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DEFIANT F.B.I. CHIEF REMOVED FROM JOB BY THE PRESIDENT

By DAVID JOHNSTON,

WASHINGTON, July 19— President Clinton today dismissed William S. Sessions, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who had stubbornly rejected an Administration ultimatum to resign six months after a harsh internal ethics report on his conduct.

Mr. Clinton said he would announce his nominee to replace Mr. Sessions on Tuesday. He was expected to pick Judge Louis J. Freeh of Federal District Court in Manhattan; officials said Judge Freeh had impressed Mr. Clinton favorably on Friday at their first meeting.

Mr. Clinton, explaining his reasons for removing Mr. Sessions, effective immediately, said, "We cannot have a leadership vacuum at an agency as important to the United States as the F.B.I. It is time that this difficult chapter in the agency's history is brought to a close." Defiant to the End

But in a parting news conference at F.B.I. headquarters after Mr. Clinton's announcement, a defiant Mr. Sessions -- his right arm in a sling as a result of a weekend fall -- railed at what he called the unfairness of his removal, which comes nearly six years into his 10-year term.

"Because of the scurrilous attacks on me and my wife of 42 years, it has been decided by others that I can no longer be as forceful as I need to be in leading the F.B.I. and carrying out my responsibilities to the bureau and the nation," he said. "It is because I believe in the principle of an independent F.B.I. that I have refused to voluntarily resign."

Mr. Clinton said that after reviewing Mr. Sessions's performance, Attorney General Janet Reno had advised him that Mr. Sessions should go. "After a thorough review by the Attorney General of Mr. Sessions's leadership of the F.B.I., she has reported to me in no uncertain terms that he can no longer effectively lead the bureau."

Despite the President's severe tone, he seemed to regret having to force Mr. Sessions from his post. He said he had hoped that the issue could be settled at the Justice Department without the necessity of using his authority to dismiss the Director, who has a 10-year term but may be removed by the President at any time.

But Mr. Sessions's intransigence had festered into an awkward situation for Mr. Clinton.

A Republican stranded in a Democratic Administration, Mr. Sessions was appointed to head the F.B.I. by President Ronald Reagan in 1987 amid the turmoil of the Iran-contra affair. Mr. Sessions arrived as a

respected judge from San Antonio, but after five and a half years in office, he leaves with his star fallen, his agency adrift and his support at the F.B.I. all but drained away. Troubled Tenure

He served under four Attorneys General, and each complained privately about his absentee management style, his frequent traveling -- often to unimportant events -- and his inability to take command.

During Mr. Sessions's tenure, the F.B.I. has struggled to redefine its mission, which has shifted focus dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Mr. Sessions emphasized institutional issues, backing policies designed to open the F.B.I.'s byzantine internal hierarchy to women and minorities. He settled a discrimination lawsuit by Hispanic agents and reached a tentative accord with black agents that is awaiting approval by a Federal court here.

But his associates found him to be a disengaged figure who relished the trappings of high office but never inspired confidence in his leadership.

Undercurrents of unrest surfaced last year when several complaints led to an internal inquiry by the Office of Professional Responsibility, an internal watchdog unit of the Justice Department.

The report found that Mr. Sessions had taken numerous free trips aboard F.B.I. aircraft to visits friends and relatives, often taking along his wife, Alice. The report, which was endorsed officially by Attorney General William P. Barr on his last day in office, detailed a litany of abuses. It is a lacerating portrayal of the Director as an official who was in charge of enforcing the law but who seemed blase about perceptions of his own conduct.

Today, Mr. Sessions sought to keep up the appearance of routine. Dressed in his customary navy suit, red tie and white shirt, he spent the morning alone in his office.

The White House announced in advance Mr. Clinton's meeting with Ms. Reno to discuss Mr. Sessions's future and said the President and Ms. Reno would appear jointly in the White House press room, a certain sign of his dismissal.

This afternoon, Mr. Clinton telephoned Mr. Sessions twice. He called once to advise Mr. Sessions that he was dismissed, then phoned again minutes later to say that the dismissal would take effect right away.

At Mr. Sessions's news conference, he said he was a private citizen as of this afternoon and not permitted in F.B.I. headquarters unescorted.

There was one further indignity: Mr. Clinton rejected Mr. Sessions's assertion that he was the victim of a palace coup led by Floyd I. Clarke, the Deputy Director. The President said Mr. Clarke would be acting Director until a successor was confirmed by the Senate.

Still unclear is why it took so long for Mr. Clinton and his Attorney General to act in Mr. Sessions's case. White House officials said Mr. Clinton had hoped that Ms. Reno could reach an amicable settlement that could lead to a graceful exit.

But today, with Ms. Reno saying the Director should be above politics, it was evident that the Administration feared that dismissing Mr. Sessions might be viewed as politically motivated.

On Saturday, after weeks of fruitless discussions, Ms. Reno finally told Mr. Sessions that he must resign by today or face dismissal. Upon leaving that meeting, Mr. Sessions tripped and fell, breaking his arm, which forced him to spend that night in a hospital.

To the end, Mr. Sessions insisted that he had committed no ethical wrongdoing. He said today that throughout his career, he had been "ever mindful of the absolute requirement to serve with excellence, honor and integrity." But the report painted a different picture. Beyond abusing his travel fund, it found that he had improperly used Government money to build a \$10,000 fence at his home.

The findings were embarrassing for a senior law-enforcement official, but the specifics quickly became almost secondary to the impact of the report within the F.B.I., where Mr. Sessions's defiant refusal to heed the report rankled many senior officials. Morale within the bureau hit what some veterans said was a new low.

Photos: "It is because I believe in the principle of an independent F.B.I. that I have refused to voluntarily resign," said William S. Sessions. He spoke at a news conference after he was dismissed by President Clinton. (Stephen Crowley/The New York Times)