

*by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

So the underboss, having fingered the boss, decides to go on the lam, but the boss tries to rat him out anyway. Meanwhile, the old underboss drops a dime on the boss by talking about how, before he was boss, he tried to squeeze the old boss into signing off on a squidgy deal, even though the old boss was laid up in the hospital at the time.

This week's episode of "The Sopranos?" No. The latest developments in the increasingly sleazy soap opera at the top of the U.S. Department of Justice. How much longer is President George W. Bush going to allow this relentless water-boarding of the nation's faith in the administration of justice to go on?

To recap for those who may have missed the latest episode: On Monday, Paul J. McNulty, the No. 2 man in the Justice Department, resigned as deputy attorney general. It was McNulty who, testifying before Congress in February, first revealed that the White House had been involved in the firing of at least one of the eight U.S. attorneys who left office in December.

On Tuesday, Attorney General Alberto "Mistakes Were Made" Gonzales, in a speech at the National Press Club, tried to lay the blame at McNulty's feet. "You have to remember, at the end of the day, the recommendations (for who got fired) reflected the views of the deputy attorney general (McNulty). He signed off on the names ... and he would know better than anyone else, anyone in this room, anyone - again, the deputy attorney general would know best about the qualifications and the experiences of the United States attorneys community, and he signed off on the names."

As Gonzales was mixing the concrete for McNulty's feet down at the Press Club, up on Capitol Hill, James A. Comey, McNulty's predecessor as deputy attorney general, was telling the Senate Judiciary Committee about a secret late-night hospital visit Gonzales made in March 2004. At the time, John D. Ashcroft was attorney general, but he had been hospitalized for emergency gall bladder surgery. Gonzales was White House counsel at the time and badly wanted Ashcroft to approve the legality of a presidential order reauthorizing the warrantless wiretapping of people in the United States suspected of terrorist ties.

Comey had discussed the matter with Ashcroft before he fell ill and had reviewed a report on it by the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel. All agreed that the program was not legal. Filling in for his sick boss, Comey refused to certify the surveillance program as legal.

So on the evening of March 10, 2004, Comey was alerted that Gonzales and then-White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card were going to try to sneak into George Washington University Hospital's intensive care unit and get the desperately sick and disoriented Ashcroft to approve the deal. Comey testified that he alerted FBI director Robert Mueller to the White House's attempted end run, then rushed to the hospital and prepared to protect Ashcroft from the wheedlings of Gonzales and Card. Mueller ordered the FBI agents with Comey's

security detail to keep Gonzales and Card from trying to evict Comey from the hospital room.

Let's see ... where have we seen that scene before? Oh, sure, "The Godfather," where young Michael Corleone thwarts a plot by the Tattaglia family and a crooked cop to sneak into the hospital to finish off Don Vito Corleone, who is recovering from an assassination attempt.

This editorial page had its differences with Ashcroft as attorney general and, before that, as a U.S. senator and governor of Missouri, but that night on his sickbed, he showed personal, professional and political courage. Flat on his back, he did what was right, reiterating his objections to the spying program and underscoring that he had passed the authority of the attorney general's office to Comey.

Would that we could see any hint of that kind of courage in Gonzales, instead of his unrelieved toadying to the White House political operations. Would that we could see a little of Ashcroft's and Comey's belief in the tough and impartial administration of justice in President George W. Bush. That doesn't seem like too much to ask.

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