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State, The (Columbia, SC)

1995-12-01

Section: FRONT

Edition: FINAL

Page: A1

CITING STRESS OF JOB, U.S. ATTORNEY TO QUIT

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The state's first Democratic federal prosecutor since the 1970s resigned Thursday, effective in mid-January.

U.S. Attorney Pete Strom said he would return to private practice Jan. 19, after spending 2 1/2 years fighting violent crime and prosecuting a Who's Who list of South Carolina political figures. Attorney General Janet Reno will appoint an interim replacement, probably one of the attorneys in Strom's office. That person will run the 115-person U.S. attorney's office until President Clinton makes a permanent, political replacement.

Several Democrats said they'd be surprised if U.S. Sen. Ernest Hollings asks the president to make that appointment before the 1996 election. As the state's lone Democratic U.S. senator, it would fall to Hollings to make the recommendation.

Strom, 36, said he was tired of the emotional stress of the job and looked forward to being able to choose his workload more freely.

"When your decisions deal with political leaders and business leaders, even asking the first question in an investigation could ruin their career," he said. "I've spent a lot of hours on the sofa, 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, worrying about the cases and making sure we are not erroneously harming someone just by asking the first question."

Since taking office in the spring of 1993, Strom has prosecuted Theo Mitchell, a state senator who was running for the Democratic nomination for lieutenant governor, on charges of failing to report large cash transactions to the IRS. He has also prosecuted former Democratic gubernatorial candidate Pug Ravenel for conspiracy to defraud a bank and NAACP executive director James Felder for taking part in a counterfeit check scam.

He encouraged a Washington investigation that has begun to tarnish the best known work of his Republican predecessors, Operation Lost Trust. And last month, he oversaw the bankruptcy fraud indictment of former USC President Jim Holderman, for whom he had served as an intern in college.

Defense attorney Joe McCulloch said Strom had been thinking about stepping down for some time.

"Sometimes you just wake up in the morning and say, 'You know, it's time,'" said McCulloch,

one of Strom's former law partners.

Former 5th Circuit Solicitor Dick Harpootlian said Strom's job, which pays \$110,000 a year, had been "a tremendous sacrifice for him and his family."

"Very few people serve the full term, especially if you are a marketable attorney," Harpootlian said. "The financial rewards in the private sector are much more than in the public sector."

Strom and Harpootlian decided Tuesday to share office space in Columbia. On Thursday, Strom sent an electronic mail message to his staff, announcing his departure.

"I certainly haven't solved all the crime problems in this state, but I've accomplished a number of my goals, including setting up the violent crime task force," Strom said Thursday afternoon.

The task force dramatically changed the focus of the U.S. attorney's office. Environmentalists complained that it took too much attention away from high-profile environmental crimes. But Columbia defense attorney **Jack Swerling** said the change of focus allowed Strom to "take a bite out of crime in South Carolina."

"I think the ability to pick up the phone and get the U.S. attorney and the federal authorities involved in violent crime was very helpful," Harpootlian said. "He focused on the kind of crime that the federal government has traditionally ignored but that has the greatest impact on the community."

Strom, the son of former State Law Enforcement Division Chief J.P. Strom, graduated from the University of South Carolina Law School in 1984. He was an assistant prosecutor in Richland and Kershaw counties for three years and a defense lawyer for six years.

Strom



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