

## A League of Our Own

by Thomas Fleming

Nineteen ninety-two was an opportunity for Americans to reflect on both their past and their future. In less than a month, we celebrated the birthday of Columbus and the transfer of power from the New Deal to the Big Chill, from the civics-class pieties of George Bush to the *Penthouse* improprieties of Bill Clinton.

I watched a good part of the campaign from an Italian vantage-point. I went to Italy primarily to speak about Columbus and the American tradition and to continue my very limited education in things Italian. At the end of the month, I was more confused than ever about Italian politics, but—as is always the case—I had learned something about my own country.

A year or so ago, a part-Italian friend took me to task for saying that Italy was in crisis. Without admitting I was right then, he now acknowledges the real sense of emergency that exists everywhere in Italy. At the end of the summer, the middle classes were practically up in arms against the government's handling of economic questions. Faced with mounting debt, the government ordered property-owners to pay a second round of real-estate taxes. All over Italy, people lined up to pay the impost and avoid the threatened penalties, only to discover that no one knew how much was owed, and, besides, the government had not printed up the tax forms.

The government wanted the extra money, in part, to pursue its futile plan to stabilize the lira on world markets. After hearing, day after day, that the lira would never be devalued, businessmen woke up one morning to read of the devaluation. Even opponents of the policy were outraged, and one businessman told me that the regime had forfeited any claim to be taken seriously.

The Italian economy is in ruins; none of the major parties inspires confidence even in loyal members; the Mafia is murdering every judge and prosecutor who stand in its way. In the midst of this crisis, the labor unions—pampered and coddled by the government—are once again threatening strikes that will shut down the entire country, just like in the good old days of the 1970's. I got up early one morning in Genoa to

catch the train to Milan, and when I asked the desk clerk to call me a cab, she gave me a crude version of Hotspur's response to Owen Glendower's boast that he could summon spirits: "But will they come when you do call for them?" Somewhere in the monologue I picked out the most dreaded word in Italian vocabulary: *sciopero* (strike).

The unions have a right to be unhappy. After squandering vast sums of money on monetary stabilization, the government decided to balance the budget by cutting health benefits. The unions—part of the party-state that governs the country—went along, but when the most powerful union leader in Italy attempted to hold a rally, he was attacked by union members who have joined the Lega Nord, a coalition of localist movements in Northern Italy that preaches a doctrine of economic liberty and political decentralization.

The Lega has increased its share of the vote in every recent election and is now the dominant party in the rich industrial North. In response to the double taxation, Lega's leaders called for a tax protest; their answer to government-controlled unions is to form their own unions; and their solution—only half in jest—to the collapse of the lira is to coin their own money, the Lega.

The ruling coalition is terrified. Opinion polls in Monza and Varese, two wealthy cities in Lombardia, gave the Lega 35 percent or better in the next mayoral elections—high figures in a country with dozens of parties. The government responded to these polls by postponing the elections. Umberto Bossi's threat, reported in the *Corriera della sera* last September, could not have been plainer: "If the government will not reverse its decisions, a march on Rome could start from Milan to ask for the North's secession."

Bossi's hand was strengthened by a recent victory in Mantova, a city outside the center of the Lega's strength. For the first time in years the Socialists openly campaigned together with the former Communist Party leader, Achille Occhetto, in a popular front with the Greens for the sole purpose of defeating the Lega, but when the votes were counted the Lega Nord polled 34 percent, roughly double what the second-place

Christian Democrats (DC) received.

A high-ranking official of the Lega asked me what I thought of the government's postponement of elections, and when I called it "*un piccolo colpo di stato*," he smiled and expressed his agreement. The elections were rescheduled for December (the day after the election an Italian friend called to say "*La Lega ha stravinto*"—it won hands down). So far, the second march on Rome has not materialized, but it is possible to sense the trembling of the DC leadership even from one thousand miles away. Former head of state Francesco Cossiga, in an interview in London, performed an uncharacteristic act of truckling diplomacy: "I prefer to think of it as an excursion (*passeggiata*)," he commented, explaining that unions and parties always come to Rome for their meetings. The headline should have read: "NEW LIGHT SHED ON MUSSOLINI."

Perhaps more frightening than Bossi's original threat was his denial last October of any plans for a march. Conceding that if he did decide to march "the citizens would support us," he explained that it was only his "profound democratic conviction that prevented him from venturing upon solutions of this type."

I cannot think of a major American political figure since MacArthur who would let a little thing like democratic process stand in the way of his ambitions. If, for the time being, the head of the Lega Nord has rejected "solutions of this type," he began his electoral march on Rome several years ago. At the end of the 1980's, when the *leghisti* were boasting of getting 10 or 15 percent of the vote in local elections in Lombardia, the movement was considered a joke. Reviving the dialect and customs of their Lombard ancestors, the members of the Lega Lombarda struck most educated Italians as participants in a historical pageant representing Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*. Even two years ago, when the Lega's threat was confined to the North, Italians made fun of me for expressing an interest in a movement that was as irritating as it was quaint. They laughed when I tried to explain that whatever they might think of the style of the "Senatur" (Lombard for "senator"), his message of decentralized federalism and economic reform offered the only hope for Italy.

In general, the *leghisti* would like a new constitution along the lines of Swiss federalism. The country would be divided into three republics of the North, Center, and South, which would function like Swiss cantons and maintain considerable autonomy in political, cultural, and economic affairs. Although regional and local autonomy is part of Bossi's original conception, the Swiss flavor of the three republics owes something to Gianfranco Miglio, a senator and political scientist often described as the Lega's ideologue, even though he is technically independent.

Miglio has spent much of his professional life analyzing the deficiencies of the Italian constitution and proposing such remedies as a directly elected president and large autonomous regions. In his most recent book, *Come cambiare*, Miglio once again defends his idea of a federal system of macroregions and of a new *Unione italiana* that would give the peoples of Italy the rights of self-determination guaranteed by the Helsinki agreement.

Under a federal system, the historic regions of Italy—Lombardia, Toscana, Veneto, etc.—would be able to assert their cultural identities without interference from bureaucrats imported from other parts of the country. Traditionally, Ital-

ians have accepted the imposition of senior officials from outside as a guarantee of impartiality, a custom that echoes the institution of the *podesta* of the later Middle Ages. What disgusts many Northern Italians is the swarm of Southern bureaucrats, teachers, and policemen who have little or no sympathy with the customs and traditions of Lombardia or Piemonte.

---

**In general, the *leghisti* would like a new constitution along the lines of Swiss federalism.**

**The country would be divided into three republics of the North, Center, and South, which would function like Swiss cantons and maintain considerable autonomy in political, cultural, and economic affairs.**

---

One key to the Lega's growing popularity is its position on immigration. In reasserting the cultural identity of its regions, a federalized Italy would move to expel illegal aliens and tighten restrictions on immigrants. Despite the popularity of the Lega's stand on immigration, it—more than anything else—was responsible for much of the bad press.

The really explosive issue, though, is not foreign immigration, but domestic. Northern Italian hostility to Sicilians and other Southerners is proverbial. While much of the generalized resentment is unjustified—Sicilians take jobs that Lombards are unwilling to accept—it is also true that the Southerners have brought their way of life with them, which includes revenge killings, the drug trade, and their great criminal organizations, the Mafia, the Camorra, and the *'ndrangheta*.

Italian crime syndicates are no joke. In America we might entertain the fantasy that the Genoveses or Gambinos are just like Vito Corleone, but their cousins in Italy—the real Corleone family, by the way—are lethal parasites upon the political and economic systems. Giorgio Bocca in *La disUNITÀ d'Italia* made plain for even the simplest readers what the situation is in the South: "connected" judges rigging acquittals and token sentences; appeals judges overturning convictions; sequestered gangsters returning to Palermo and Naples to resume their careers. Two honest judges in Palermo were compelled to meet in secret to prevent their colleagues from leaking information to friends in the Mafia. One of them was assassinated in 1983. More recently, the most famous anti-Mafia judge in Italy, Giovanni Falcone, was the victim of a car bomb powerful enough to have taken out a small village.

Everyone has always known that the Mafia was instrumental in delivering the Sicilian vote to the Christian Democrats. Americans can hardly point a finger at the Italians, since it was our own President, Franklin Roosevelt, who restored the Mafia after it had been effectively scotched, if not killed, by the Fascists. Ever since the war, the Mafia has been a political fact of life in much of the South, and if the Christian Democrats were going to succeed against the Communists, they could not afford to be selective about their allies. But who is

the master and who the servant in this alliance? There have been persistent rumors that Salvo Lima, the DC's power-broker in Sicily and longtime friend of former party secretary Giulio Andreotti, was connected with the Cosa Nostra leader "Totò" Riina. Despite Andreotti's frequent denials, Lima has been named more than once by Mafia *pentiti* (informers) as their ambassador to the DC.

Several years ago, when Umberto Bossi declared that a vote for the DC was a vote for the Mafia, his critics cried "for shame," because he had slandered the greatest statesman in contemporary Italy, the fox who had by his own machinations kept Italy in the Western alliance and prevented a Communist-Socialist takeover. If the allegations are proved, they will do nothing to diminish Andreotti's accomplishments except to reveal him as one more great man who learned to value power for its own sake.

What really offends Northern Italians about the Mafia is the hold it appears to exercise over DC politicians and the ease with which it extorts millions out of government contracts. In the new Mafia, drugs and prostitution are small potatoes. The big-ticket items are highways, office buildings, and welfare fraud. I spent an afternoon touring a great city in the North accompanied by a Sicilian lady of great charm and erudition. Although she has spent her professional life in the North, she remains a Sicilian patriot, and as we drove by a great new building, she explained, "It makes me so proud. A Sicilian company got the contract. To get work done of this quality, they had to go all the way to Sicily."

It is, in fact, a magnificent building, and the contract may well have been on the level, but none of the natives I spoke with would even concede the possibility. (If the lady reads this, I hope she has forgotten her promise to come to America to kill me if I say anything bad about Sicily.) The Sicilians do have their own story to tell, of how they were conquered by Northerners who have been complaining ever since about the problem of the South, but it is time to give up those resentments and to acknowledge that a federal system will ultimately do as much for the South as it does for the North. As it is, by depending heavily on the largesse distributed by Rome, some Southern Italians have become like the Québécois in Canada: impotent and resentful. Autonomy would force them to address their own problems.

When I made this statement to a member of the Lega Liguria in Genoa, he was very skeptical. Federalism will work in the North, he insisted, because Northerners are capable of self-government, but only a strong central government can do anything about the Mafia. But Italy has a centralized government, and it appears to be under the Mafia's thumb.

The polemics of the leghe against Southerners caused few problems so long as they were strictly regional movements, but with the chance for national power in sight, Senator Bossi, it has been predicted, will have to tone down the rhetoric. Paul Piccone, in a special issue of *Telos* devoted to the leghe (Winter '91-'92), notes that "ethnicity was officially abandoned with the launching of the Northern League. . . . The radical decentralization and federalization of the present unitary state . . . should . . . allow the populations of both South and North to put their own houses in order." Piccone's analysis—and predictions—were borne out at the end of October, when Bossi suspended a local secretary in Trent for holding demonstrations telling Southerners to go home.

Although the power center of the Lega Nord continues to be Lombardia, its strength is growing in other regions: the Veneto, Emilia (where the Reds are deserting the Communist parties for the Lega), the Piedmont, and even Liguria. In the North as a whole, one recent poll gives the Lega 22 percent (which would be up from 10.3 in the last communal elections), just behind the DC's 23.4 percent (down from 33.4).

In broadening their base, the leghe may run the risk of losing their regional identities. In Liguria, for example, the emphasis is almost strictly on economic and political reform. I spoke with a Ligurian Leghista, a lawyer, who was faintly amused by the Lombard myths and symbols—the *carroccio*, the oath of Alberto da Guisanno, the songs in dialect—and cast the Lega Nord's program in terms that would appeal to students of Austrian economics: an end to corruption and welfare fraud, the deregulation and privatization of banking, commerce, and industry.

In fact, he described himself as *liberalista* in economics and against the current *industria dello stato*, which means intervention of politicians into all levels of business. It was such intervention that led to the great bribery scandal—the so-called "*tangenti*"—in which leading members of the Socialist Party have been implicated. In September, one of the most-beloved Socialist leaders shot himself, rather than face the music. The response of party chief Bettino Craxi has been to denounce the judges. Bets are being made on how long Craxi can remain the Socialist *capo dei capi*, and the smart money is selling short on Craxi and long on his chief critic, Claudio Martelli, the best friend of Italy's illegal immigrants. Despite his personal charm, Martelli's hip Third-Worldism may make Socialists long for the old-fashioned crook.

Of the Lega Lombarda's original program, decentralization remains an important issue, even in Liguria. The *comuni*, I was told by my friend in the Lega Liguria, have lost the power to control taxation because of the "need" to drain resources toward the South. As a result it is impossible to have balanced local budgets, no matter which party is in power.

The North/South problem is really a difference in the "*modo di pensare*" (way of thinking). The Sicilians are not so much lazy as aristocratic and disdainful of manual work. This, combined with their refusal to see government in any but personal terms, has meant the persistence of feudalism, albeit in distorted forms. From one perspective, at least, this description makes the Sicilians seem much more attractive than the hardworking and responsible *borghesia* of the North, whose regional and local identities have been homogenized, my Genovese friend observed, by television.

A few days after leaving Genoa—my kind friend from the Lega had to drive me to the station because of the strike—I had the chance to speak with Dr. Elia Manara, a distinguished physician in Como and one of the Lega's newest senators. Since Dr. Manara, the Lega's point-man on health care, is unusually well-informed on practical matters of economics and technology, he is a far cry from the sentimental regionalism of the early days. I asked him if the leagues were in danger of losing their regional identities. He explained that while maintaining their local attachments, the leagues were also discovering a common unity in a larger Northern ecosystem that Miglio and others call *Padania*. He derided the notion of the universal citizen and went on to reject Italian nationalism as a fascist idea. As a metaphor for the whole movement,



he described Lombard provincialism as the locomotive of the autonomist train.

Manara regards himself as the very opposite of an ideologue. As a scientist, he is interested in the self-evident principles of human nature as they are revealed in history and experience. Federalism, he insisted, because it is rooted in human nature, is a theory for human survival. We talked of the original American system of federalism as a successful example to set beside Switzerland. I explained that, while our system had been undone by war, the federalist thinking of Jefferson, Madison, and Calhoun had new relevance in both Europe and the Americas.

But if the Italians have much to learn from our past, we can benefit from a study of Italy's present. In Genoa, because of an international convention of philatelists, I had to stay in an old hotel out in Sturla. Neither the hotel nor the neighborhood had much to recommend it, except for the view of the harbor from my balcony. It was from here that Garibaldi launched his invasion of Sicily and helped to inaugurate that process of centralization that every major Italian statesman—from Cavour to Mussolini to Andreotti—has followed. After World War II, various federalist provisions were written into the new constitutions, but few were implemented and those few were circumvented if not hamstrung, corrupted if not ignored. The result is the familiar spectacle of a corrupt conspiracy of a few thousand politicians micro-managing the lives of millions of people, most of whom could get along quite well with a minimum of intervention.

The current economic situation is so acute that many Italians, in and out of the leagues, are beginning to rethink the basic political mythology of the nation—the *Risorgimento*, Garibaldi, and Cavour. We are not quite so desperate, here in the United States, but who knows what thoughts we might entertain after four years of “Compagno Bill” in the White House.

Our own political mythology is built on the doctrine of equality, open borders at home, and the imposition of democracy abroad; the heroes of our myths are Presidents Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt who made war for the sake of peace, suspended laws for the sake of the Constitution, and thought domestic tyranny was the best vehicle for exporting democracy. Some Italians are brave enough to confess the mistakes of the past and intelligent enough to long for the kind of government our own ancestors lived under. What about us?

\* \* \*

POSTSCRIPT: Are Americans ready for something like a League of their own? None of the three candidates in the recent presidential election was willing to face the reality of life in America: the rioting and rampages perpetrated by an underclass that consists, for the most part, of unassimilated minorities. Pillaging, arson, and murder have taken place in Los Angeles and Miami, but since these criminals were fighting under the black flag of racial sensitivity, the leadership of this country refused to defend the innocent. In New York, a murderer was turned loose by a jury, because the killer was black and the victim Jewish. Shortly afterwards, Spike Lee turned out a hagiography of a pimp and a con-artist who evolved into a leading anti-white racist, and the only controversy over the film had to do with teenagers who sport the “X” symbol without reflecting deeply on its meaning. They do not need to reflect on Spike or Malcolm; they have already imbibed the symbol's meaning from Ice-T and Sister Souljah.

With widespread public approval, the outgoing President, eager to relive the thrill of the Gulf War, decided to send troops to Somalia. To judge from the columns, news programs, and call-in shows, Americans think this is a good idea, because they could not bear to see all those pictures of starving Somalians on network television. Rather than turn off the set and find a book to read, we go to war. What, in the meantime, is news, big news? News is when the addleheaded female who owns controlling interest in the Cincinnati Reds is accused of telling race jokes in the office. This calls for investigations, denunciations in Congress, and demonstrations organized by such major-league racists as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson.

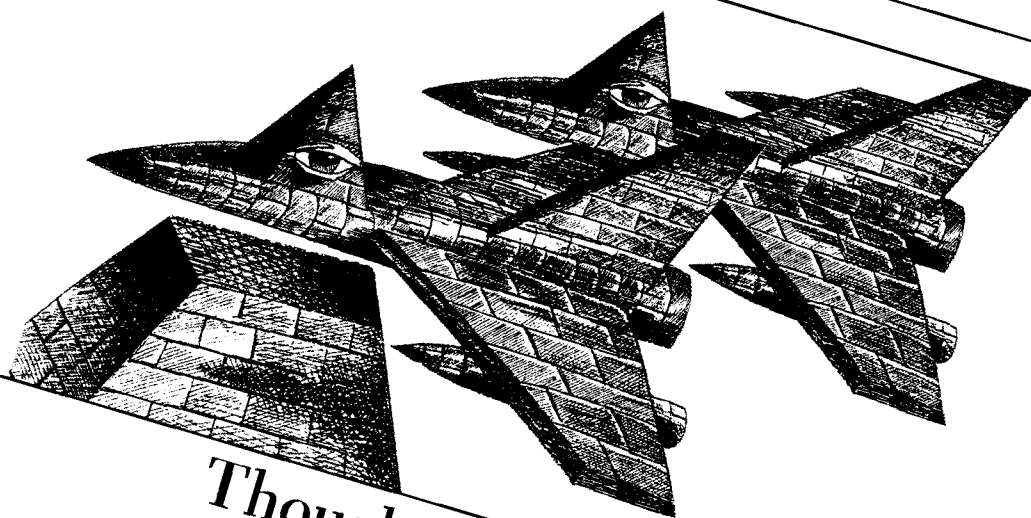
Apart from our collective soft head on matters of ethnic sensitivity, what is the connection between Marge Schott and the invasion of Somalia? We no longer know how to mind our own business, take care of our own neighborhoods, defend our own interests. We get our kicks from TV riots and African civil wars, and when the station signs off, we sleep a sleep untroubled by dreams of what we and our representative government are doing, in failing to protect us at home while sending armies abroad to lay down the peace. We created the problem in Somalia by inflicting the humanitarian aid that resulted in a population that cannot be sustained. At the same time, we are pursuing an immigration policy that even David Broder now realizes will turn the United States into Somalia. If human life is so precious, why don't we protect it in Detroit, in Miami, or in Cabrini Green?

If something like a League movement were to develop here in the States, urban majors would not be calling upon the National Guard to restore order; it would be up to the cities and even the neighborhoods to defend themselves. We would have a national government, but it would be restricted to defending the national interest, not to giving away American lives to a debating society for the criminally insane—the United Nations.

There are only two alternatives for this continental empire that has never been a real nation: either we find the means to decentralize decision-making and restore authority to the old institutions of family and town and county (and even state), or else we lapse into a multifaceted civil war of blacks against Hispanics against whites against blacks against Jews. . . . It is too late for a man on horseback leading a militia of populist rednecks. There aren't enough rednecks to go around—besides, Bubba is too busy watching X-rated movies on his Japanese-made VCR. Bubba and his Midwestern counterparts might have just enough manhood left in them to stand up for themselves and their families, if they have no alternative, but they—or rather we—will have to be dragged, kicking and screaming, before we will take responsibility for ourselves.

The revolution cannot be made overnight, and the first step would be the creation of a movement devoted to the long-range goals of political devolution, privatization (ours is not a free enterprise system), protection of the national interest in matters of immigration, trade, and foreign policy, and the reassertion of our old cultural identities as a European and—dare we echo the Governor of Mississippi? —a Christian nation. If there is no movement or party willing to embrace a Leghist program, then one needs to be formed, and if that is impossible, my advice is to stockpile ammunition and invest in bullet-proof doors and shutters.

c



## Thoughts of Empire

by F.W. Brownlow

When Mikhail Gorbachev declared that he was going to withdraw Russian troops from Afghanistan, people were so entranced by his supposed sincerity that they neglected more interesting aspects of the announcement. If it was genuine—and there was no convincing argument for thinking it was not—then it was the first sign, as those familiar with the vicissitudes of empire recognized, that the Russian will to domineer was weakening. The moment the besieged states of the West had been waiting for had arrived, and it passed almost unnoticed.

Having been a schoolboy under a headmaster who as late as 1947 was telling his pupils that to be accepted into the Indian Civil Service was an honor few men deserved and even fewer achieved, my credentials as an amateur empire-watcher are pretty good. What is more, the bones of my kinsmen are all over this globe, and when I was 15 or so and people began to ask what I wanted to do, one of my first answers was that the colonial service looked tempting. It was my father, until then the only realist I had ever met, who told me that by the time I left school there would be precious little left for a colonial servant to serve.

Liberal wisdom tells us that empires end because private virtue and public conscience prevail and that the result is progress. There is not much truth in that, nor in the left-wing view that empires end because history will have it so. Empires mostly end because imperialists get tired. Empires begin as great adventures promising immense rewards in wealth and self-esteem, but they demand commensurately great sacrifices, which, in time, prove unpayable. Too many sons and daughters go away and never return, and in time the emotional, moral, and economic discipline of empire exhausts the stay-at-homes as well. What kept the British Empire going as long as it did was the optimism and high spirits of several generations of upper-class schoolboys, trained for imperial administration in a peculiar, strictly regimented, and often fantastic system of education. Yet even schoolboys lose their enthusiasm, with the consequence that King-Emperor George V must have intuited when he asked on his deathbed, "What of the Empire?"

For the British Empire, the turning point was the Boer War. That war's difficulties and losses were a shock to a people that had fallen into the habit of comfort and power. When young Chesterton and his pro-Boer friends observed that the Empire was fighting the Boers for claiming the same independence that the British considered their birthright, a significant large minority of their fellow subjects agreed. The conviction grew that in gaining an empire England had lost too much of its traditional character, and this feeling, joined to foreign competition and disapproval and to difficulties and discontents at home, provided moral cover for a process of disengagement from imperialism that two great wars could delay but not reverse.

Russian imperialism has nearly as long a history as British, although the Communist Empire we knew is a recent artifact, differing from the British in nearly every respect but one—that being an empire, it was based on the sacrifices of its people. In the case of Russia those sacrifices were so appalling that only a regime based on silence, lies, and brutality could have enforced them. Two things seem finally to have demoralized the Russian ruling class. First, there was the effect of the modern diffusion of information, speeded up by the vast state security apparatus. Russia's rulers poisoned themselves with information about the world they wanted to dominate. Second, into that situation came Ronald Reagan, who named the Russian Empire accurately before the world and who proved to be the first American President prepared to use

*F.W. Brownlow is a professor of English at Mt. Holyoke College.*