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White House Offers a Choice For Prosecutor

A Native of New York Would Replace White

By BENJAMIN WEISER

James B. Comey, a native New Yorker and veteran federal prosecutor who has won wide acclaim for his aggressive approach to prosecuting gun violence in Richmond, Va., is in line to be the next United States attorney in Manhattan, officials said.

Mr. Comey, 40, who served as a federal prosecutor in New York earlier in his career, also has experience investigating terrorism, which has become a prime focus of the United States attorney's office in the last eight years under the current chief federal prosecutor, Mary Jo White.

The White House moved quickly to find a replacement for Ms. White, who announced this month that she would step down from her post by the end of the year. For many months, the leading candidate to replace her was believed to be the counsel to Gov. George E. Pataki, James M. McGuire. But top aides to the governor said that Mr. Pataki, who had originally recommended Mr. McGuire for the job, had changed his mind and that he wanted Mr. McGuire to remain in his post.

Mr. Comey's name was recently put forward by the White House counsel's office. He has already met with Mr. Pataki and will meet this week with Senator Charles E. Schumer, in hopes of winning their support, officials said. One person close to Mr. Pataki said that the governor was impressed after meeting with Mr. Comey.

A man known for his aggressive approach to prosecuting gun violence.

Bradley Tusk, spokesman for Mr. Schumer, said: "His name has been given to us for consideration, and we are looking at him right now. Based on his résumé and experience, it looks like he may meet some of the criteria important to Senator Schumer."

If President Bush decides to nominate Mr. Comey, he would still have to be confirmed by the United States Senate.

The office of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton has said that she is not playing a role in the selection of the next United States attorney. Mrs. Clinton and former President Bill Clinton have been under investigation by Ms. White's office regarding their roles in the pardons and grants of clemency issued by President Clinton in his final days in office. Both have denied any wrongdoing.

But the continuing investigations of the Clintons, along with another investigation into the campaign finances of Senator Robert G. Torricelli, a New Jersey Democrat, have made the choice of Ms. White's replacement so politically fragile. Mr. Torricelli has also denied wrongdoing. The appointment may also be seen as a test of the new political power centers of New York, with Mr. Pataki, Mr. Schumer, and Representative Benjamin A. Gilman, the senior New York Republican in Congress, all having sought a role in the selection.

Mr. Comey declined to comment last night through a spokesman in Richmond. But people who have worked with him in Richmond, as well as during his days Manhattan, describe him as dogged, straightforward, and without a political agenda.

Mr. Comey was born in Yonkers, where his grandfather was once the police commissioner. He is married and has five children; a sixth died in infancy. At 6 foot 8 inches, Mr. Comey also towers over colleagues and has a rich sense of humor, his colleagues say. A Republican, Mr. Comey has run the Richmond division of the United States attorney's office for the Eastern District of Virginia.

Most recently, he was named lead prosecutor in the case stemming from the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers apartment building in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 Americans.

Mr. Comey graduated from the College of William and Mary and the University of Chicago Law School. He clerked for Judge John M. Walker Jr. of Federal District Court in Manhattan, who is a first cousin to former President George Bush. Mr. Comey joined the Manhattan federal prosecutor's office in 1987, when the United States attorney was Rudolph W. Giuliani. Among Mr. Comey's major cases was the prosecution of Gambino crime family members.

In Richmond, he developed Project Exile, a program to aggressively prosecute felons with guns, which led to a significant drop in the homicide rate. The program has since been imitated widely by prosecutors' offices around the country, officials said.

"It's reflective of the personality of Jim Comey," said Jerry A. Oliver, the Richmond chief of police. "Jim is the kind of guy that once he gets his teeth into a project, he's like a bulldog. You need a leash when you're dealing with this guy."

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