to the transatlantic relationship has long paid out dividends in international legitimacy and in currency with the U.S. administration, especially following Spain’s withdrawal from Iraq last year. Senate president Marcello Pera underscored this point when he railed against “superficial pacifism” at home and denounced the Spanish government for “withdrawing its troops [from Iraq] when called to defend its own civilization and the lives of its citizens.” Berlusconi has constantly made supportive statements of the U.S.-led war, and has been rewarded with state visits to Washington—he was the second foreign leader, after Tony Blair, to be received after Bush’s reelection. Italy was also granted the helicopter contract for the presidential Marine One, as well as a promise to review its hopes for a seat on the UN Security

Council. For Berlusconi and his government, Bush's personal unpopularity in Italy is outweighed by the enduring prestige of the American presidency and residual pro-American feelings from the post-World War II era.

But the wounded pride palpable at the funerals of the 19 Carabinieri in November 2003 has now morphed into untempered grief and anger. Calipari's death by American fire, which also wounded another Italian agent as well as the journalist Giuliana Sgrena—just 35 minutes after they had freed her from a month in captivity, and 700 meters from the Baghdad airport where an Italian military jet awaited the group—has bluntly driven home the tragedy of war and reinforced the impression that the United States is careless about the use of force and insensitive to its consequences.

Conspiracy Theories

The conspiracy theory that the assault on Sgrena's car was intentional has found fertile ground in the imagination of some Italian opposition members, fed mostly by her companions' assertions that the Americans wanted her dead because of her anti-war positions (her captors had apparently told her so.) Italian government spokesmen have rejected this thesis, and no serious political figures in Italy entertain the notion of deliberate targeting. Nonetheless, Sgrena's ambiguity on the matter has encouraged a dynamic of mutual resentment between a contrite American administration and an Italian government eager to have this episode come to an end.

Two days before the Italians' car drove down that stretch of "Route Irish" to the Baghdad International Airport, insurgents in a speeding car dropped an IED (improvised explosive device) in the middle of a convoy on that road, killing two American soldiers. This recent experience goes some way towards explaining the soldiers' later actions, though American and Italian versions of the shooting still differ and Italy is still demanding further investigation, as Berlusconi stated in a special parliamentary address on March 9. One columnist in the Milan daily *Corriere della Sera* wrote that "we will never know if Calipari was trying to force his way past an American checkpoint or if he thought Saddam loyalists were firing on him... We will only know the truth when it doesn't matter politically anymore," adding that we would also have to wait to know whether the Romans or the Jews killed Christ.

Several factors create fertile ground for conspiracy theories. Italians lived under dictatorship for more than two decades in the 20th century, and leftist activists suffered under a sometimes-repressive counterterrorism apparatus in the 1960s and 1970s. There is still a deep mistrust of state power and skepticism of the American readiness to evoke "raison d'Etat," whether in the context of Iraq, the death penalty, the Kyoto accords or Guantanamo. Playwright Dario Fo's nobel-prize winning "Accidental Death of an Anarchist" explores a scenario in which the Italian police, having been complicit in an act of right-wing terror, proceed to stage a leftists' "fall" from a commissariat window. At *Il Manifesto's* headquarters on Friday night, the Communist daily where Sgrena works, editors and journalists worried aloud about "Giuliana being in an American-run hospital" as the only survivor "who knows the truth about the shooting."

In this context, Calipari's death is a reminder of the strength of Italy's democratic institutions: the poignant morality tale of a secret service agent who escorted an opposition journalist to safety and paid with his life. *Il Manifesto's* editor Gabriele Polo praised Calipari "not as a

servant of the state... but as a man of courage who died doing good.” It is not a good sign for the Prime Minister when a secret agent is lionized by the communist party’s newspaper as a victim of his government’s alliances.

The Italian government has already weathered a number of violent crises related to its alliance with the United States since the beginning of the Iraq war. However, previous tragedies paradoxically tended to reinforce the government’s line that participating in the “war on terror” was necessary. In spring 2004, there was the televised execution of Italian contractor Fabrizio Quattrocchi, who brazenly asked to have the sackcloth taken off his head “to show how an Italian dies.” This became a rallying cry similar to the one heard on Flight 93 on September 11: “let’s roll.” Months later, Iraqi insurgents killed Italian journalist and anti-war critic Enzo Baldoni while in captivity. These deaths provoked outrage at the perpetrators and led to a sense that Italy had no choice in this war. Baldoni was “condemned by his passport,” in the words of *La Repubblica*. “In the global crisis playing out in Iraq, no one is safe,” the newspaper wrote, “Because we are Westerners.” The kidnapping of two anti-war aid workers in Iraq, known as “the two Simonas” was followed by arrests of terrorist suspect “Mohammed the Egyptian” in Milan and then by the broadcasting of multiple videotaped threats by the elusive “Hafs al Masri Brigades”; the first Al Qaeda communiqué issued in Italian translation on an Al Ansar website and, finally, the death of two Italian tourists in a suicide bombing at the Taba Hilton in Egypt. These events all confirmed the impression that an ineluctable “Italianization of global terror” was well underway, as has been argued by the commentator Magdi Allam.

Despite this record, Nicola Calipari’s death places the Italian government in a uniquely delicate situation. In addition to orchestrating the liberation of Giuliana Sgrena, Calipari had personally negotiated the release of three Italian contractors and two aid workers in 2004. His life’s work fought the terror that insurgents could wreak on Italian public opinion and indirectly helped keep Italy in the coalition. His death is a doubly cruel blow to the government: a fatal debacle involving the man whose job it was to prevent the occurrence of such disasters.

Notwithstanding Calipari’s efforts, the string of hostage videos have taken some toll on public opinion, with each incident bringing out tens of thousands into the streets, called out by opposition parties and Catholic, Muslim and Jewish leaders alike. These ecumenical rituals have reinforced domestic opposition to the war—not against the ideals the government claims to pursue but for the victims it produces. Sergio Romano, the *Corriere della Sera* columnist and former ambassador, noted that the steady stream of demonstrations in favor of hostages, and the alleged payment of ransom is ironic given that during the spate of terrorist attacks of the 1970s, legislation was proposed to discourage kidnappings that would impose a media blackout and freezing of the family’s assets. Another point of irony, noted by the French specialist of the Islamic world Olivier Roy, is the extent to which Italian leftist militants like the Red Brigades actually pioneered the tactics now adopted by mujahadeen in their *mise en scène* of threatening hostages with death—hands bound in front of a row of masked revolutionaries—for the consumption of a domestic audience.

Italy, the United States and the Iraq War

In many ways, Italian society has experienced the war in Iraq much more viscerally than American society. In January, Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi went to a military airport to receive the coffin bearing an army Marshall, Simone Cola, who died of gunshot wounds at Nasariyah, and let his hand linger on the flag-draped casket for several moments in front of the soldier's family, the Senate president, and journalists. Italian public mourning rituals have been in striking contrast with Pentagon policy which for a long time did not even allow photographers to record the return of American dead at Dover Air Force base. For Italians, the casualties of the "war on terror" have been experienced one by one; but "for the Americans," as Sgrena stated, "war is war." There was some personalized media attention in the United States when CIA agent Mike Spann was killed at the Mazar-e-Sharif revolt (where "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh was captured) and many paused upon learning of the death of Pat Tillman, the NFL player who died in a fire in Afghanistan. Otherwise, the United States is enduring a war without public heroes, though not without sacrifice. In addition to the names and photos of over 1500 war dead, American public opinion has weathered images of the beheading of Daniel Pearl, Nicholas Berg, and Paul Johnson, and, apparently, emerged from these experiences more determined to continue American military campaigns. But American thousands never had the opportunity to file past the caskets of those fallen. Nicola Calipari "has brought Baghdad home to Italy," *La Repubblica* wrote on the day his body lay in state, "all of Iraq is in his coffin, the fear and the hell that is Iraq."

This Italian distaste for the war has become mixed up with residual anti-Americanism, left over from earlier confrontations with the superpower. The flip side of proudly earned international respectability is a stronger sense of national sovereignty and a resentment of perceived American "impunity." American officials have been unusually effusive with their condolences—Bush and Rumsfeld have placed telephone calls and written personal letters—though they must also cover themselves against eventual liability. But Italian commentators assume that the soldiers who shot at the Italians' car would never be handed over for prosecution, and American exemption from the International Criminal Court is a further reminder of American exceptionalism. Italian national pride is in the air as the names of two American Air Force bases in Italy – Sigonella and Aviano—have suddenly reemerged in national discussion. Sigonella is where the Italian military extracted PLO leader Abu Abbas with a show of force after the United States had forced his plane down following the Achille Lauro incident in 1985—a symbol of defending national sovereignty in the face of unilateral action. Aviano, the site of large anti-war demonstrations in spring 2003, was where the U.S. EA-6B Prowler took off that sliced a ski lift cable, sending 20 skiers falling 370 feet to their death in 1998. In the case of the cable car, Americans exercised their right to deny local jurisdiction and went ahead with their own courts martial, eventually acquitting the two airmen and handing down meager sentences for obstruction of justice in the investigation. Both pilots were discharged and only one served just six months in jail. Early reports of the Baghdad shooting spoke of reckless American soldiers, who "shoot at anything that moves" expending "400 rounds" of ammunition and "nearly splitting the diplomatic vehicle in two." This was later revised when photos showed the Italians' small rental car with around 14 bullet holes and still intact. The current popular image of GIs as high-tech thugs with a license to kill is distant indeed from the post-World War II's cinematic representations of smiling

American soldiers who handed out Lucky Strikes and bubble gum in war-torn villages of southern and central Italy.

Even the numerous pro-American Italian blogs are finding it hard to exonerate the American military, though one of them noted that Italian patrols would probably have done the same in that context. Indeed, in a war story from summer 2004, Italian forces allegedly shot up an ambulance that had failed to stop for an Italian checkpoint in Nasiriyah, in which an Iraqi family perished. The Italians then supposedly withdrew their protection of an American freelancer after he sold footage of the bullet-riddled ambulance to Italian television—a far cry from the current bonhomie between journalists and the Italian military. The freelancer was taken hostage by insurgents soon thereafter, and later released after ten days' captivity (and two videotaped death threats broadcast on American television).

Staying the Course?

For now, Italian politicians are keeping their cool. Berlusconi's office softened his first public statements insisting on accountability with a more conciliatory press release that emphasized US-Italian friendship. Former Prime Minister Romano Prodi addressed the Americans deferentially but firmly, saying "No accusations, no judgments, but please: explain this to us." Even the notoriously confrontational communist leader Fausto Bertinotti warned against premature conclusions. But if Americans do not reassure their allies that they will revisit their rules of engagement, and if no one is punished for this incident, then outrage in Italy will certainly fester. Former Prime Minister Massimo d'Alema, who had already demanded a cessation of bombing during previous hostage crises, said that "Today we paid homage to a valiant man, tomorrow we will renew our demand for justice." In a sign of the mounting political pressure, Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini went from saying the day after the shooting that his support for the United States "had not changed a jot," to demanding a full explanation several days later, and asking that any culprits be brought to trial – though he said that Italians "must not give into anti-American feelings." The U.S. Central Command has announced a month-long, American-led inquiry into the March 4 shooting, to be headed by Brig. Gen. Peter Vangjel, and which – apparently in response to Berlusconi's request—will include representatives from the Italian military.

Recently released hostages may not be particularly reliable witnesses, but in the popular imagination their words can be oracular. Simona Torretta, the aid worker whose release was secured by Calipari last fall, predicted that the January 2005 Iraqi elections would have no legitimacy and that the country would be in shambles for "many decades" to come. Giuliana Sgrena, who has not shied away from her newfound fame, said in an interview after her return to Rome "It's not a crime to be anti-American, I challenge anyone to go see what is happening in Iraq and then not be anti-American."

With the planned departure of Dutch, Norwegian, Ukrainian and perhaps Bulgarian troops this year from the Multinational Force, could Italy be next? Italians did not participate in the initial phase of major combat operations, and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi sold the war on the basis that it was not a matter of choice—a war in which Italy was anyway already a target of terrorism.

Now, plans for Italy's 3,000 troops in Iraq are less certain, and doubtlessly public pressure will force the government to modify its military presence or its relationship with the US in some way, certainly in time for regional elections later this spring and general elections in 2006. The government must also periodically receive parliamentary authorization for stationing troops abroad. This will be a real balancing act for Berlusconi, who famously stated in 2001, "I am on whatever side America is on, even before I know what it is." Sergio Romano, writing in the *Corriere della Sera*, argued that "to foment anti-Americanism and ask for the withdrawal of troops would be to divide the country in two factions and to show the world an argumentative and untrustworthy Italy," while another columnist in the same newspaper predicted that the "two Italies"—pro-war and anti-war—were ripe for confrontation. Given the nature of Calipari's death, Washington would not be able to portray a partial Italian withdrawal or modification of the Italian participation in the coalition as a capitulation to terrorism. Thus partial withdrawal may provide a crucial way out for Berlusconi to preserve his ties to the United States while placating a restive Italian public. The revision of Italy's military presence in Iraq would constitute the democratic response to its citizens' outrage.