

Letter From Italy

by Alberto Carosa

Tax Breaks for Terror?

On June 23, the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* reported that Italian police had smashed a Milan-based Islamic terrorist cell that was planning an attack on the Basilica of San Petronio. This church, the most important in Bologna, is dedicated to its patron saint, and it contains a fresco showing Muhammad being tortured by demons in hell. *Corriere della Sera* said police uncovered the plot after intercepting the phone conversations of a group of Moroccans and Tunisians, some of whom are believed to be members of Algeria's extremist Salafist Group of Preaching and Combat, led by Hassan Hattab. The cell was reportedly in contact with a Libyan terrorist known as Amsa, allegedly a leading member of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terror network and active in Afghanistan, Iran, and Europe. Amsa was arrested this summer in London. The paper reported that Amsa's job had been to "make contact with various terror cells in Europe in order to organize terror attacks." The group in Milan had links to similar cells in Bologna, Rome, Naples, and Vercelli, and Italian investigators had uncovered its plans to coordinate an attack on the church in Bologna in February.

The fresco, painted in 1415 by Giovanni da Modena, has long been criticized by Muslims in Italy. There have been campaigns for its removal or destruction, including letters to Pope John Paul II and Giacomo Cardinal Biffi, archbishop of Bologna, calling the painting "barbarous." Yet Islamic leaders were skeptical about the terrorist plot. The Union of Italian Muslims said the press report was "not very convincing" and "could be an attempt to discredit Muslims who live in this country, to convince public opinion that they are violent people and terrorists." They added that "obviously, we consider the work an insult to our religion and people, but that doesn't mean we would contemplate or plan an

act of vandalism or, worse, terrorism." The Union argued that the fresco should be removed, but it stressed that Muslims would also be satisfied with a decision to cover up the name of Muhammad, written beneath the figure in hell.

Prosecutors and antiterrorist police in Bologna, probably in a bid to soothe fears, said that they knew nothing about this alleged plan by Al Qaeda-linked terrorists. The then-interior minister Claudio Scajola also sought to allay public alarm: "There is too much talk about these arguments, perhaps stemming from the hunt for news," he said. But dismay ran high again the following day, June 25, when Italian Defense Minister Antonio Martino said that a major attack by Islamic terrorists is certain to take place somewhere in the West—perhaps in Italy itself. "We do not know where this attack will take place nor how it will take place, and thus it is very difficult to say that we can guarantee the security of our citizens," he stated. The opposition branded the minister's words "irresponsible," "alarmist," and "shocking," and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, speaking from Canada where he was participating in the G8 summit, played down Martino's statement as "over-emphasized."

Against this background, it is no wonder that the Northern League, led by Umberto Bossi, started calling for the government, of which it is a part, to withdraw its own bill on religious freedom, because it would place Islam on the same footing as any other religion in Italy. The government's bill, currently before the House Constitutional Affairs Committee, was tabled in mid-June and drew almost immediate criticism from the League, especially after the opposition center-left lent its support to the measure. Those supporting the bill, League MP Federico Bricolo argued,

appear to ignore the fact that mosques and Islamic centers are not just places of worship but also forums for fundamentalist propaganda and the recruitment of terrorists, as took place at the Milan and Turin mosques. The ministers of the Islamic faith referred to in this bill have often been responsible for this recruitment.

According to Michele Saponara, the head committee member from Prime Minister Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, "The problem is verifying whether the religions which will be recognized by the new law will truly abide by our laws and the fundamental rights of man." For instance, he argued, "Muslim laws governing the family are in clear contrast with Italian ones. On points like these we must have absolute guarantees."

Furthermore, as an inescapable consequence of the bill, Muslim civil and religious rights would be codified regarding education, hospitals, barracks, and other institutions, and Muslim taxpayers in Italy would be allowed to assign a percentage of their income before taxes to their religion, just as Catholics and other recognized religious groups can. This is money that will, at the very least, fund mosques in Italy. Though the bill was signed by Prime Minister Berlusconi, one of his most influential advisors, priest-turned-politician Gianni Baget Bozzo, is firmly against it:

What's the sense of recognizing, in the name of religious freedom, full constitutional rights to a creed which does not recognize those values in its dispensation? Under several grounds Islam is incompatible with Italy's constitutions.

Taxpayer money, Bozzo argues, "would end up funding those factions which are closest to terrorism."

During the National Symposium on Narco-Terrorism at DEA headquarters in Virginia last December, Larry C. Johnson, a specialist in money-laundering investigations, contrasted traditional money-laundering operations with a less-conventional system he termed the "money-dirtying process." Speaking particularly of the bin Laden network, he pointed out that

We've also seen . . . the money does not start out . . . as dirty money. It doesn't start out as money generated from illegal activities. In fact, in some of the cases, it's money generated by charitable contributions that flows into bank accounts, flows through the system, and it's only when it comes out at

the other end [that it] is put in the hands of those folks who are going to go out and kill and murder people[. A]t that point you then have a criminal act.

Examples of this, recently reported in the *Financial Times*, are the huge sums of money being channeled from Islamic extremists in Great Britain to terrorists groups in the disputed region of Kashmir in India. The money is often collected after Friday prayers, under the auspices of human-rights charities, particularly in London, Manchester, and Cardiff. If this is already happening in Rome, Milan, and Turin, Italy may soon turn out to be the first Western country to fund an Islamic *jihād*, courtesy of its internal-revenue service.

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Letter From the Elsenborn Ridge

by Brian Kirkpatrick

The 99th's Last Mission



My father told me about his combat experience in World War II just once when I was a boy. I must have been under ten, and we were in a car at night. My clearest memory of what he told me is the story of the deer his unit killed with their carbines, and of their delight in the fresh meat.

Now that he's in his 70's, I hear many of his stories: the strange composition of his division, the 99th, and what the German general who couldn't cross the Elsenborn Ridge said about the 99th after the war; what my father did on the Danube that got him a Silver Star nomination, and how he lost it when he fell asleep on guard duty in a rear area. Sometimes, my father seems to be hiding other stories, such as what he traded his coveted cigarettes for while he was in Paris.

The stories started to flow in 1995, when he went on a trip with other mem-

bers of the division to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, the 99th's first major engagement. The American veterans were astonished that, so many years later, the Belgians greeted them like heroes. When my mother describes the cider and chocolates, her face—now half-paralyzed—still lights up. After that trip, my father began to talk about his experiences, and he hasn't missed the division's annual reunion since.

My parents live in Texas, so when the 99th's reunion brings them close to Baltimore, I find myself among the division's aging alumni, their wives, and their grown children. The 99th is a skeleton operation now, providing support services, and is no longer a combat infantry unit. As a consequence, when the Division Association meets, nearly all of the members are well into their 70's. Unavoidably, the number who can attend is smaller every year. At the closing banquet, they bring out the bottle of champagne in a chest, with which the last man is supposed to toast his lost comrades. My father told me that he and a friend have agreed that, when only the two of them are left, they'll drink it together. "It wouldn't be as much fun to drink it alone," my father said.

For my father, there are already times when the meetings seem terribly lonely. I heard about the first absence that night long ago, when I was a small boy. According to the first version my father heard, Dean, his boyhood friend, was standing—*standing*—in his foxhole, reading a letter from his girlfriend, when the artillery shell landed, killing him instantly.

"The first thing I thought," my father said, "was 'How could he have been so stupid?' I was furious."

My father was just 20.

The other absence hurts more now, because it's more recent. Dick, my father's foxhole partner—the man with whom he slept in rain and snow, who kept him alive and was kept alive by him—is absent. Alzheimer's has taken Dick from my father, something the Germans tried and failed to do.

My father usually tries to get out of telling his stories, saying others should speak instead. Twice, he was in a rear area because of injury: once, because of a fall that injured his back, and once, because of a minor wound. As a consequence, he wasn't with his friends at the battle in the area of the Remagen bridge.

To him, the fact that he lay in the snow for a month in the woods of Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge, and suffered permanent damage to his feet from frostbite, or that he was nominated for a Silver Star when the division crossed the Danube, can't make up for his absence when G Company of the 395th had their third great battle.

All of the men say similar things: that others should speak; that each of them did nothing special; that someone else was the hero. The 99th was badly outnumbered when the German veterans made their push for the Dutch coast during the Battle of the Bulge. Someone kept the Germans off the Elsenborn Ridge, but to hear these men tell it, none of them had much to do with it.

The men of the 99th laugh a lot at the reunions, but, when they tell the serious stories, there is always that subtext of guilt. G Company's former commander—still called "Captain" by all the men—told me about the time, in a quiet area, when he arranged for the company to have a rare hot meal. As the first group gathered in a walled garden, a hidden German observer called in an artillery barrage. Of course, the Captain couldn't have known there were any Germans around, but he still lacerates himself for those deaths.

Why do they all seem to feel guilty? They were part of the effort that closed the German concentration camps and liberated the grateful Belgians. Moreover, they had little choice but to fight. Still, I think that, by their lights, they have committed two terrible sins. First, they all killed other men, or tried to. And, unlike so many of their friends, they are still alive. Each year, the burden of that last crime increases.

The 99th is on a final, teaching mission, and my son is among their students. The lessons creep in, among the family gossip and war stories, and he learns them without realizing that I have put him in a classroom. He is coming to understand that young men, strong enough to walk from the Atlantic coast to southern Germany while carrying a heavy automatic weapon—that is, young men like him—all become old. That these old men have gone ahead of him and know about things he will encounter, even if he never has to lie in the snow with a rifle in a forest in Northern Europe. That there are good leaders, who are loved by their men for the rest of their lives, and bad ones, who, in their egotism, can order