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Acting Attorney General Robert H. Bork continued his efforts yesterday to find a new special Watergate prosecutor but without success.

Bork would not say how many rejections he has received, but he did not deny that some candidates have said no. He has called about 20 persons, including prospective nominees, about the job, several sources said.

Bork said that he was calling "friends and attorneys" and as a result, taking some names off his list of possible appointees and adding others to it. He said some people he has called suggested reasons why certain nominees should not be considered and then recommended another candidate or two.

"So my lists grows by the day," he said.

Bork became acting attorney general Oct. 20 after he agreed to follow President Nixon's order to fire special prosecutor Archibald Cox—an order that both Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus refused to obey. They resigned instead.

The President ordered the

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firing of Cox when the prosecutor refused to halt his court pursuit of nine tapes of presidential conversations on the Watergate scandal. Last Friday night the President, in announcing that Bork will appoint another prosecutor this week, said the White House would cooperate fully with the new investigator but would not expect him to go to court, as Cox did, to force production of other presidential tapes and documents.

Bork, however, has said he thinks the prosecutor should be free to go to court if necessary. He also has said his own position would be "intolerable" if the new prosecutor is not granted full independence.

At the same time, Congress is considering legislation to reestablish the office of special prosecutor, which Mr. Nixon abolished, and guarantee its independence.

Last Thursday, when Bork met with White House aides Alexander M. Haig Jr. and J. Fred Buzhardt, between

40 and 50 names of prosecutor candidates were discussed, according to Justice Department spokesman John W. Hushen. Most of them, including some of the half dozen names that Bork put forward, were rejected, Hushen said.

But Bork denied news reports that his own top choice was rejected by President Nixon, stressing that the President has not yet gotten into the decision making process.

Instead, Hushen said, Bork and the White House aides began discarding names for a variety of reasons: "They were perceived as too politically partisan on one side or the other; they did not have enough prosecutorial experience; they were not thought to be able to manage an operation of the magnitude of the prosecution force."

One source familiar with Bork's search for a prosecutor said, "He knows he's in a terribly difficult position and he's trying to do the

right thing. He feels strongly that the prosecutor must have independence and if he can't get that—if he's backed into a corner—he'll resign." He said Bork remarked the other day that he would "get shot" with criticisms regardless of whether he stays at Justice or leaves.

Another source, who works in the Justice Department, recalled that Bork himself considered resigning after he fired Cox. But as Bork told fellow staffers last Tuesday night, three days after the firing, "Somebody ought to obey the President. Whether you think he's right or wrong, the Constitution gives him the authority to fire anyone in the Executive Branch."

If Bork had not stayed on in the department, this source said, "there would have been no one in a position of leadership. The department, for example, could not have brought an antitrust suit because no one could have signed it."

When the Cox firing occurred, there was no order

of succession beyond the solicitor general, a job Bork still holds. Last week Bork signed an order setting up a line of succession.

Another source close to him said, "Undoubtedly he sees the box they're headed into. Even if he could find the best possible man and could negotiate a deal whereby the White House had no strings on him, no one's going to believe it."

"His chance of being able to come up with someone with guarantees of freedom credible to Congress is zilch. Bob is tied in with the loss of credibility that has affected the President."

"Assuming Congress then passes a bill creating a really independent prosecutor, what's Bork going to do? Advise the President to veto it?"

"The special prosecutor named under the congressional bill would supersede the prosecutor named by the administration. And Bork and the White House would be left standing like a bunch of peeled bananas. It's a no-win game."