



Statement of Chairman John Conyers, Jr. Committee on the Judiciary Hearing on DOJ Authorization/Oversight (Attorney General Gonzales) May 10, 2007

Mr. Attorney General, I want to thank you for appearing before us today. It is my hope that the Members will focus their questions today on the US Attorney investigation and related matters, and that in the near future, you will come back so that we may discuss the many other important issues involving the Department.

I believe I speak for every Member of this panel when I say that we all want the Department of Justice to succeed in its mission as the premier law enforcement agency in the Nation, and perhaps in the entire world. The laws under your jurisdiction – from civil and voting rights, to crime, to antitrust, to bankruptcy and the environment – are among the most important charters of our society, and are critical to our well-being as a nation and as a democracy.

At the same time, I am sure you would agree with me that any hint or indication that the Department may not be acting fairly and impartially in enforcing the Nation's laws, or in choosing the Nation's law enforcers, has ramifications far beyond the Department itself, and can cast doubt upon every action or inaction your office and your employees take.

So when we learn that several US Attorneys were added to the termination list only after they decided to pursue criminal investigations involving Republican officials, or after complaints that they were not pursuing investigations against Democrats, we must insist that we understand exactly how this list came into existence.

When we learn that most of the US Attorneys forced to resign were among the highest-rated and most able in the nation, that they were told they were being displaced to create a bigger Republican farm team, while others were retained because they were "loyal Bushies," it creates the impression that the Department has placed partisan interests above the public interest.

When a respected former career attorney at the Civil Rights Division testifies that he had been directed to alter performance evaluations based on political considerations; when I receive an anonymous letter, apparently from DOJ employees, complaining that candidates for career positions have been subjected to political litmus tests; and when the Attorney General has secretly delegated his authority to hire and fire non-civil service employees – this calls into question the Department's commitment to fair and impartial justice. When the White House gives us a take-it-or-leave-it offer for one-time "off the record" interviews, without transcripts – what I have referred to as come meet us down at the pub for fish and chips so we can talk – which no self-respecting investigator would accept – makes open-ended claims of executive privilege, and loses or destroys millions of e-mails relevant to our investigation; one has to ask whether the Administration is trying to cover up two simple truths – who created the list, and why.

And when we learn this morning, in the Washington Post, that another US Attorney, in Missouri, was forced out, contrary to repeated assurances that the eight US Attorneys whose circumstances we have been examining for the past few months were the entire list, it makes us wonder when we will get the full story.

To those who might say it is time to move on and end our investigation, allow me to remind them that the matters that have come to light to date are quite serious:

- sitting prosecutors have faced political pressure to bring or not bring cases;
- numerous misstatements by senior officials regarding the firings have been made to Congress;
- the reputations of good and honest public servants have been besmirched;
- ex-US Attorneys have been pressed not to cooperate with our investigation; and
- the Presidential Records Act and Hatch Act may have been violated.

Most important of all however, the Department's most precious asset – its reputation for integrity and independence – has been called into question. Until we get to the bottom of how this list was created, and why, those doubts will persist.