

Italy's Watergate

Espionage, secrecy, and corruption: Lessons for the Bush administration.

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Global Research, July 30, 2006

[slate.com/](#) 27 July 2006

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

When Italian prosecutor Armando Spataro issued arrest warrants for 22 CIA officers last [November](#), for the 2003 kidnapping of an Egyptian cleric in Milan, it seemed like a hollow gesture. Spataro claimed that American operatives had snatched the imam, who is known as Abu Omar, and transported him to Egypt, where he was allegedly tortured. But there was no way the United States would extradite its spies, and it appeared that the Italian investigation of the murky practice of [extraordinary rendition](#) would go the way of [similar cases](#) in this country: nowhere.

But Spataro wasn't hampered by the sort of pervasive official secrecy that prevails in the United States, and his team turned up revealing [details](#) of the abduction. The more they dug, the more dirt they found. Before long, the investigation blossomed into a full-blown spy scandal, replete with domestic wiretapping and the mysterious death of one of the investigators. By early July, two of Italy's top spymasters were under arrest.

We haven't heard much about the story on this side of the Atlantic. (When asked whether he had discussed it at the G8 summit with President Bush, Italy's new Prime Minister Romano Prodi quipped that Bush probably doesn't even know "the initials" of Italy's spy agency, Sismi.) But this is Italy's Watergate. It has already revealed in unprecedented detail the anatomy of an extraordinary rendition. And it raises serious doubts about the Bush administration's "just trust us" insistence that behind the veil of secrecy, espionage is an honest, upstanding business.

In February 2003, Abu Omar (whose full name is Hasan Mustafa Osama Nasr) was under surveillance by Italy's special branch police force, the Digos, on suspicion of recruiting terrorists. Walking to mosque one day, he was whisked into a CIA van. The Digos didn't witness the event and wondered why the guy they had been tailing had suddenly disappeared. CIA officials [told](#) them that Omar was headed to the Balkans, when in fact he was being interrogated in an Egyptian prison.

When they learned of this deception more than a year later, prosecutors in Milan were outraged at the CIA's apparent violation of Italian sovereignty. The Americans had unquestionably strayed a bit outside their jurisdiction. And they'd carried out the rendition with a minimum of subtlety. In the weeks surrounding the abduction, they stayed at fine hotels, including Milan's Principe di Savoia (single room: \$588 a night), eventually racking up \$158,000 in room charges. The Rolling Stones keep a lower profile when they swing through Milan. The American operatives also used easy-to-tap, unsecure cell phones to coordinate their plans with headquarters in Langley, Va. And when the supposed architect of the mission, CIA Milan Chief Robert Seldon Lady, blew town, he forgot to pack a surveillance photo of Abu Omar. He left it (oops) in his apartment for the Digos to find. The message

seemed to be: Not only will we swoop into your country, screw your investigation, and steal your suspect—we're going to do it in broad daylight and leave a trail of clues, just because we can.

But that wasn't exactly the message, because the Italian government had given permission for the CIA's mission. When the story first broke, representatives of Silvio Berlusconi's government denied knowing anything about the rendition. But when Spataro's investigators questioned a Sismi operative, he [said](#) he had been told "in explicit terms" that the rendition was a joint operation between Sismi and the CIA. Suddenly this was no longer a story about Italian sovereignty. It was a turf battle between different security agencies—the Digos and Sismi—that were both after the same guy.

Which explains the peculiar thing that happened next: At the prosecutors' behest, Italian cops started wiretapping Italian spies. It's hard to say which is stranger—that cops would monitor the calls of their own country's spies, or that the spies would be foolish enough to say anything sensitive on an unencrypted line. In Italy prosecutors enjoy a great deal of institutional autonomy, and suspicion that Italian spooks had aided a crime was grounds enough for Spataro's team to start watching the watchers. Wiretapping is a favorite tactic in Italy—police and spies tap [100,000 phones](#) every year—and the prosecutors who had pieced together the CIA's movements by looking at phone records began doing the same with the Sismi brass. Tracing the phone of Marco Mancini, Sismi's No. 2, led them to a penthouse apartment on Via Nazionale, a popular shopping thoroughfare in Rome. On July 5, police raided the apartment and discovered a Sismi spy den filled with dossiers on various enemies of the Berlusconi regime. There were files on journalists, prosecutors, and businessmen, as well as evidence that Sismi had been paying reporters at the right-wing paper *Libero* to spy and plant stories on the agency's behalf.

The same day, prosecutors arrested Mancini, along with another Sismi official, on suspicion of being involved with the rendition. The head of Sismi, Nicolo Pollari, has escaped arrest thus far. But he is alleged to have personally run the secret spy shop, and his assurances earlier this year that he knew nothing of the Omar rendition appear less credible every day. More troubling still, last Friday, a security official at Telecom Italia named Adamo Bove, who had been assisting Spataro's team in monitoring Mancini's phone, left his Naples apartment, telling his wife he had to run an errand, and [threw himself](#) off a highway overpass. Police have launched an investigation into what they're calling "instigation to suicide."

It will take time for investigators to determine what happened to Bove, and to sift through the secret dossiers removed from Via Nazionale. But already one thing is clear: The secrecy surrounding the espionage profession is a constant temptation to corruption.

The [frequent refrain](#) of the Bush administration has been that Americans should not ask questions about how our spies operate and whether they follow the law. If you assume that behind the veil of secrecy, most spooks are just doing their jobs, then it seems wrongheaded to risk exposing official secrets and thus endangering national security by conducting a rigorous investigation. It's a forceful argument, and one that has so far successfully forestalled any serious assessment by Congress or the courts of extraordinary rendition or warrantless wiretapping. After all, it would be paranoid—even unpatriotic—to suggest that behind closed doors the very people we entrust to keep us safe might be spying without cause on civilians, misleading supposed allies, or running up \$158,000 hotel bills. And it seems paranoid to suggest that the recent suicide of a man who was assisting

the investigation of Italy's disgraced No. 2 spy might have been anything but a suicide. But at a certain point, the frequent instances of abuse and overreach by intelligence agencies—from the Stasi to Sismi, from J. Edgar Hoover's files to Pollari's—begin to seem less like the anomaly and more like the rule. And you're left to wonder: If this country had an investigator with the autonomy and perseverance of Armando Spataro, just what might he uncover?

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