

IF IT SOUNDS TOO GOOD FOR THE GOSS, IT'S WORTH A SECOND GANDER

The NYT allowed a bunch of gosslings to tell them a story anonymously that they were unwilling—at least partly for legal reasons—to say on the record. They told a story of Porter Goss heroically refusing Stephen Hadley's (and by association, Dick Cheney's) pressure to keep the CIA in the torture business.

Acutely aware that the agency would be blamed if the policies lost political support, nervous C.I.A. officials began to curb its practices much earlier than most Americans know: no one was waterboarded after March 2003, and coercive interrogation methods were shelved altogether in 2005.

[snip]

Provoked by the abuse scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and pushed by Senator John McCain of Arizona, who had been tortured by the North Vietnamese, the 2005 bill banned cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Top C.I.A. officials then feared that the agency's methods could actually be illegal. Mr. Goss, who had succeeded Mr. Tenet at the C.I.A., wrote a memorandum to the White House saying the agency would carry out no harsh interrogations without new Justice Department approval.

The national security advisor, Mr. Hadley, was angered by the C.I.A.'s response. He called Mr. Goss at home over the Christmas holidays to complain; Mr. Goss, backed by his lawyers, would not budge. Mr. Hadley decided he could

not push the C.I.A. to do what it thought might be illegal.

But there's a problem with this story.

Robert Grenier.

Grenier was head of Counterterrorism at the CIA during the Christmas holiday of 2005-6. Yet he was fired within weeks of Goss' heroic stand against torture because—CIA sources said—he was "insufficiently forceful" against al Qaeda.

His boss at the clandestine service, the nation's senior human intelligence officer, was said to regard him as insufficiently forceful in the battle with al Qaeda.

"The word on Bob was that he was a good officer, but not the one for the job and not quite as aggressive as he might have been," one official said.

Vincent Cannistraro was more explicit about what "not aggressive enough" means: that Grenier was opposed to waterboarding.

Vincent Cannistraro, a former head of counter-terrorism at the agency, said: "It is not that Grenier wasn't aggressive enough, it is that he wasn't 'with the programme'. He expressed misgivings about the secret prisons in Europe and the rendition of terrorists."

Grenier also opposed "excessive" interrogation, such as strapping suspects to boards and dunking them in water, according to Cannistraro.

And while Grenier himself said the continued disappearance of the High Value Detainees was a big part of the problem, he also raised the insufficient clarity in law following the McCain Amendment—precisely the problem Goss is said to have confronted.

Now, it may be that Jose Rodriguez (the "boss at the clandestine service" described in the first excerpt) decided to sack Grenier without the input of or against the wishes of his own boss, Porter Goss (precisely the tale, of course, that Goss tells about the destruction of the torture tapes just months earlier). It may be that Cheney went through Goss to Rodriguez to get him to fire Grenier (note, in the NPR interview, Grenier makes it clear he was unloved at the White House). It may be that Grenier was the source of the pushback that Goss now claims credit for. It may really be that Rodriguez and Grenier supported the same policies, but just despised each other.

But if Porter Goss really did resolve this issue at the end of 2005, then it would have mooted one of the big reasons for ousting Grenier. Nevertheless, Grenier was sacked, just weeks later. (Then again, Goss himself was sacked just months later.)

Now, I don't know what the explanation is—why Goss claims to have stood against torture in December-January but then overseen the firing of someone for being insufficiently pro-torture in February. Maybe, there's a perfectly good explanation. But for the moment, the gosslings refusing to say these things on the record for legal reasons aren't giving that good explanation.