

TOP NEWS

Hits from Democrats and Trump put Sessions in familiar hot seat

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U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions delivered remarks about defending national security, at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, on Thursday.

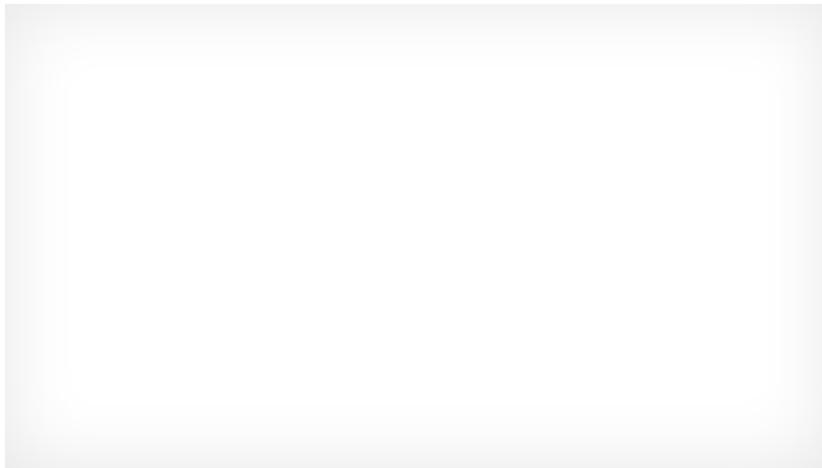
WASHINGTON >> The nation's chief law enforcement officer found himself in a familiar spot today: belittled by the president, pressured to investigate political opponents and

sucked back into the center of the storm around the investigation into the Trump administration's campaign ties to Russia.

In President Donald Trump's Cabinet, Attorney General Jeff Sessions appears to be perpetually in the hot seat, yet he has made clear he's not going anywhere. In an administration where top aides serve at the president's displeasure, the former Alabama senator has shown he is more than willing to absorb the blows.

Trump paused to hit Sessions with yet another indignity just before he left the White House for a 12-day Asia trip increasingly colored by his domestic political troubles. Asked if he would fire the attorney general if he doesn't investigate his Democratic political rivals, Trump said, "I don't know." He continued to vent his frustration with the top prosecutor.

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"I'm not really involved with the Justice Department," he said. "I'd like to let it run itself. But honestly, they should be looking at Democrats. ... They should be looking at a lot of things, and a lot of people are disappointed with the Justice Department, including me."

Two White House officials quickly cautioned against reading too much into Trump's comments, reiterating that he has no plans to fire Sessions. And although the White House maintains that Trump's tweets are "official record," it says Trump has not ordered Sessions or the FBI to do anything related to Democrats.

Trump issued a flurry of tweets over a 3-1/2-hour span today urging the Justice Department to investigate Hillary Clinton and the Democratic National Committee over a joint fundraising agreement they signed in August 2015.

Trump's accusations follow publication by Politico of an excerpt from former acting DNC Chair Donna Brazile's upcoming book. Brazile alleges she found "proof" that the 2016 Democratic primary was rigged in Clinton's favor.

"Everybody is asking why the Justice Department (and FBI) isn't looking into all of the dishonesty going on with Crooked Hillary & the Dems..." Trump tweeted.

The aides said the tweets were a media savvy way to deflect attention from the investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. This week, former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort and his business associate Rick Gates, who also had a role in the campaign, were indicted on 12 counts, and former Trump campaign adviser George Papadopoulos pleaded guilty to lying about his dealings with Russians who were offering “dirt” on Clinton.

Sessions has become a scapegoat for Trump’s anger, allowing the president to avoid some of the political consequences of directly attacking the special counsel.

But the president’s lashing was another blow to the attorney general, who could be called back to Congress to explain why he said earlier this year he was unaware of information exchanges between Trump’s campaign and intermediaries for the Russian government.

Papadopoulos admitted he told Sessions at a meeting he had made contacts with Russians who said they could set up a meeting between Trump and President Vladimir Putin. Sessions quickly dismissed the idea and said he’d prefer no one ever speak about it, according to one person who was there, who spoke on condition of anonymity to share the private conversation.

Democratic members of the Senate Judiciary Committee are now asking Sessions to follow up.

“This is another example in an alarming pattern in which you, the nation’s top law enforcement officer, apparently failed to tell the truth, under oath, about the Trump team’s contacts with agents of Russia — a hostile foreign power that interfered in the 2016 election,” Sen. Al Franken wrote in a letter to Sessions.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal also asked Sessions to return to the panel to clarify his comments.

The Justice Department had no immediate comment. But the president’s attacks and the pressure from members of Congress were a one-two punch for an attorney general who has been a loyal foot soldier to the president, even after repeated attacks from Trump this summer over his decision to recuse himself from the Russia probe, which Trump has come to view as the original sin in the swirling special counsel investigation.

But Sessions clung to the job he had long desired, in part to enact his hawkish immigration and crime-fighting strategies. And he has since been steadily carrying out Trump’s agenda, stumping for Trump policies, praising the president directly in speeches across the country, and tearing into federal judges who have criticized or tried to block the administration’s work. The two have been lock-step on everything from drugs and gangs to terrorism and immigration. Sessions has been mostly silent as Trump has inserted himself into legal matters, including calling for the execution of

the Islamic State devotee charged with mowing down eight people on a New York bike path this week.

There's nothing expressly preventing the president from opining on law enforcement investigations, and Trump is not the first president to have done so. But pressuring the attorney general to investigate a foe would be a violation of longstanding protocol and insensitive to the bright-line boundary between the White House and the FBI.

Sessions also has said he would recuse himself from any Clinton-related investigations.

Still, the president's casual call for an investigation into the Democrats drew outrage from some members of Congress, at a time of increasing concern about White House interference with Justice Department doings.

Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein said it was "characteristic of authoritarian regimes, not democracies, and it needs to stop." And Republican Sen. Bob Corker, a Trump critic, said Trump's wading into criminal cases and pushing for investigations of adversaries not only "undermine our justice system but erode the American people's confidence in our institutions."

Associated Press writers Mary Clare Jalonick and Steve Peoples contributed to this report.

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