

More calls for attorney general to resign over firings of US attorneys

Barry Grey
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Appearing on the “Fox News Sunday” program, former speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich joined other prominent Republicans and a larger number of Democratic lawmakers in urging Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales to resign over his role in the firings of eight US attorneys.

The purge of federal prosecutors—seven were dismissed last December 7 and the eighth some months before—has sparked an escalating political scandal. The fallout from the firings has exposed a systematic effort by the White House and Justice Department to stack US attorney offices around the country with right-wing Bush loyalists prepared to use their prosecutorial powers to suppress the voting rights of working class and minority citizens and launch trumped-up voter fraud prosecutions to discredit Democratic candidates.

The scandal has implicated Karl Rove, Bush’s chief political adviser, and other high-level White House officials, as well as Gonzales and his top lieutenants in the Justice Department. Mounting evidence from thousands of pages of emails and other documents released by the administration to the judiciary committees in the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives and Senate, as well as public testimony by Gonzales’ former chief of staff, indicate that the political conspiracy was intensified in preparation for the 2008 presidential election.

Assertions by Gonzales, both in statements to the press and testimony earlier this year before the Senate Judiciary Committee, that he played no significant role in the US attorney firings have been exposed as lies. Gonzales, a Bush acolyte since the president’s term as Texas governor in the 1990s, is scheduled to testify before the Senate committee on April 17.

While Bush has publicly reiterated his continuing support for Gonzales, some Republican notables are calling for Gonzales to step down in the hope that his departure will defuse the scandal and shield Rove and other White House officials, including Bush. Leading Democrats appear eager to assist in such a cover-up.

Last week, New York Senator Charles Schumer, who has been heading the investigation, proposed on national television a “compromise” to end a stalemate with the administration over demands by the House and Senate judiciary committees that Rove, former White House counsel Harriet Miers and other White House officials testify on their roles in the US attorney firings. The White House has refused to allow its aides to testify, citing executive privilege. It has also withheld internal White House documents on the planning and execution of the dismissals.

Instead, the White House insists that Rove and other aides may be questioned only in private, without being sworn in, and with no transcripts of the proceedings.

Both the Senate and House judiciary committees last month voted to authorize the issuance of subpoenas ordering the White House aides to testify in public and under oath, but have failed to execute the subpoenas.

On April 1, on the “Face the Nation” news program, Schumer accepted the White House proposal, with the caveat that there be transcripts. Senator Arlen Specter, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee who was also on the program, immediately endorsed the Democratic cave-in. However, to this point the White House has rebuffed the offer.

On Sunday, Gingrich said, “You know, the buck has to stop somewhere, and I’m assuming it’s the attorney general and his immediate team.” Asked by interviewer Chris Wallace whether Gonzales should resign, Gingrich said, “I cannot imagine how he is going to be effective for the rest of this administration. I think the country, in fact, would be much better served to have a new team at the Justice Department, across the board.”

Gingrich’s statement followed the announcement Friday that Monica Goodling, Gonzales’ senior counsel and liaison to the White House, had resigned her post, effective immediately. Goodling figures prominently in the emails and other documents thus far released on discussions between Rove, Miers and other White House aides and Justice Department officials on the purge of federal prosecutors.

Last month she went on indefinite leave. She was summoned to testify by the judiciary committees in both houses of Congress, but two weeks ago she invoked her 5th Amendment right against self-incrimination and declared she would not answer any questions from congressional investigators.

Goodling became the third high-ranking Justice Department official to resign since the US attorney scandal erupted last January. Michael A. Battle, the former director of the Executive Office for United States Attorneys, who notified the prosecutors of their dismissals, announced last month that he was leaving to enter private practice. D. Kyle Sampson resigned as Gonzales’ chief of staff on March 12.

Sampson testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 29 and flatly contradicted Gonzales on two key questions. He said Gonzales was directly involved in the discussions concerning the firing of the federal prosecutors and had presided

over a November 27, 2006 meeting where the final list of targeted US attorneys was reviewed. He also testified that Gonzales was aware of plans to use a provision inserted into the revised USA Patriot Act of 2006 to appoint new US attorneys on an interim basis so as to circumvent the Senate confirmation process.

Goodling's political profile and academic résumé provide a telling indication of the type of individuals who have been recruited by the Bush administration to administer the Justice Department.

Only 33, she is a 1995 graduate of Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania and a 1999 graduate of Regent University Law School in Virginia, founded by the right-wing Christian fundamentalist Pat Robertson. In her letter of resignation to Gonzales, she wrote, "May God bless you richly as you continue your service to America."

According to a column published Sunday in the *Washington Post* by Dahlia Lithwick, a former career official in the Justice Department told the newspaper that Goodling "forced many very talented career people out of main Justice so she could replace them with junior people that were either loyal to the administration or would score her some points."

The column quotes a former classmate as saying Goodling "developed a very positive reputation for people coming from Christian schools into Washington looking for employment in government ..."

Lithwick continues, "Goodling is one of 150 graduates of Regent University who have served in this administration, as Regent's web site proudly proclaims. Pretty impressive for a 29-year-old school. The university says that 'approximately one out of every six Regent alumni is employed in some form of government work.'

"Former attorney general John Ashcroft teaches at Regent, and graduates have obtained senior positions in the Bush administration. The express goal is not only to tear down the wall between church and state in America but also to enmesh the two."

One of Goodling's main tasks was to help coordinate the removal of US attorneys who either prosecuted Republican lawmakers for corruption or refused to indict Democratic politicians and pro-Democratic voter-registration groups for "voter fraud" during the run-up to the 2004 and 2006 elections. The purge was part of a broader drive to install what Kyle Sampson called "loyal Bushies" as US attorneys, especially in so-called battleground states deemed critical to Republican electoral fortunes.

One result of this campaign is the failure of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division to bring a single voting case on behalf of an African American since 2001. Instead, the division has been deployed to oppose supposed voter fraud or discrimination against Christians.

More than a dozen Bush administration insiders have been appointed as federal prosecutors over the past two years, according to government records. These include right-wing lawyers who worked at Justice Department headquarters or the White House and were dispatched to fill top posts in United States attorney offices on an interim basis, such as J. Timothy Griffin in Arkansas, Bradley J. Schlozman in Missouri, R. Alexander Acosta in Miami

and Matthew M. Dummermuth in Iowa.

Griffen and Schlozman, for example, were directly involved in Republican efforts to challenge and block likely Democratic voters or discredit Democratic campaigns by issuing voter fraud indictments on the eve of elections.

One such Bush loyalist is Rachel K. Paulose, who was sworn in on March 9 of this year as the United States attorney in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She was a senior aide to Paul J. McNulty, the deputy attorney general, before she was named as an interim United States attorney in Minneapolis in early 2006. She was subsequently confirmed on a permanent basis by a unanimous vote of the Senate.

Her appointment followed the resignation of Thomas B. Heffelfinger. Emails released to Congress strongly suggest that Heffelfinger was among those targeted for dismissal, but decided instead to resign.

Last Thursday, three of Paulose's four top deputies resigned their leadership positions in protest over what they regarded as Ms. Paulose's ideologically driven and dictatorial managerial style.

As Gonzales' Senate hearing approaches, the administration is refusing to release further documents to the Judiciary Committee. At issue are several hundred pages of documents, most of them unedited versions of documents that were provided to Congress only in edited form. The Senate Judiciary Committee is reportedly set to issue a new round of subpoenas Thursday for these documents, as well as for all other documents the Justice Department has related to the firings.

Meanwhile, House and Senate staffers are conducting private interviews with high-ranking Justice Department officials, and Gonzales has holed himself up with Republican officials to practice his testimony in advance of his April 17 appearance.

In addition to the US attorney firings scandal, congressional investigators are requesting documents and testimony in connection with influence peddling and corruption or improper political manipulation of government agencies involving the General Services Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Education student loan programs. A House committee is also investigating White House connections to the convicted Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff.



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