

White House chief of staff steps down

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The resignation of Andrew Card as White House chief of staff and his replacement by another long-time Bush aide, Joshua Bolten, is an expression both of the deepening crisis in the Bush administration and the inability of the White House to find any way out.

For weeks, the White House has been under pressure from congressional Republican leaders and sections of the media to conduct the kind of shakeup of the top presidential aides that could be portrayed as a rejuvenation or even reorientation of the Bush administration. The shift from Card to Bolten hardly fulfills such demands.

While Card has been, at least nominally, the top staff man in the White House since Bush took office, he was seen more as an administrator than a policymaker, and his replacement by Bolten represents a further contraction of the inner circle, a circling of the wagons, rather than an effort to change course.

Decision making on foreign policy matters remains in the hands of Bush, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice, the former national security adviser who is now secretary of state. Domestic policy largely runs through Karl Rove, who holds the title of deputy chief of staff but is Bush's top political adviser and de facto head of the Republican Party. There is little indication of any change in policy in either sphere.

Both Card and Bolten are virtually family retainers, with service in the political campaigns and administration of the senior George H.W. Bush before rising to top positions in the administration of his son.

Card was a Republican state legislator in Massachusetts who worked as state chairman in the older Bush's abortive 1980 presidential campaign, moving to Washington to work in the Reagan White House and then as secretary of transportation in the Bush administration. Bolten is the son of a CIA official who worked in covert operations. After an elite education at Princeton University and Stanford Law School, he worked on the staff of the Senate Finance Committee, then as general

counsel for the US Trade Representative in the first Bush administration and as a White House lobbyist.

What Bolten and Card have most in common is that they derive from what used to be called the "Eastern Establishment" rather than the Christian fundamentalist wing of the Republican Party. They personify the connection between the Bush administration and big business. Card spent the Clinton years as head of the auto industry's Washington lobby, while Bolten was on Wall Street at Goldman Sachs.

That investment bank is more closely identified with the Democratic Party, since its top executives included Robert Rubin, a Clinton economic adviser and Treasury secretary, and Jon Corzine, a Democratic senator and now governor of New Jersey. Bolten's last position at Goldman Sachs was as Corzine's top aide, and Corzine hailed his appointment as deputy chief of staff at the Bush White House.

Bolten was promoted to director of the Office of Management and Budget in 2004, when OMB Director Mitch Daniels left to run for governor of Indiana. He was replaced as Card's deputy by Harriet Miers, then the White House staff secretary. When White House counsel Alberto Gonzales became attorney general in 2005, Miers was promoted to replace him.

Similar shifts moved other White House aides to cabinet positions: Condoleezza Rice from the National Security Council to the State Department, education adviser Margaret Spellings to secretary of education. In each case, the effect has been to give the White House more direct control over the operations of the executive branch, while further reducing the administration's decision makers to a narrow circle of Bush's closest aides.

According to White House spokesman Scott McClellan, Card offered his resignation March 8, the day before the Bush administration induced Dubai Ports World to abandon its effort to take over management of port facilities at six Atlantic and Gulf Coast ports. Card was widely criticized in Republican circles for his role in the failed nomination of Miers for the Supreme Court and for

other Bush debacles of the past year, including the failed Social Security privatization campaign and the indifferent and incompetent response to Hurricane Katrina.

Increasingly fearful that the growing popular opposition to the war in Iraq and Bush's dismal approval ratings would culminate in an electoral debacle in November, congressional Republican leaders have suggested sweeping changes in White House personnel to provide at least a cosmetic change in the administration. There have been suggestions that Rumsfeld resign, or even that Vice President Cheney step down, citing "health reasons," to be replaced by a less unpopular figure.

Now, there is a widespread feeling in Republican circles that the mountain labored and brought forth a mouse. The discontent with the Card-for-Bolten reshuffle found expression in the unwillingness of top Republicans to speak to the media on the record praising the move. Press accounts were unable to find any Republican enthusiasm for the maneuver outside of Bush's immediate circle. The *Washington Post*, for instance, cited approving comments only from Karl Rove (Bolten's nominal subordinate), former commerce secretary (and Bush crony) Donald Evans and Rob Portman, the US trade representative.

Press commentary was equally dismissive, with the *Post* declaring, "Other personnel changes may follow, but the lesson of this one is that Mr. Bush sees no need for new thinking," while the *New York Times* commented, "If this is what passes for a shake-up in this administration, the next two and a half years are going to be grim indeed. This is a meaningless change, and it simply sends the message that Mr. Bush lacks the gumption to trade in anyone in the comforting, friendly cast of characters who have kept him cocooned since his first inauguration."



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