

FBI director: no sign Justice Dept. meddled in political cases

by George E. Condon Jr.

WASHINGTON - FBI Director Robert S. Mueller said Wednesday he is confident that nobody in the Justice Department exerted any undue political influence on any of the high-visibility public corruption cases of recent years, citing a "firewall" of career professionals at Justice who keep political appointees at bay. Mueller would not comment on behind-the-scenes complaints that the department was slow to approve the prosecution of targets in the corruption case of former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham.

"I have not seen an indication of political pressure in any way adversely affecting any of our investigations," Mueller told a group of reporters at a Washington breakfast.

Mueller was very careful to differentiate between the political appointees, headed by embattled Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, and the career employees who were at the department before the current administration.

"There is a firewall," he said, "not only at the FBI but also the professionals at the Department of Justice." He refused to be drawn into any discussion of the attorney general or the political appointees, saying, "I want to make absolutely certain I am not commenting one way or the other on individuals in the department other than those who have been there for a long time."

He said the FBI "has not been affected at all" by the controversy over the administration's firing of eight U.S. attorneys, including Carol Lam of San Diego. He also ducked a question about behind-the-scenes complaints that prosecutors and investigators had been frustrated in San Diego at how long it took for Washington to approve their recommendations on how to proceed against former Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham, Poway, Calif., defense contractor Brent Wilkes and former top CIA official Kyle "Dusty" Foggo.

Cunningham currently is serving an eight-year, four-month term in federal prison after admitting conspiring to accept bribes, evade taxes and commit wire and mail fraud. Wilkes and Foggo both face trial later this year after having been indicted for conspiracy, wire fraud, conflict of interest and money laundering. Separately, Wilkes also was indicted for bribery of a public official. "I can't comment on any particular investigation," he said. When asked if that meant he was happy with the way Washington handled the case, he replied, "That's not what I said. I can't comment on any investigation."

Mueller was pressed several times on how the Justice Department handled such high-profile political cases. He said that when U.S. attorneys recommend the indictment of a "substantial public figure" the charges are routinely reviewed in Washington by longtime employees of the department.

The director said the bureau put a higher priority on public corruption cases after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, forced a re-evaluation of the FBI's mission. Since then, he said, "public corruption has been our No. 1 priority on the criminal side," resulting in a doubling of such convictions between 2000 and 2006.

"We had to make some very difficult decisions on the criminal side as to what we were going to prioritize. We knew that we were not going to be able to do many of the certain types of cases we had done in the past (like) bank robberies," he said. "We are doing far fewer bank robberies (and) drug cases."

He added, "After dialogue, discussion, hashing out, we believe that public corruption and civil rights are two that, if we do not do it, there is no other entity in the United States that you can rely upon to have those areas addressed."

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