

Eye on Washington by Steve Komm and Jeff Steinberg

Is Thornburgh on his way out?

The ouster of the Attorney General is not enough to clean up the Justice Department, but it is indispensable.

Some people here saw the writing on the wall when President Bush left Attorney General Richard Thornburgh back home when he traveled to Cartagena, Colombia for the hemispheric anti-drug summit earlier this year. When William Safire, the sardonic columnist for the *New York Times*, labeled Thornburgh the poorest performer among Bush's cabinet members a few months ago, other Washington watchers began marking off the days on their calendars before the his ouster.

Now, a personnel shakeup at the Justice Department involving some of Thornburgh's top aides, lends credence to this view.

Hated overseas for his Thornburgh Doctrine, which tramples on the national sovereignty of friends and foes alike, Thornburgh finds himself knee-deep in scandals at home, all largely the outcome of his unbridled presidential ambitions, and his arrogant flaunting of "pin-stripe patronage."

According to one senior Justice Department official, shortly after his return to Washington in August 1988, Thornburgh convened a meeting with top officials of the Drug Enforcement Administration to fill them in on his plans for the department. Seated around the conference table with Thornburgh and the DEA reps were a cast of characters all drawn from his days as U.S. Attorney in Pittsburgh and as governor of Pennsylvania: Robert "Robin" Ross, Murray Dickman, David Runkel, Dick Weatherbee, and Henry Barr. Thornburgh made it clear that this was "his team," and that the people in the room would call all the shots at the department—

career officials and top department appointees be damned.

On May 11, Deputy Attorney General Donald B. Ayer abruptly announced his resignation as the titular number-two man at the Justice Department, making it clear that he was quitting over the fact that he had been stripped of all decision-making authority. Department sources report that Ayer had been told that he would receive instructions on what to do every two weeks, through a meeting with special assistant Robert Mueller, a former aide to U.S. Attorney William Weld in Boston and another member of the Thornburgh inside team. Face-to-face meetings with the AG were absolutely out of the question.

Ayer's resignation was supposed to have been announced three days later, and was to have been accompanied by the announcement of two other personnel changes. David Runkel, Thornburgh's press secretary, was shuffled over to the communications office, and the AG's top aide, Robert "Robin" Ross, was given a temporary assignment setting up an international liaison office, after which he would return to private law practice. The dumping of two of his most trusted Pennsylvania cronies was a big setback for Thornburgh, and he had hoped to muffle the impact by the Ayer news.

Runkel surfaced as a prime suspect in a DoJ probe into leaks targeted against Democratic congressman William Gray last year. Although Solicitor General Kenneth Starr recommended against prosecution of any department officials on May 16, Runkel

remains under scrutiny, since he failed a polygraph test during the early phase of the FBI investigation. Simultaneous with the Starr recommendation, evidence also surfaced that Robin Ross had also failed the FBI polygraph exam concerning the Gray leaks.

Ross's departure from the department, however, is believed by sources in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to be more closely related to the ongoing federal grand jury probe there into cocaine and marijuana dealing by state officials during the Thornburgh governorship. One member of the "Thornburgh Five"—Henry Barr—is still expected to be indicted by that panel on cocaine charges, and other top Thornburgh aides, including Ross, are suspected of involvement in either the drug ring or in its coverup.

Barr resigned as Thornburgh's chief counsel at the DoJ in May 1989, within 48 hours of ex-Pennsylvania Assistant AG Richard Guida's receipt of a target letter from the Harrisburg grand jury. Last March, Guida took a one-count felony plea to avoid a reported 100-count cocaine-trafficking indictment. But sources in Harrisburg now say that Guida is attempting to renegotiate his plea down to a misdemeanor in order to avoid disbarment.

Although both Attorney General Thornburgh and Harrisburg U.S. Attorney James West have claimed to have recused themselves from the case because of their longstanding ties to major targets of the probe, sources in Harrisburg report that both men continue to make inquiries into the case. These sources say that the probe has now expanded to include cocaine and marijuana use by people in the Governor's Mansion during the Thornburgh era. Guida, according to these sources, continues to represent clients appearing before the same grand jury that indicted him.