

THE POINTY END OF A DULL SPEAR

The NYT has a fascinating profile of Jose Rodriguez—the guy who ordered the destruction of the CIA torture tapes. This anecdote conveys the kind of guy we’re dealing with:

Not long after the tapes were destroyed, Mr. Goss held a management retreat for top agency officials meant in part to soothe tensions among the agency’s dueling branches. There the deputy director for intelligence – the head of analysis – complained openly about the arrogance of the clandestine branch and said undercover officers thought they could get away with anything.

That was too much for Mr. Rodriguez. He stood up in the room, according to one participant in the meeting, and shouted in coarse language that the analysis chief should “wake up and smell the coffee,” because undercover officers were at the “pointy end of the spear.”

The clandestine branch, Mr. Rodriguez was making it clear, would do what it wanted.

While the profile doesn’t offer much new in the story of the torture tapes (though it does provide a more compelling case that Goss couldn’t control Rodriguez than I’ve previously seen), I’m most interested that Rodriguez apparently prevented any accountability for those who conducted the pathetically incompetent kidnapping of Abu Omar.

It would become known inside the Central Intelligence Agency as “the Italian job,” a snide movie reference to the bungling performance of an agency team that snatched a radical Muslim cleric from the streets of Milan in 2003 and

flew him to Egypt – a case that led to criminal charges in Italy against 26 Americans.

Porter J. Goss, the C.I.A. director in 2005 when embarrassing news reports about the operation broke, asked the agency's independent inspector general to start a review of amateurish tradecraft in the case, like operatives staying in five-star hotels and using traceable credit cards and cellphones.

But Jose A. Rodriguez Jr., now the central figure in a controversy over destroyed C.I.A. interrogation tapes, fought back. A blunt-spoken Puerto Rico native and former head of the agency's Latin America division, he had been selected by Mr. Goss months earlier to head the agency's troubled clandestine branch. Mr. Rodriguez told his boss that no inspector general review would be necessary – his service would investigate itself.

The incident is significant, first of all, because of the likelihood that the IG report finding the interrogation methods used by the CIA constituted cruel and inhuman treatment—possibly illegal. This incident suggests Rodriguez refused to allow the IG to do its job—oversee and correct problems in the CIA. Which, in turn, increases the already large chance that the IG report is central to the reasons for the destruction of the torture tapes.

But the incident is interesting for another reason. By preventing any real evaluation of the Italian job, Rodriguez may have ensured that those responsible remain in significant positions within the CIA. You might be interested in this news, particularly if you're in NY:

Milan Spy Boss on Rebound: CIA officer

Jeff Castelli, mastermind of the botched February 2003 "extreme rendition" of an al Qaeda operative in Milan that ended in the indictment of 26 Americans, all but one CIA employees, might be on the rebound. According to a reliable intelligence source who demanded anonymity, Castelli was reprimanded by the CIA's Accountability Board last year for the much-ridiculed caper and dispatched to the Air War College at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. But Castelli is now a candidate to be the CIA's next station chief in New York – an astounding comeback, especially considering that Italy is planning a trial in absentia of the CIA employees implicated in the kidnapping, perhaps as early as this spring. "Well, they can't send him overseas," said the source, "because of the Milan thing." Italian warrants have been issued for Castelli and the others, who would risk arrest if they tried to enter any European Union country, or many other states.

Am I the only one who thinks it's a bad idea for someone who oversaw legendarily bad tradecraft to be chief of a US station?

It's not clear to what degree Rodriguez is responsible for Castelli still having a job—and in the US! (It sounds like Castelli was not sent to Alabama until 2006, after Michael Hayden took over the CIA.) But it's certainly the kind of coddling of incompetence and abuse Rodriguez seems to have fostered.