



Former Governor of Buenos Aires Province and current President Eduardo Duhalde has reportedly received at least one million dollars from Mexico's Juarez cartel of narco-traffickers.

The handwriting is on the wall, as obvious as the graffiti in a Buenos Aires slum. In the 2001 Global Competitiveness Report, published by Harvard University's World Economic Forum, Argentina was ranked 53rd out of 75 countries, down there with the war-racked nations of Colombia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. A recent editorial by James Neilson in the English-language *Buenos Aires Herald* (November 8, 2001) boldly addresses the Argentine perspective about the current impasse:

Argentina has been edging nearer to . . . the knacker's yard where "failed states" are broken up. Some suspect it will be soon . . . The trouble is, people have been going on for decades about just how exceptionally bright they think the Argentines are, but this belief, which . . . is popular among Argentine intellectuals, has surely contributed . . . to the debacle by making too many . . . assume that the country's plight is none of their doing, or that, seeing they are so clever, they will find it easy to wriggle out of any hole they may have fallen into while their eyes were fixed on the stars. In any case, even if it were to be proved that Argentina really is home to an astonishing number of *Urbemensen* that would be no consolation at all: the *Titanic* would have gone down just as fast if every single passenger had been a PhD.

The point at which failed nations should be cut loose from the umbilical cord of the international financial institutions that have enabled their chronic dysfunction must be considered with sobriety. The nonviable nation-state differs little from the addict: every cover-up for

the addiction, every injection or fix, every public excuse only prolongs the inevitable, drags others down, and compounds the fallout. Col. David Hackworth has often counseled military leaders: "Do not reinforce failure." While Argentina's default on its debt repayment may send shock waves throughout emerging markets and exacerbate the global recession, a call to "abandon ship" might prove to be the only way to prevent the rest of the world's economy from sharing Argentina's fate.

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Letter From Italy

by Alberto Carosa

Italian Artworks Targeted by Muslims



When the Taliban in Afghanistan were busy destroying ancient gigantic stone statues of Buddha, some commentators asked: What's next? Now, a fundamentalist Muslim group known as *Unione dei Musulmani d'Italia* (Italy's Union of Muslims) has demanded that a priceless 15th-century fresco, which they call "obscene and blasphemous," be removed from San Petronio, the 14th-century cathedral in Bologna.

"A new Rushdie case? Perhaps, but only six centuries late," noted *il Giornale* on June 27, 2001. On June 7, 2001, the *Unione* wrote Pope John Paul II and Giacomo Cardinal Biffi, the archbishop of Bologna, calling for the fresco to be destroyed and the Catholic Church to apologize to the Islamic community "in much the same way as your superior, the non-EU pontiff John Paul II, has already asked for pardon from the Jews and Orthodox Greeks." Neither the Vatican nor Bologna's archbishop responded to the *Unione's* letter.

The fresco depicts the sixth-century founder of Islam, Muhammad, naked and burning in the flames of Hell. It was painted by the early Renaissance master Giovanni da Modena on the wall of the Bolognini chapel as part of a wider scene based on the Last Judgment, showing Hell with a monstrous Lucifer at the cen-

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cial services previously axed; and payment of state salaries with "Argentinos"—baseless currency bonds that a *Financial Times* editorial on January 27 termed "Mickey Mouse money": "Printing money to satisfy popular desire for spending unmatched by taxation is a recipe for chaos."

Saa disappeared within days, resigning ostensibly because of a "lack of support" within his own Peronist Party. And while the Argentine protesters, the IMF, and international creditors prescribed a "new alternative" for leadership as the key to economic viability, the Argentine political class went forward in reverse, placing millionaire real-estate magnate and former Buenos Aires governor Eduardo Duhalde—a known associate of the Juarez narco-cartel—in the presidential office. Duhalde had been overwhelmingly defeated in the 1999 presidential elections—even after using one million dollars from the Juarez drug cartel to buy votes. Despite U.S. Senate records of his narco-laundering endeavors, his corrupt and incompetent provincial tenure, and his efforts to devalue the peso, Duhalde was heralded in the national and international press as "the last chance" to save Argentina.

ter, munching on a sinner. To his left, a grimacing, horned demon drags the naked figure of Muhammad down to the underworld. The Unione claims that the fresco compromised relations between Catholics and Muslims, arguing that it is far more offensive than Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Muslims, the Unione said, had never depicted Jesus or the Virgin Mary naked on the walls of a mosque. (They failed to note, however, that they consider depicting any human being in an image on the wall of a Mosque—or anywhere, for that matter—idolatry, and it is forbidden.)

The Unione, headquartered in the outskirts of Rome, has announced it will hold demonstrations outside the capital's mosque—the largest in Europe—despite the fact that the head of the local Islamic Cultural Center said that not all Muslims in Bologna agreed that the fresco should be removed. So far, no such demonstration has taken place. The *International Herald Tribune's Italy Daily* supplement may have been right to describe the Unione as a "tiny Muslim organization."

Still, the social and cultural implications of the controversy could be enormous, since the Unione contends that the problem started in the Middle Ages with Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Italy's national poet, who, in Canto 28 of the *Inferno*, placed Muhammad in the ninth circle of Hell alongside other idolators and schismatics. The fresco was based on this literary masterpiece, written 100 years earlier. The Unione also demands that the teaching of Dante be suspended in Italian schools in immigrant areas since, in their words, "nothing against the prophet Jesus is studied in our schools."

The World Muslim League, which operates out of the mosque in Rome, said the request was "pure madness" and called the petition "more than silly." But Roberto de Mattei, the president of a Rome-based think tank, Centro Culturale Lepanto (named after the 1571 battle that saw a huge Muslim fleet routed by the Christian forces), was of a somewhat different opinion. "The demand exposes the aggressive nature of Islamic fundamentalism, which never has renounced its goal to dominate Europe one day," he told the *Asian Wall Street Journal* (July 13-15, 2001). "What other explanation is there for attempts to destroy Italy's cultural heritage?"

The fact that the controversy erupted in Bologna may not be coincidental. In September 2000, Giacomo Cardinal Bif-

fi set off a tempest when he issued a pastoral letter on Muslim immigration to Italy and the dangers posed by Islamic proselytizing. He stated that it would be best if Italy changed its immigration policy to favor immigrants who were Catholic, rather than Muslim, in order to "save the nation's identity." In his opinion, economic and social criteria alone should not be the guidelines for allowing immigrants to adopt Italy as their home. Cardinal Biffi repeatedly stressed the incompatibility of certain aspects of Muslim culture and religion with the traditions of Italy: different eating habits, family rights, a different weekly holy day, the concept of the role of women in society, polygamy, and a fundamentalist view of public life in which religion is one with politics. "Europe must either become Christian again or it will become Muslim," he argued, and he rejected accusations that his suggestion amounts to discrimination on the basis of religion. "There is no right to invasion!" the cardinal said. "A country can let whom it wants into its house." Anti-Muslim feelings were further fueled by the Northern League, now part of the center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi, which has campaigned on an anti-immigration platform and called for the defense of Christian society against outside influences. Berlusconi has also held marches to protest the building of mosques in Italy.

The spokesman for the Bologna curia confirmed that, even if the cardinal wanted to modify or erase the fresco, he would not be able to. In Italy, all public monuments, including the Bologna basilica, are state property, and the approval of the Ministry of Culture is needed to move even a single stone. The same applies to Dante's poetry: In Italy, school syllabi are determined by the Ministry of Public Education, and it is highly unlikely that the new center-right government would ever consider, let alone accede to, such a request.

After all, why should others change their cultural patterns to please the Muslims, who would never change theirs for the sake of others? What if Catholics started asking that insults and threats to Christians be removed from the decorations in many mosques and from the Koran itself?

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Letter From Texas

by Wayne Allensworth

The Trees of Autumn



It is a warm night for November, even in Texas. Thanksgiving is a few days away, and the warm weather, interrupted by a cool snap, has returned, reimposing itself like an unwelcome guest on an autumn background of falling leaves and brown, seemingly endless prairie stretching north to distant Canada. Southeast from Waco, along Highway 6 to Bryan and the Gulf Coast beyond, Santa has made his first appearance, starring in a light show ("Santa's Wonderland") staked out in a cow pasture bordered by barbed wire and the cracked pavement of the highway. I turn on the air conditioner to cool the stuffy car interior. My wife shakes her head. "Welcome back to Texas and eighty degrees at Thanksgiving." I need a Dr. Pepper.

Welcome back, indeed. Sitting on the porch of my parent's home in Houston, I'm watching a grey squirrel bury a pecan amongst the leaves and bare roots of a massive live oak and trying to imagine the yard as it was 35 years ago, before all the roads were paved, before city water, before the crawdads and water moccasins disappeared from the creek and the ubiquitous horny toads vanished. In those days, my brothers and I could roam the adjacent fields unmolested. We kept a pet raccoon for a time. My younger brother once brought home a copperhead for my mother's inspection and was quite upset when Daddy whacked its head off with a hoe. Out near Bear Creek, the farmers and stockmen hung the corpses of slain predators on a fence at a place we called "Wolf Corners." We used to go out there on Sunday afternoons to inspect the week's kill.

The air has that smoky look it takes on this time of year, and the shadows are encroaching on the house even at midday. The squirrel finishes his work and dashes up the live oak, grown thick and battered since its early days. The magnolia is still there, its bright green, waxy foliage standing out against the fallen brown leaves of the neighboring sycamore. The twin mimosas are gone. I remember climbing the thick limbs of the larger one that