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WSJ

White House Counsel's Job at Stake

By **BY EVAN PEREZ**

WASHINGTON -- Obama administration officials are holding discussions that could result in White House counsel Gregory Craig leaving his post, following a rocky tenure, people familiar with the matter said.

Mr. Craig, the top lawyer at the White House and a close aide to President Barack Obama, has helped lead the administration's efforts on several national-security issues that once enjoyed popularity but have since become political liabilities for Mr. Obama.

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President Barack Obama meets with White House counsel Gregory Craig, right, in the Oval Office in June.

These include the closure of the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the release of Bush administration-era national-security documents, and efforts to find legal ways to indefinitely hold some detainees who can't be put on trial.

The decision to close the Guantanamo facility became a political problem for Mr. Obama when concerns arose that some of the detainees would be released into the U.S. and the public soured on the move.

Mr. Craig didn't respond to questions about his job as White House counsel for this article.

The people familiar with the matter said a final decision hasn't been made.

In a statement, White House Deputy Chief of Staff Jim Messina said: "We've addressed these rumors before. They are nothing more than typical Washington parlor games. It's disappointing that while we are focused on

reviving the economy and fighting two wars, others spend their time pointing fingers in an attempt to promote their own status."

Mr. Craig has come under criticism from inside the administration and in Congress for a perceived failure to manage the political issues that have originated from Mr. Obama's decision to close Guantanamo, according to officials in the administration and in Congress. This criticism has drawn focus away from president's priorities, such as health care and energy.

One administration official involved in Guantanamo matters defended Mr. Craig, saying he has been responsive and helpful when consulted. One member of Congress who has worked with Mr. Craig on detainee issues, called Mr. Craig "a smart guy who understands Congress very well."

As an example of the difficulties Mr. Craig faced, the officials cite the president's move in May to reverse a decision that would have led to the release of photos showing abuse of terror detainees during the Bush administration.

Weeks earlier, Mr. Craig brought Mr. Obama plans to release Justice Department memorandums detailing the Bush administration's policies on terrorism detainees. Some Obama national-security officials complained they hadn't been consulted, people familiar with the matter said, and the objections prompted weeks of debate inside the administration.

Mr. Craig and Attorney General Eric Holder won the fight to release the memorandums, with minimal redactions, but the White House had to move quickly to limit political damage. Former Vice President Dick Cheney sharpened criticism of Mr. Obama during a televised speech that followed Mr. Obama's own address intended to explain his national-security vision.

At around the same time, the administration was running into trouble with plans to move to northern Virginia at least some Chinese Muslim Uighurs who remain detained at Guantanamo despite being cleared for release. The furor over the possible release of former suspects in the U.S. led Congress to overwhelmingly pass new restrictions, including barring spending to close the Guantanamo prison.

Mr. Obama signed executive orders during his first week in office to close the Guantanamo prison, to review the cases of the more than 200 detainees there and to draw up possible changes to detention and interrogation policies.

At the time Mr. Obama enjoyed public support for his Guantanamo plans, polls showed. Six months later that public support has dissipated, polls show.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), one of the administration's allies on the Guantanamo closure, faulted the White House handling of Guantanamo. "Announcing the closure without a plan has put in jeopardy the ability to close Guantanamo. Now public opinion has turned," Mr. Graham said Monday.

Mr. Craig, 64 years old, was with Williams & Connolly, a prominent Washington law firm, before joining the Obama campaign. President Bill Clinton tapped him in 1998 to lead his defense during congressional impeachment proceedings against the president.

Mr. Craig has built a White House counsel's office of formidable size, with 41 lawyers, according to the administration's most recent filings. Mr. Bush left office with about 30 lawyers in his counsel's office.

In response to earlier questions about why he had built such a large office, Mr. Craig said: "We have the best new law firm on the planet." He noted that the Obama administration faced an economic crisis and major national-security issues.

—*Jess Bravin contributed to this article.*

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