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WASHINGTON — On Nov. 9, the day before Leonid Brezhnev died, Italian Interior Minister Virginio Rognoni received a visit from the C.I.A.'s vice-chief of station in Rome and a staffer from the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee. The Americans wanted to know about the Bulgarian connection to the shooting of the Pope.

Mr. Rognoni explained that Ali Agca, the Turkish gunman, had been informed a few months before that Italy could not afford the cost of keeping him in solitary confinement much longer. To Mr. Agca, that meant he would be transferred to an ordinary prison and would promptly be murdered. That induced him to talk about the Bulgarian Government officials who hired him to kill the Pope.

"What proof do you have?" asked the C.I.A. man.

The man in charge of Italy's internal security laid out the facts: that the gunman was a cold-blooded killer for hire, and not a fanatic or ideologue; that he was able to pass into Bulgaria easily on an Indian passport and take up residence in a first-class hotel, which requires secret service knowledge; that he entered penniless and came out with \$50,000 from what is hardly a land of opportunity; that he was able to describe accurately the living quarters of the Bulgarian officials who were his controls and contacts; and that a flurry of electronic communication came out of the Bulgarian Embassy just before the attack on the Pope, similar to the activity that took place before an American general was abducted.

The C.I.A. man waved that all aside. "You have no proof," he said, and did his best to convey to the Italian Government a high degree of skepticism from the American Government.

"What proof do you want?" asked Mr. Rognoni. The circumstantial evidence already presented, along with some more that the gunman was expected to reveal, was the best that

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'You Have No Proof'

By William Safire

could be garnered on a covert operation. Nobody would come forward with a fingerprint of Yuri Andropov on the gun, but it was certain that no such mission could be undertaken without the permission of the K.G.B., then headed by Mr. Andropov.

According to one report of the meeting, the C.I.A. representative continued to view with distaste the conclusions being reached by the Italian investigators. Meanwhile, in other capitals — and in Washington — middle-level C.I.A. men with journalistic contacts have been pooh-poohing the story. In Rome, U.S. foreign service officers have been telling Italian diplomats that the investigation is an international embarrassment.

Thus, the Italian Government found itself pursuing a case that caused it to strain relations with a Communist neighbor and profoundly offend the new Soviet leader without the moral support of the government of the United States. The lackadaisical attitude of most of the U.S. press on this subject throughout the early winter — especially after the man who had to have at least guilty knowledge of the plot was elevated to the top post in the Kremlin — was seen by Italians as further evidence that the U.S. wanted the investigation shut down.

Why do we require tongs to touch

this story? Why are we setting ourselves standards of proof that the Soviet bloc will make impossible to meet?

One reason is humanly institutional: most spooks, after the C.I.A.'s flat rock was flipped over in the post-Watergate era, don't want anybody to think that assassination is part of any nation's "dirty tricks," and so they come to the defense of the K.G.B. in grand le Carré fashion, hinting that the evidence is part of an anti-Andropov plot. (An exception is former Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms, who was pointing a finger at this "classic intelligence operation" from the start.)

Another reason has to do with the workings of the American press: where does a story of such magnitude come off being broken in the Readers' Digest, and developed in detail by NBC, a mere television network? Such a story needs establishment legitimacy; only a major newspaper can properly provide that.

Then there is the bogglement factor: the story of the spymaster who gave the order to kill the Pope and thereby saved Poland from Solidarity and rose to the top in the Kremlin — that's a large lump of information to digest. Evil so audacious is unbelievable.

The central reason for the shameful reluctance to urge the Italians on is political: we have to deal with this man Andropov, say our doves, and if the chain of circumstance is drawn too tight we might not be able to trust the Soviets on arms control.

That fear of not being able to bring back détente motivates most of those who wish this awful trail of circumstance would vanish. We know enough; they do not want to know any more.

That is why, after facts are presented which compel common sense to lay the crime at the Kremlin door, we will hear the faceless officials complain, "you have no proof."