

Top News

Abrupt dismissals spark turmoil among federal prosecutors

By [Star-Advertiser staff](#)

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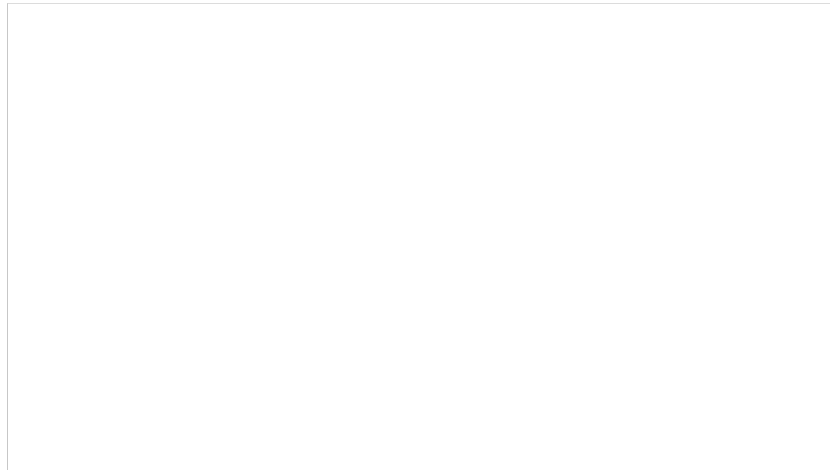
Attorney General Jeff Sessions waits to make a statement at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection office in Washington.

WASHINGTON >> Two days before Attorney General Jeff Sessions ordered dozens of the country's top federal prosecutors to clean out their desks, he gave those political appointees a pep talk during a conference call.

The seemingly abrupt about-face Friday left the affected U.S. attorneys scrambling to brief the people left behind and say goodbye to colleagues. It also could have an impact on morale for the career prosecutors who now must pick up the slack, according to some close to the process. The quick exits aren't expected to have a major impact on ongoing prosecutions, but they gave U.S. attorneys little time to prepare deputies who will take over until successors are named.

"It's very, very gut-level reaction," said Steven Schleicher, a former prosecutor who left Minnesota U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger's office in January and was still in contact with people there.

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The request for resignations from the 46 prosecutors who were holdovers from the Obama administration wasn't shocking. It's fairly customary for the 93 U.S. attorneys to leave their posts once a new president is in office, and many had already left or were making plans for their departures. Sessions himself was asked to resign as a U.S. attorney in a similar purge by Attorney General Janet Reno in 1993.

But the abrupt nature of the dismissals — done with little explanation and none of the customary thanks for years of service — stunned and angered some of those left behind in offices around the country.

Former prosecutors, friends and colleagues immediately started reaching out to each other on a growing email chain to express condolences and support, commiserating about how unfair they felt the situation was. One U.S. attorney was out of state on Friday and was forced to say goodbye to his office by a blast email, said Tim Purdon, a former U.S. attorney from North Dakota who was included on the email chain.

Some of those ousted were longtime prosecutors who had spent their careers coming up through the ranks of the Justice Department. John W. Vaudreuil, U.S. attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin, became an assistant U.S. attorney in that office in 1980. Another, Richard S. Hartunian of the Northern District of New York, joined the Justice Department in the 1990s.

"All of these U.S. attorneys know they serve at the pleasure of the president. No one complains about that," said John Walsh, an Obama-era appointee as U.S. attorney in Colorado who resigned in July. "But it was handled in a way that was disrespectful to the U.S. attorneys because they were almost treated as though they had done something wrong, when in fact they had not."

Peter Neronha, who had served since 2009 as U.S. attorney for Rhode Island, said even before Friday he had been preparing for his eventual departure and had written a resignation statement to be released upon his exit. He said he knew his time was limited but had been eager to stay on to see through a major public corruption prosecution and to speak with students about the perils of opioid addiction.

"When that was done, I was going to go anyway — whether I got 24 hours' notice, or two weeks' notice, or two months' notice. It doesn't really matter," Neronha said.

Whenever there's a change in presidential administration, he said, "I think it would be unwise not to be ready."

It's not clear why the Justice Department asked the prosecutors to exit so quickly. Sessions gave no warning during the Wednesday conference call in which he articulated his agenda for fighting violent crime.

"The attorney general did not mention on that call, 'Stay tuned for changes,'" Neronha said.

Much of the public attention since Friday has focused on Preet Bharara, the high-profile Manhattan federal prosecutor who said he was fired despite meeting with then-President-elect Donald Trump and saying he was asked to remain.

Trump himself did apparently make an attempt to speak with Bharara in advance of the Friday demand for resignations. The president reached out through a secretary on his staff to Bharara a day earlier but the two men never spoke, according to a person told about the conversation but who requested anonymity. The White House on Sunday said the president reached out to thank Bharara for his service and to wish him good luck.

The Justice Department on Friday did say it would not accept the resignations of Dana Boente, now the acting deputy attorney general, and Rod Rosenstein, the Maryland prosecutor who's been nominated for the deputy role.

On Sunday, some Democrats condemned the demand for resignations in highly partisan comments. Maryland Rep. Elijah Cummings, the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee, suggested Trump might have fired Bharara to thwart a potential corruption investigation, and believed the move added to a lack of trust of the administration.

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