

## The Standoff Between Trump, Sessions Escalates



President Donald Trump was asked at a Rose Garden news conference Tuesday if he would fire Attorney General Jeff Sessions. "We'll see what happens," Trump said. **MUST CREDIT: Washington Post photo by Jabin Botsford**

By Devlin Barrett, Philip Rucker and Sari Horwitz

**W**ASHINGTON - The public standoff between the White House and the nation's senior law enforcement official took another strange turn Tuesday as President Donald Trump escalated his verbal attacks on Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who was urged by fellow conservatives to stand his ground.

Trump was asked at a Rose Garden news conference if he would fire the attorney general, who angered the president by recusing himself from the criminal probe into possible connections between the Trump campaign and Russia.

"We'll see what happens," said Trump - a potentially ominous choice of phrase, considering the president used the same

expression when talking to FBI Director James Comey before he was fired.

"I'm disappointed in the attorney general," Trump said. "If he was going to recuse himself, he should have told me prior to taking office, and I would have picked somebody else. It's a bad thing not just for the president, but also for the presidency. I think it's unfair to the presidency."

He said he wanted Sessions "to be much tougher on leaks in the intelligence agencies that are leaking like they never have before. . . . You can't let that happen."

It is unheard of for a Cabinet-level official to be subjected to such visceral and public criticism, which has now gone on for a week. But Sessions showed no sign of buckling Tuesday, and in fact his

position was bolstered by support from prominent conservatives taking his side in the fight with Trump.

Trump's reluctance to act on his anger and fire Sessions may be based in part on the lack of an immediate plan for a successor at the Justice Department. While Trump has discussed potential candidates to replace Sessions, senior White House officials have not settled on someone, and may not anytime soon, administration officials said. If Sessions were to be fired without even a temporary replacement lined up, the deputy attorney general who oversees the Russia probe, Rod Rosenstein, would assume authority over the entire Justice Department.

One Republican close to the White House said a number of senior aides,

including newly hired communications director Anthony Scaramucci, have urged Trump to sit down with Sessions and work through their differences. So far, there has been little enthusiasm for that suggestion, the Republican said.

One informal adviser to the Trump White House said there is another reason Trump has yet to fire Sessions: "The president doesn't want to be seen as firing another law enforcement official."

After Trump fired Comey, one unintended consequence was the appointment of Robert Mueller as special counsel overseeing the Russia probe.

Earlier Tuesday, Trump had tweeted that Sessions was "very weak" on investigating Hillary Clinton's "crimes"

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