

SHELL SHOCKED

Is There No Privacy Left?

By Art Stevens

You're a golf pro in Sanibel and you're disturbed by recent news reports on further invasions of our privacy. As you're conducting a lesson on putting you think about phone conversations that are being tapped and stored in one giant data base and can be retrieved at any time. Although the federal government swears up and down that it has no intention of prying into anyone's phone conversations it does make you wonder if that's true.

Supposing the national security people sense that what to you is a harmless phone conversation is to them a breach of national security. They can come pounding on your door, read you your rights and haul you away. And there you'll be, a peaceful, law abiding golf pro whose only experience with Miranda rights is an old Carmen Miranda movie in which she wears bananas on her head and sings Spanish songs.

The thought is fleeting until the day six federal agents invade your pro shop and haul you away. They put you in a five by five room and make you wait for two hours before anyone comes in. In the meantime all kinds of thoughts go through your head. What have I done? Is it that high school algebra exam I cheated on in high school by looking over the shoulder of the student next to me? Is it the check to Verizon that bounced years ago because your wife had spent your bank balance on shoes, blouses and hair spray?

This must be a mistake and you can handle this. But why won't someone come in and tell you what this is all about? They're making you stew as though you'll confess to anything. Is this about a parking ticket? Hadn't you I paid it yet? The meter was only over the time limit by about fifteen minutes. You didn't inconvenience anyone. And besides, you really needed that beer.

And then two burly individuals enter the room. They sit down, stare at you and say nothing for a few minutes. Then one of them starts in. "I assume you know why you're here."

You say, "No, I don't know why I'm here and who you are?"

They present their badges. The badges say Counter-Terrorist Division, Homeland Security.

You're stunned. "Counter terrorism? What has that got to do with me? I'm a golf pro at one of Sanibel's golf courses."

The two agents give each other the quick eye which in spook talk means this guy won't be a hard nut to crack.

"You had a phone call on February 12 with one of your alleged students. Isn't that so?"

You think hard. "I might have. I think it might have been Art Stevens, one of the worst golfers I've ever come across. He signed up for a series of lessons and it happened to rain on that day and we rescheduled. I was happy not to have to go through another frustrating hour."

The other agent read from notes. “Didn’t you tell him – and I quote – ‘remember to practice the backswing? When taking the backswing the golf club moves parallel to the ground.’ “.

You’re puzzled. “Yes, I might have said that. How would you know that? Are you tapping my phone?”

The agent smiled. “This is a national security matter. Please don’t ask questions about how we investigate terrorists- in -training like you.”

You’re aghast. The only thing you know about terrorism is that one of your students almost hit you in the head with a golf ball even though you were standing a mere five feet away from him. “Terrorist in training? Boy do you have the wrong person.”

Both agents grunted. One said: “Really now? We recently hacked into the computer of an Al-Qaeda militant in Yemen and his code words for future terrorist attacks are ‘the golf club moves parallel to the ground.’ This can’t be a coincidence. You must be the Sanibel operative for Al-Qaeda.”

You are so staggered that you don’t even know how to respond. “Al-Qaeda? Good God, I’m golf pro. I’ve never used a golf club as a weapon of mass destruction. Besides, every golf pro says the same thing I did about moving a golf club parallel to the ground on a backswing.”

One of the agents said, “You also used other code language. You said ‘it’s raining. Let’s reschedule.’ We know this means that there’s a terrorist attack in the works and that it’s scheduled for next week.”

You’re frantic. “Look, I don’t speak in code language. I say what I mean and I mean what I say. I’m a golf pro. I talk about chip shots and sliced drives.”

“Then how do you explain your reference to a terrorist cell in New York?”

“What reference? The only time I referred to New York was when there was a blizzard there.”

The two agents smiled. They looked like they had you trapped. “In terrorist code, rain means New York.”

“And how would I know that?”

“Because by monitoring your phone calls we know that you’ve used the word ‘rain’ many times.”

You’re stymied. “But it does rain a lot in Sanibel during the summer.”

One of the agents said, “This is why we listen to every single phone call that’s made in the U.S. We know the patterns, the codes, and the jargon. We know that what sounds innocent often has the ring of conspiracy. And that’s why we want to know from you all about your connection to Al-Qaeda.”

This situation takes months to unravel and get you off the Homeland Security most wanted list. All you want to do is go back and teach golf, which you eventually do. And after countless lie detector tests, interrogations, analysis of every personal record you possess, you’re told that the person they’re really after is one of the island’s top chefs.

At that point you vow to never make another phone call in your life.

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