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“Shots from a Luce Cannon”:

Combating Communism in Italy, 1953-1956

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Beginning with the April 1948 Italian national election campaign,¹ the United States invested large sums in economic aid and military assistance, along with substantial covert funds, to reduce the power of the Communist Party, the largest in Europe outside the Soviet bloc, and strengthen the governing Center coalition led by the Christian Democrats (DC) and Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi.* (U)

The first series of policy papers the National Security Council (NSC) produced after its creation in 1947 dealt with the possibility of the Communists winning the 1948 election or staging an insurrection to seize power.² A successor series (NSC 67) updating policy in 1950-51, in effect until the second year of the Eisenhower administration, was unusual in that its focus—the Communist threat—was narrower than most NSC papers covering a single country. The focus derived from the importance accorded the country’s strategic position. If the Soviet Union gained control of Italy, it “could dominate the Western Mediterranean and could apply substantial military power against the Balkans and Western Europe.”³ In 1951 President Truman established the Psychological Strategy

* The smaller coalition parties included the Republicans (PRI), Liberals (PLI), and Social Democrats (PSDI). In 1947 De Gasperi had ousted from his Cabinet the Communists (PCI) led by Palmiro Togliatti and the Socialists (PSI) under the leadership of Pietro Nenni. The Social Democrats, headed by Giuseppe Saragat, were Right-leaning Socialists who broke with the party and joined the Center electoral bloc that defeated a PCI-PSI bloc in the 1948 election. Small parties on the far Right not represented in the government included the Monarchists (PNM) and the neo-Fascist MSI. (U)

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Board (PSB) under which a working group compiled a checklist of actions and coordinated U.S. Government efforts to weaken Communist influence in the country. Although Eisenhower replaced the PSB with the Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) in 1953, the new body in effect retained the working group on Italy and a similar checklist of actions.⁴ (U)

Little changed in the new administration's approach to Italy's Communist problem, appearances to the contrary. In appointing Clare Boothe Luce in March 1953 as ambassador, the first woman to represent the United States at a major diplomatic post,⁵ Eisenhower essentially continued his predecessor's activist policy while giving it a different face. (U)

Luce soon became a center of attention as much for her glamour and an inclination to speak her mind openly—and sometimes too sharply--as for the groundbreaking nature of the appointment. She labeled it a myth that she talked too much. Once dubbed the "Candor Kid" by the *New Yorker*, now just shy of her fiftieth birthday, Luce had been a magazine editor, successful playwright (among others, the Broadway hit, *The Women*), and reporter for *Life* magazine at the outset of World War II. Beginning in 1943 she served two terms in Congress, becoming the first female member of the House Armed Services Committee. After failing in 1952 to win the Republican nomination for the Senate from Connecticut, she and her second husband, Henry R. Luce, publisher of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*, campaigned heavily for Eisenhower. No doubt the appointment was a reward for their support. Her recent conversion to Catholicism may have been a factor in her posting to a predominantly Catholic country.⁶ (U)

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The appointment was not widely welcomed in Italy. Embassy morale plummeted at the news. Minister Counselor Elbridge Durbrow, second in rank, lobbied the Foreign Ministry to reject the appointment. Another staff member thought of resigning. The popular Ellsworth Bunker, who had been in Rome as ambassador for less than a year, had to lecture the staff on the need for supporting his successor.⁷ The Italian press reacted negatively. A cartoon portrayed the American flag edged in lace hanging from the Embassy building. Some Italians did not like the idea of relations with an important country like the United States being handled by a woman. Others thought her Catholicism meant a boost for clerical influence within the government. But, particularly on the Right, people began to point out that her ties to President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles could only help Italy and her husband's publications might enhance Americans' image of the country. Despite all the grumbling, De Gasperi decided to accept the appointment, reportedly saying, "If the President of the United States wants to send a woman she will be more than welcome. I have already met her and like her."⁸ (U)

Under Bunker the Embassy tried to pull back from the highly visible role it had played during the 1948 election campaign and keep in the background. Injecting the United States into the Italian scene, he believed, only helped the Communists. U.S. policy "should be as self-effacing as possible and let the Italians get the credit for the material progress which has been made." Luce was aware of the expectation that she should maintain a low profile. Shortly after her nomination a reporter asked if she would predict the outcome of the national election later that spring or offer advice on how Italians should vote. She replied, "We don't like people or other nations to interfere in our elections. . . . Why should they?" She confided to a friend: "I think it will be a time for

me to go quietly about my ambassadorial business, indicating that we simply do not interfere in other people's affairs." Given her outspoken personality, this may have been impossible. As a biographer noted, Luce was "to the limelight what certain actors are to the camera: they love each other on a level almost below consciousness, and can find each other in a London fog."⁹ (U)

It did not take long for Italians to warm to her. By summer British Ambassador Victor Mallet observed that "the phenomenon of a woman Ambassador excited the Italian imagination to such an extent that Mrs. Luce has had to put up with a kind of film star reception wherever she goes. Luckily, she seems rather to like queening it in this manner, but it makes it difficult for Italian politicians and her diplomatic colleagues to deal with her in business matters on an ordinary footing of equality." He sized her up as "goodlooking and beautifully dressed" with much "personal charm to mix with her not too profound intelligence," noting that she was "a convinced feminist" eager "to show that a woman can do the job as well as a man." He added somewhat condescendingly that she was "hardworking enough to make a suitable Ambassador." Luce's celebrity status was reflected in a poll showing that within a month almost 50% of Italians knew her name, while only 2 percent knew Bunker's.¹⁰ (U)

It is open to question whether she helped during her three-and-a-half years' tenure to fortify the Center parties and weaken the Communists, primarily by selectively awarding Offshore Procurement Program (OSP)* contracts to reduce Communist

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* Financed under the Military Defense Assistance Program (MDAP), offshore procurement provided funds for U.S. purchase of military equipment manufactured in other countries and its presentation to allies (often the country of manufacture) for their military forces. By April 1954 the United States had placed contracts in European NATO

influence in Italian labor unions and by covertly funneling large sums of money to Center parties and organizations, though not nearly as much as generally believed. When she left Italy the relative electoral positions of the parties had changed only slightly. Although her main mission was political, military matters occupied much of her time. In addition to involving herself heavily in the implementation of the OSP program, she sought Italian backing for the European Defense Community (EDC), wrapped up agreements governing U.S. military facilities and the status of U.S. forces in Italy, helped to resolve the Trieste controversy that in the fall of 1953 brought Italy and Yugoslavia close to war, and wrestled with the question of possible U.S. military intervention should civil war break out in Italy. (U)

The Disappointing 1953 National Election

By the time Luce arrived in Rome fears had lessened of a possible Communist insurrection or a Left bloc victory in the next national election, though the Center's electoral strength had been declining in local elections. (U)

During the 1948 election campaign military contingency planning played a large part in Washington's thinking. If the Communists came to power legally, the Truman administration decided it would carry out a limited mobilization, further strengthen military forces in the Mediterranean, begin combined planning with allies, and provide financial and military assistance to any anticommunist underground that might emerge. The CIA expected that anticommunist forces would try to prevent a communist government from consolidating power but would not be able to overthrow it or hold areas under their control "without immediate and substantial foreign assistance." The Joint

countries amounting to \$1.7 billion, roughly half of which was for ammunition. (Ismay, *NATO: The First Five Years*, 137.) (U)

Chiefs deemed sending additional U.S. air and naval forces to the region feasible. Because deploying ground forces would deplete a reserve already dangerously low, they advocated reinstatement of the draft. They also pointed out that neither limited nor general mobilization would significantly boost combat strength until at least a year after mobilization had started.¹¹ (U)

Concerned also with the possibility—late in 1947 considered a likelihood—that the Communists would use force to seize power, the United States wanted to rush delivery to Italy of military equipment for the government's use in controlling disturbances expected during the campaign and immediately following the election. De Gasperi initially balked, fearing that knowledge of the shipments would give the Communists propaganda fodder, but eventually relented. The equipment, mostly small arms ammunition, began to arrive in early April 1948 without notice via Germany.¹² (U)

Just before the election, the Joint Chiefs finalized plans to move U.S. air and naval forces to the Mediterranean as a show of force. A year later, however, they concluded that several positive developments, including the favorable outcomes of the Italian and French elections, the establishment of NATO, and the Soviet-Yugoslav split had obviated the need to have military supplies and equipment pre-stocked to carry out the movement of these forces, planning for which they now considered "a contingent rather than a firm demand."¹³ (U)

By the beginning of 1953 the Communist Party was downplaying the use of violence and subordinating preparations for insurrection to lawful political activities. Although it had maintained a paramilitary organization of more than 50,000 members, that number had apparently been declining; there was no evidence the party intended to

augment these forces in the near future. Police occasionally discovered and seized weapons hidden in large caches but found them in poor condition. A State Department analysis concluded that in the unlikely event the party attempted a major insurrection, government authorities could ruthlessly suppress it. Even in northern areas where the party was strong, only a Soviet invasion would give it any prospect of carrying out successful revolutionary action.¹⁴ (U)

The national election held 7-8 June, the first since 1948, confronted Luce with an immediate challenge. Originally scheduled for April, the State Department had wanted Bunker to remain in Rome until it was over. When the date was pushed back, State, worried that it would appear he was staying to manage another U.S. intervention, decided Luce should arrive before the election.¹⁵ (U)

In the contest for the more important lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, the Center coalition suffered a huge setback, winning 49.8 % of the popular vote, a sharp drop from the 62% achieved in 1948. It narrowly retained control with a majority of 16 seats rather than the 160 it had enjoyed.¹⁶ The biggest gains accrued not to the Communists but to their allies, Nenni's Socialist Party, and to the neo-Fascist and Monarchist parties of the far Right. What made the result even more disappointing was the failure of the Center coalition to benefit from a modified electoral law, labeled the "swindle law" by the far Left and the far Right, whereby it would have received almost two-thirds of the Chamber seats had it won just a bare majority of the popular vote.¹⁷ (U)

The poor showing was not unexpected. Although one historian has claimed that American officials viewed the coalition's prospects with much optimism,¹⁸ it is more accurate to describe official opinion as ranging from alarm to cautious optimism. With

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the coalition's electoral strength already falling to around 51% in the 1952 local elections, Bunker appealed to the CIA for increased subsidies for the Center parties prior to the 1953 national election. Some [REDACTED] perhaps more, would be needed, he said. Embassy opinion unanimously held "that the fate, not only of everything we have done here, but our present position in Italy, and our hopes for the future" hinged on the election's outcome. If the Center lost, Bunker declared, "I believe we shall be picking up the pieces not only in Italy but all over Europe for years."¹⁹ (S)

Subsequent prognoses brightened a little but remained mixed. On returning to Washington in the spring, Bunker told Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles that the election would be quite close; there was a "fair possibility" the Center would win "a fraction more than the 50% of the total vote." But a State official monitoring the campaign felt the prospects "did not point unequivocally to a victory for the center coalition."²⁰ Two weeks prior to the election State thought the Center would obtain around 51%. On election eve the Embassy held to what it had been saying throughout the spring: It anticipated a "rather slim margin" of victory for the Center, an outcome the CIA also foresaw.²¹ However disappointing, the Center's winning just under 50 percent of the popular vote therefore came as no big surprise. (U)

Luce's first major public address may have contributed to the Center's setback. In Milan on 28 May, little more than a week before the election, she warned that "if--though it cannot happen--the Italian people should fall unhappy victim to the wiles of totalitarianism, totalitarianism of the right or left, there would logically follow, logically and tragically, grave consequences for this intimate and warm cooperation we now

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enjoy." From the Left and the Right came charges that the implied threat of a U.S. aid cutoff constituted meddling.²² (U)

Although one of Luce's staff contended that the speech "said what needed to be said" but had served as "a convenient means of criticism" for people "who hated a woman Ambassador anyway," British Ambassador Mallet felt it "may have done more harm than good." Washington officials reportedly preferred that the remarks, not cleared by State, had been worded more diplomatically, but they had no intention of disavowing or clarifying them. The *Washington Post* called them an "inexplicable breach of diplomatic propriety" that would not help the Center's chances. After the results were in, while acknowledging that many other factors had been at play, the *Post* again mentioned the Milan speech, emphasizing that a shift of one per cent of the votes would have made a huge difference in the Chamber's composition.²³ (U)

Then and later Luce strove to counter criticism that her remarks had cost the Center coalition the bonus seats, contending that they created more of a stir in the United States than in Italy. She liked to repeat De Gasperi's argument that the Cold War thaw following Stalin's death, and particularly British Prime Minister Churchill's call for an East-West summit, had been responsible. Months afterwards she told an Italian newspaper that two staff members had written the speech, both of whom had since left Rome. She eventually identified Durbrow as responsible for the warning comments, saying she had wanted to remove them from the speech but he had insisted they stay. Luce's social secretary, who claims to have typed the speech, recalled the ambassador working on it for five days. Presumably repeating what Luce told her, she said that the ambassador had discussed it with Secretary Dulles and others at State, implying that the