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Jeff Sessions

Statement on Classified Information Leaks Threatening National Security

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Good morning:

I want to thank Director Coats for being here. Dan Coats is one of the finest people I've ever known in public service, and [I] have tremendous respect for his integrity and professionalism.

Together, we lead the National Insider Threat Task Force that was established in 2011. This task force has an important role to play and one we are taking seriously. Progress has been made and we intend to reach new levels of effectiveness.

First, let me say that I strongly agree with the President and condemn in the strongest terms the staggering number of leaks undermining the ability of our government to protect this country. Just yesterday, we saw reports in the media about conversations the President had with foreign leaders. No one is entitled to surreptitiously fight to advance battles in the media by revealing sensitive government information. No government can be effective when its leaders cannot discuss sensitive matters in confidence or talk freely in confidence with foreign leaders.



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We're here today to talk about the dramatic growth in the number of unauthorized disclosures of classified national security information in the past several months. This include[s] leaks to both the media and in some cases even unauthorized disclosures to our foreign adversaries. Referrals for investigations of classified leaks to the Department of Justice from our intelligence agencies have exploded. In the first six months of this Administration, the Department of Justice has already received nearly as many criminal referrals involving unauthorized disclosures of classified information as we received in the previous three years combined.

Classified information, by definition, is information that if disclosed would do harm to national security. As Director Coats will discuss, leaks are incredibly damaging to our intelligence mission and capabilities. Simply put, these leaks hurt our country. All of us in government can do better. The first requirement is for discipline within all our agencies of the government. To prevent these leaks, every agency, and Congress, has to do better.

We are taking a stand. This culture of leaking must stop.

Furthering this goal, today, we are here to announce some steps being taken and underway by the National Insider Threat Task Force to ensure the government's first priority -- to protect this country and her citizens -- is not undermined by the very people who've been entrusted to protect it.

While the Department of Justice does not discuss ongoing investigations or confirm specific matters, it is important for the American people -- and for those who might be thinking about leaking classified or sensitive information -- to know that criminals who would illegally use their access to our most sensitive information to endanger our national security are, in fact, being investigated and will be prosecuted. Since January, the Department has more than triple the number of active leak investigations compared to the number pending at the end of the last Administration. And we've already charged four people with unlawfully disclosing classified material or with concealing contacts with federal officers.¹

Soon after I arrived here in February, I initiated a review of our leak investigations and prosecutions.



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I reviewed how these cases were being referred and handled and was concerned with what I found: too few referrals, too few investigations with insufficient resources dedicated to them. I concluded the unprecedented rise in leaks required an increase of additional support for more investigations and to speed up existing investigations.

Our system here relies on the intelligence community making a determination of whether classified material has been improperly handled or released and then sending referrals to us at the Department of Justice. This means it's in vital -- vital for the intelligence community to know that the Department of Justice is committed to investigating and prosecuting these referrals. And when few investigations take place, criminal leaks may occur more often and a culture of leaking can take -- take hold.

So, today, I have this message for our friends in the intelligence community: The Department of Justice is open for business.

And I have this warning for would-be leakers: Don't do it.

For the past several months, we've already made changes and are seriously ramping up our efforts.

First, I directed my fine Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein -- whose district in Maryland encompasses NSA headquarters, and who has personally led investigations of this kind -- and the investigator, FBI Director Christopher Wray, to oversee all classified leak investigations [and] actively monitor the progress of each and every case.

Secondly, I directed the National Security Division of the Department of Justice, and our U.S. Attorneys, to prioritize cases involving unauthorized disclosures. The Department will not hesitate to bring lawful and appropriate criminal charges against those who would abuse the public trust.

Third, as I have said, we tripled the number of active leak investigations. In response, the FBI has increased resources devoted to leak cases and created a new counterintelligence unit to manage these cases. Simultaneously, this Department is reviewing policies that impact leak investigations.



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And I have listened to our career investigators, FBI agents and others, and our prosecutors, about how to most successfully investigate and prosecute these matters. At their suggestion, one of the things we are doing is reviewing policies affecting media subpoenas. We respect the important role that the press plays and will give them respect, but it is not unlimited. They cannot place lives at risk with impunity. We must balance the press's role with protecting our national security and the lives of those who serve in the intelligence community, the armed forces, and all law abiding Americans.

Finally, here is what I want to tell every American today: This nation must end this culture of leaks. We will investigate and seek to bring criminals to justice. We will not allow rogue anonymous sources with security clearances to sell out our country.

These cases -- to investigate and prosecute -- are never easy. But cases will be made, and leakers will be held accountable.

All of us in government and in every agency in Congress -- and Congress must do better. The first requirement is personal discipline. Education and repetition, within our departments and agencies, will make a difference. Prevention is what is required. An investigation of a leak is too late, really. The damage is done.

¹ Original transcript stated "foreign intelligence officers" in place of the delivered "federal officers"