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Attorney of the Year Finalist Andrew Rossman on Defending Kilmar Ábrego García and Advising on a $5.9B Citgo Sale

By Alyssa Aquino
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When Andrew Rossman heard that Kilmar Ábrego García had been mistakenly deported to El Salvador, he told his wife that the man needed a defense attorney and that Rossman would defend him himself, if need be.

"I kind of fulminated to my wife, 'This is outrageous. How could they do this to somebody?'" Rossman recalled in an interview with the New York Law Journal. "I literally said to her, 'I would defend him.'"

That's exactly what happened.

That representation has seen Rossman arguing in courts around the country on a matter that has implicated foundational tenets of the U.S. government. And the fight is still ongoing, despite several trips to the circuit court and one lightning-fast run to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"I genuinely thought that this case would be over in a few days," Rossman said.

Rossman, of Quinn Emanuel Urquhard & Sullivan, along with a team of attorneys from the firm, took on the habeas proceedings, while another team handled the underlying immigration case. On the habeas side, Rossman and his team won two injunctions allowing Ábrego García to live in his community during the immigration proceedings and preventing the federal government from deporting him to Liberia, the latest of a slew of countries that the administration has sought to send him.


Photo: Ryland West/ Law.com
Andrew Rossman of Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan.

"We had, I couldn't tell you how many hearings, but I know that we had four full evidentiary hearings where we had government witnesses testify and I had to give the equivalent of a trial closing at the end of each hearing," Rossman said.

"It was a blizzard of activity," he said. "All in favor of what I thought was a pretty straightforward proposition that all persons are entitled to due process under law."

"It's the most remarkable case that I'll ever work on in my legal career," Rossman said.

Rossman came onto the case with decades of trial experience, but for business disputes, not immigration ones.

A graduate of Harvard Law School's Class of 1992, Rossman began his legal career at Anderson Kill & Olick. He quickly moved to Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, where he eventually served as a co-chair of litigation. In 2009, Rossman joined Quinn Emanuel, where he currently serves as the chair of the firm's M&A Litigation Practice and the managing partner of the firm's New York office.

This decades-long career has seen Rossman take up a number of matters recognizable to the general public. He represented Elon Musk during his acquisition of what was then known as Twitter. Rossman was on the team that successfully defended Tesla in a $12 billion trial over Musk's take-private tweets. Rossman was also lead counsel for the Lehman Brothers Creditors' Committee in multibillion dollar lawsuits against major banks.

But this practice, while storied, is not the work experience one expects for an immigration matter. So how did Rossman come to defend Ábrego García? Through a former colleague, Tyler Whitmer, who currently runs a public interest law firm.

A day after Rossman told his wife he would defend Ábrego García himself, he received a call from Whitmer. Whitmer passed along that his friends at an immigration organization were representing Ábrego García and could use some help.

"I think he thought maybe I'd get some pro bono associates," said Rossman. "I ended up getting fascinated with the case and got very personally involved immediately."

Immediately meant immediately. Rossman's first week on the case saw him heading into Maryland court—and then the Supreme Court.

For Rossman, it was a "roll up your sleeves effort" in a case that demanded the public attention.

The Trump administration had deported Ábrego García to El Salvador, where he wound up in a notorious megaprison, despite a court order preventing his removal due to fear of persecution. Officials later admitted that an administrative error had resulted in Ábrego García's deportation.

For critics of the administration's mass deportation campaign, the case was emblematic of immigrant and due process rights. But at a time when the legal community was sounding the alarm on the erosion of the rule of law, the case stood for the separation of powers and an independent judiciary. The support Rossman received from other lawyers, even adversaries, was extraordinary, he said.

"We're actively fighting in cases and [opposing counsel] is sending me really touching notes about how important it was to do this and how they admired what we were doing," said Rossman.

The case was also unfurling as the administration was cracking down on Big Law firms in what observers feared would chill Big Law attorneys from taking cases against the administration. It was a scary time for lawyers, but Rossman said he wasn't personally afraid of retribution.

"I felt like I was in a position to be able to afford to do it and it was a principle I felt very strongly about, which is everyone's entitled to their day in court." Rossman said. "I have to hand it to my firm, for their bravery and their support of me and the incredible team."

He highlighted Jonathan Cooper and Sascha Rand, also of Quinn Emanuel, who he said were with him at every hearing. He also praised the work of co-counsel, Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg of Murray Osorio.

Of course, Rossman was representing Ábrego García in addition to his usual roster of corporate clients.

Part of what kept Rossman busy in 2025 was his representation of Amber Energy, an affiliate of the activist hedge fund Elliot Investment Management, that sought to acquire Citgo.

The petroleum company—owned by the state-owned Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.—had been put on auction as the Venezuelan government struggled to repay billions of dollars worth of debt. It was an unusual, but sought-after opportunity, with various bidders looking to snap up what is considered to be the crown jewel of Venezuela's overseas assets.

"Usually, what's sold at judicial auction is like somebody's pickup truck because they didn't make their payments or something like that. Here, you're selling a multibillion-dollar oil refining business that used to belong to a sovereign and having the court preside over that," said Rossman.

The courtroom, Rossman said, was so packed that they had an overflow room, which also filled up. He recalled people "hiding in the hallways" trying to hear what was happening, because there were so many constituencies involved in the process.

"It was quite a little jamboree," he said.

The sale was contentious. Not only did Amber Energy have to deal with rival bidders, but Venezuelan officials who were loathe to sell Citgo. Amber Energy's bid was ultimately selected, despite being $2 billion lower than a rival offer. The presiding judge found that Amber Energy's bid, which included a $2.125 billion settlement with bondholders, was better than the higher offer and was more certain of closing.

The sale is still not yet in the clear. Venezuela has appealed the court order approving Amber Energy to buy Citgo and the transaction still has to be greenlit by the U.S. Department of Treasury, which oversees the U.S.' extensive sanctions regime over Venezuela. The U.S.' capture of Nicolás Maduro, the ousted president of Venezuela, has also presented "a bit of a curveball," said Rossman.

"This was like, an entire three years worth of law school hypotheticals," said Rossman.

In terms of complexity, he ranks the work somewhere within the top five most complex transactions he's ever dealt with, an estimate that speaks both to the difficulty of the transaction and the type of work that clients are bringing to Rossman. But he enjoys the dynamism of it all.

"In most cases, something happened two years ago and you're going to litigate what happened two years ago. In M&A cases, the facts are changing in real time. Another bidder comes in, tops their bid. The judge issues a ruling. A condition falls apart. The company's business changes for the worse or the better," Rossman said. "You've got to factor that in real time, which makes these cases fun."