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Jose Rodriguez, center of tapes inquiry, was protective of his CIA subordinates


By Mark Mazzetti and Scott Shane

WASHINGTON — 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 in 2003 that snatched a radical Muslim cleric from the streets of Milan and flew him to Egypt - a case that led to criminal charges in Italy against 26 Americans.

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Porter Goss, the CIA 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 Rodriguez Jr., now the central figure in a controversy over destroyed CIA 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 Goss months earlier to head the agency's troubled clandestine branch. Rodriguez told his boss that no inspector general review would be necessary - his service would investigate itself.

It was a protective instinct that ran deep inside the Directorate of Operations, the CIA's most powerful branch. The same instinct would resurface months later, when Rodriguez dispatched a cable to the agency's Bangkok station ordering the destruction of videotapes that showed CIA officers carrying out harsh interrogations of operatives of Al Qaeda.

"He would always say, 'I'm not going to let my people get nailed for something they were ordered to do,'" said Robert Richer, Rodriguez's deputy in the clandestine branch until late 2005, who recalls many conversations with his boss about the tapes.

With their destruction now the subject of congressional and criminal inquiries, investigators are trying to determine whether Rodriguez, 59, acted on his own or with at least tacit approval from superiors at the CIA or the White House. Officials say a recent review by the CIA of his personnel file found no record of any reprimand or punishment for his action.

The tapes episode and Rodriguez's role reflect the intensity of the particular tensions that have played out since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In that period, the CIA has been asked to play a new role in capturing, questioning and imprisoning terror suspects, and is now facing questions about whether its conduct crossed the line into illegality.

The events surrounding the tapes unfolded during one of the most tumultuous periods in the CIA's 60-year history, when the insular and proud clandestine service clashed with the strong-willed team that Goss, a former Florida congressman, brought with him to the agency. Rodriguez was "the man in the middle," Richer said.

Rodriguez and Goss declined to be interviewed for this article.

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Goss was not the first CIA director to discover that operatives who were trained to destabilize foreign governments could sometimes put those same skills to work inside the agency.

In a striking metaphor for Goss's powerlessness as officers of the Directorate of Operations, or DO, ignored his instructions and shunned his staff, he told a colleague that "when he pulled a lever to make something happen in the DO, it wasn't just that nothing happened," the colleague recalled. "It was that the lever came off in his hands."

The Directorate of Operations "is a really small part of CIA, in terms of budget and people," said Mark Lowenthal, a former assistant agency director. "But in terms of culture, the DO dominates the place." In mid-2005, the directorate was renamed the National Clandestine Service.

A popular boss, Rodriguez occasionally flashed the maverick spirit prized by clandestine officers. A former colleague recalls that while in Mexico he named his horse Business, instructing subordinates to tell the ambassador or CIA brass that he was "out on Business."

By the mid-1990s, Rodriguez was head of the Latin America division. But his career was nearly cut short when the CIA inspector general in 1997 reprimanded him for a "remarkable lack of judgment" after he intervened to stop jailhouse beatings by guards of a childhood friend arrested on drug charges in the Dominican Republic.

A CIA officer stationed in the Dominican Republic complained to the inspector general that the intervention was improper, according to a former agency official. Rodriguez was removed as chief of the Latin America division, and later returned to run the station in Mexico.

Shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, he was tapped to become chief operating officer of the agency's Counterterrorism Center, based at the CIA's headquarters, which was ballooning to nearly 1,500 officers from 300. There was grumbling that Rodriguez, with no experience in the Muslim world, had been given the job. But seven months later, he was promoted to head the center, placing him in charge of the hunt for Qaeda operatives and the interrogation of terrorist suspects in a chain of secret CIA prisons.

By the time Goss was sworn in as director in late September 2004, the CIA's clandestine service was embittered by finger-pointing over the Iraq war. The arrival of the new leader and his outspoken aides made matters worse.

Many agency veterans suspected Goss and his team were on a White House mission to clean house at the CIA. The two top officers of the clandestine service, Stephen Kappes and Michael Sulick, soon quit.

When Goss looked for replacements, two agency officers turned him down. In the end, Goss offered the job to Rodriguez. Rodriguez traveled to overseas stations more than many predecessors, to build morale and get a firsthand account of operations.

One serious concern, in the view of Goss's staff, was the resistance of Rodriguez to outside reviews of such missteps by the clandestine service as the Italian operation. In the matter of the interrogation tapes, there was also concern that Rodriguez and others who were involved in creating the tapes were now pushing to destroy them.

Rodriguez, who was nearing retirement, saw the tapes as a sort of time bomb that, if leaked, threatened irreparable damage to the U.S. image in the Muslim world, his friends say, and posed physical and legal risks to the CIA officers on the tapes. People close to Goss insist that he told Rodriguez the tapes should be preserved.

But if Goss believed Rodriguez had disobeyed him, why didn't he punish the clandestine service chief? One former CIA official said that White House officials had complained about the news media firestorm that accompanied the departure of Kappes and Sulick a

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year earlier, and Goss felt he could not risk another blowup.

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