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ESPIONAGE, SECRECY, AND CORRUPTION:  
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By Patrick Radden Keefe

Posted Thursday, July 27, 2006, at 11:38 AM ET



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.

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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.

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