When Billionaires Pay Soldiers: The Case of Patriot Timothy Mellon

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In the United States, the news that **Timothy Mellon**, an eighty-three-year-old patriotic billionaire and heir to the historic Mellon financial dynasty, donated **130 million dollars to the Department of Defense** to help pay soldiers' salaries during the federal government shutdown caused a stir.

A gesture that former President Donald Trump called “patriotic,” but which raises **enormous legal and ethical questions**. In Italy, such an action would not only be unthinkable but also **illegal**.

The “Patriot” Who Funds the Pentagon

According to the *New York Times*, Mellon — known for his substantial donations to Republicans and Trump's campaigns — used a Pentagon provision that allows accepting donations “in general” for institutional purposes.

In this case, the condition was that the funds be used to cover part of the salaries of military

personnel, who were left without payment guarantees due to the federal budget paralysis.

Technically, the donation represents just **50 dollars per soldier**, but symbolically it introduces a much broader issue: **can a private individual substitute the State in guaranteeing fundamental public services, such as national defense?**

In the United States, where the culture of private patronage is ingrained, the line between philanthropy and political influence is often thin. Mellon, in fact, is not a disinterested benefactor: he is one of the main financiers of Trumpism, with over **140 million dollars given to Republican super PACs** just in 2024.

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In Italy: Such a Donation Would Be Prohibited

In Italy, such a “patriotic donation” would not be possible.
The **constitutional principle of independence and impartiality of public administration** (art. 97 Const.) prohibits state activities, particularly those related to **national security and defense**, from depending on private funds.

Even from an accounting perspective, the **Consolidated Law on State Accounting** (R.D. 2440/1923 and D.Lgs. 118/2011) and the **Court of Auditors** would prevent the acceptance of earmarked contributions that affect the management of public expenditures.
Moreover, the **public funding law** and anti-corruption regulations (L. 190/2012) prohibit any financial interference that could alter the neutrality of institutions.

In other words, if an Italian billionaire decided to “cover” part of the pay for the Carabinieri or the Army, **they would not be considered a patriot, but a dangerous precedent of privatization of public power**.

The Parallel with Italian Patrons

Of course, there are also cases of private **patronage** in Italy: restorations of monuments, cultural sponsorships, contributions to hospitals or universities.
Think of **Diego Della Valle** who financed the restoration of the Colosseum, or **Fendi** who supported that of the Trevi Fountain. But these interventions fall within the realm of **cultural heritage**, not the **sovereign function of the State**.

The difference is substantial: one thing is to finance a public good as a symbol of collective identity; another is to replace the State in paying its armed officials.

Between Patriotism and Power

The Mellon case opens a global debate: when does philanthropy turn into political power?
In the United States, where the distinction between money and politics is increasingly blurred, the billionaire's gesture is seen by some as an **act of generosity**, by others as a **form of disguised influence**.
In Italy, where distrust of public-private mixing is stronger, the risk would be perceived as a **direct threat to republican democracy**. After all, as Norberto Bobbio wrote, “the transparency of public power is the minimum condition of civil liberty.”
And when a single man — however rich or patriotic — can “pay the State,” that transparency becomes clouded.