

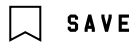
MATTHEW COLE SECURITY JUL 2, 2007 12:00 AM

In Italy, CIA Agents Are Undone by Their Cell Phones

Sloppy dialing lands U.S. spooks in hot water after the “extraordinary rendition” of an Egyptian cleric.



Illustration by John Ritter



THE CIA NEEDS to get a Q. James Bond's gadget guru surely would have warned the agency about how easy it is to track calls made via cell phone. Now 25 of its agents are facing trial in absentia in Milan, Italy, this summer — undone by their pathetic ignorance of technology. It seems that cellular data exposed their operation to carry out the “extraordinary rendition” (read: illegal abduction) of an Egyptian cleric suspected of terrorist involvement from a Milan street in 2003.

Cell phones communicate with nearby transmission towers when making and receiving calls. As many criminals know, tower location is recorded with the billing data. The spooks apparently didn't realize this and left a trail of cellular footprints at the crime scene. When an Italian prosecutor pulled the records of phones in the area at the time, the plot became apparent. He was able to identify the agents (by alias), where they had stayed, and even calls they made to northern Virginia (where CIA headquarters is), the US consulate in Milan, a US Air Force base in Aviano, and each other. The cleric, Abu Omar, has been released. But should the operatives — likely back in the States — be found guilty, they won't be able to travel anywhere Interpol operates. Maybe they can telecommute.

How They Did It

Coordinating the abduction The CIA's snatch team used unsecured mobile handsets to communicate during the kidnapping. By zeroing in on phones in the area that were unusually active at the time of the grab — many calling each other — authorities were able to identify the handsets involved. Soon they knew the agents' aliases, where they had stayed, and who else they had called.

Checking in with headquarters One of the agents participating in the abduction used his cell phone to call Robert Lady, the CIA station chief in Milan. This provided Italian investigators with the first undeniable link to CIA involvement. Lady has been forced to leave Italy and is now among those facing charges.

Planning the escape Several phones involved in the operation called an Air Force base in Aviano, both before and immediately after the event. Among the numbers dialed: the mobile phone of a commanding officer at the base. This revealed the getaway. Italian authorities believe the cleric was held at Aviano before being flown to Egypt, where he claims to have been tortured.

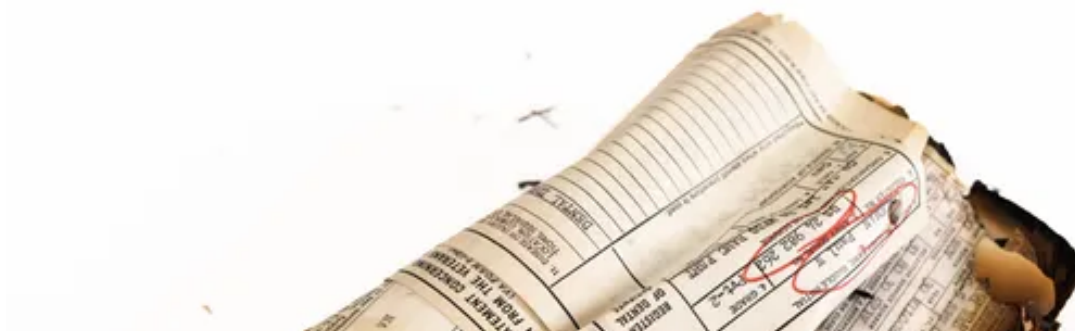
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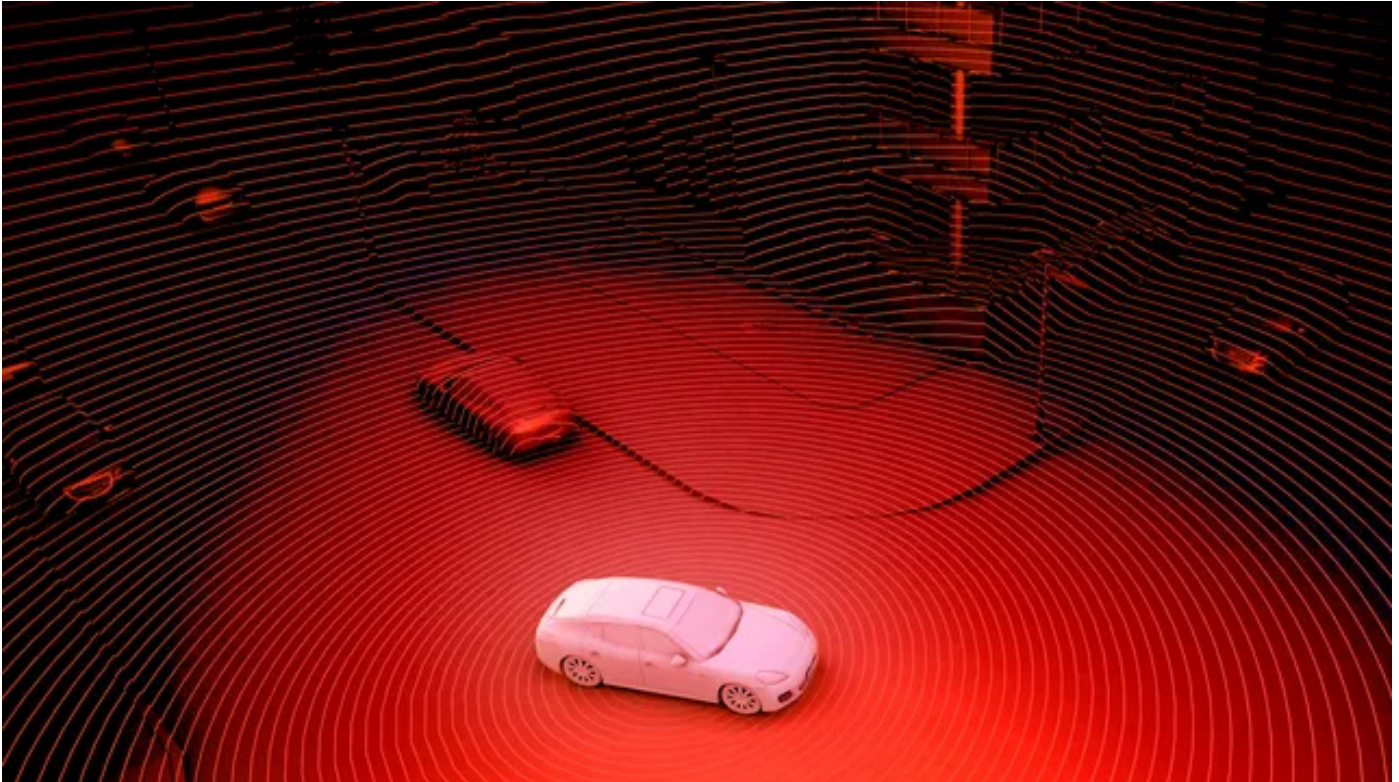
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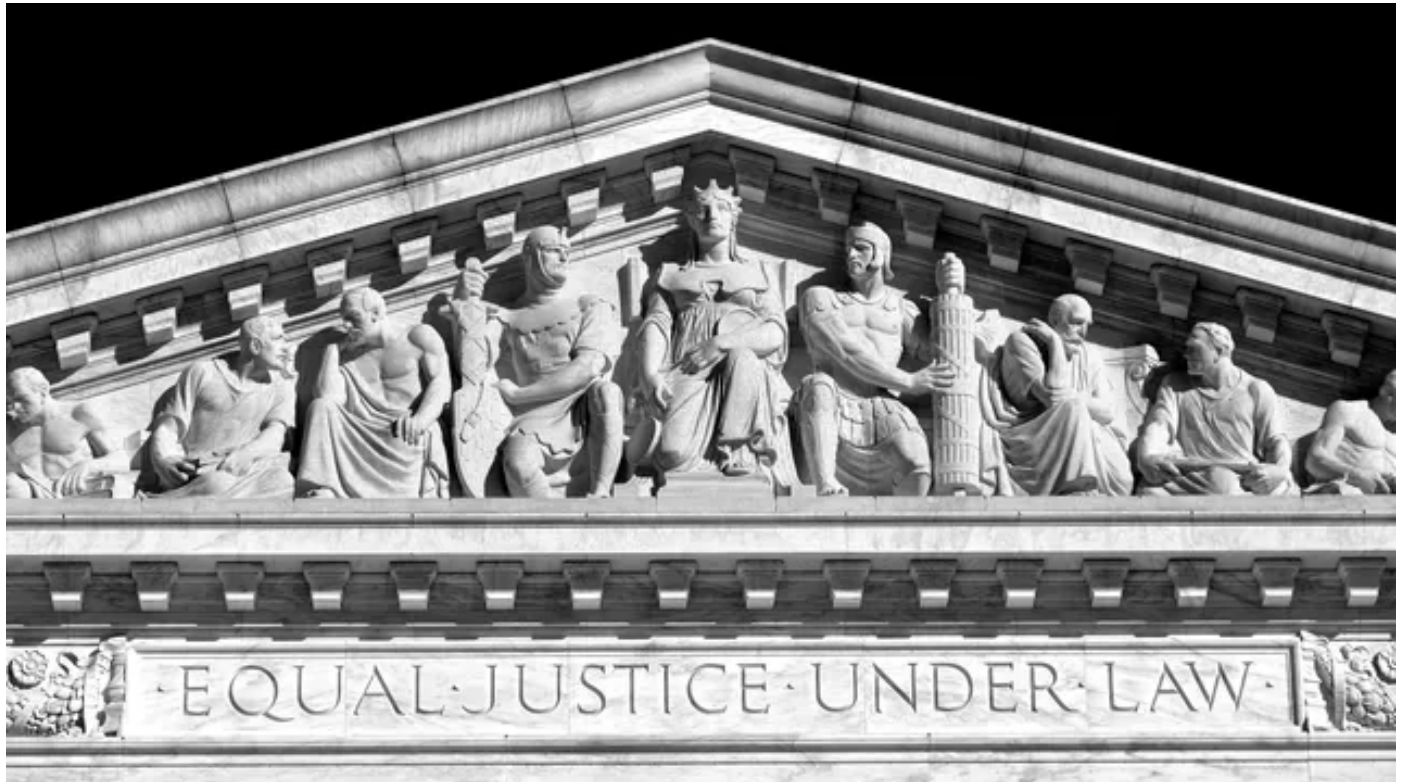
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