

White House shuffle: Bush shifts personnel but continues program of war and reaction

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22 April 2006

Changes in White House personnel announced earlier this week represented a reshuffling of key Bush loyalists rather than any fundamental change in policy. The shifts began immediately after former budget director Joshua Bolten took over as the new White House chief of staff Friday, replacing Andrew Card, who announced his resignation last month.

Bolten met with the White House staff Monday and brusquely invited anyone contemplating leaving the administration for a more lucrative position in the private sector to do so immediately. On Tuesday and Wednesday, the first major shifts were announced.

US Trade Representative Rob Portman was named to replace Bolten as budget director, while Bolten's former deputy, Joel Kaplan, followed him to the executive office, replacing Karl Rove as deputy chief of staff for domestic policy. Rove, who remains the most powerful figure in the White House staff, will focus on campaign politics, attempting to salvage Republican control of the House and Senate in the November election.

White House press spokesman Scott McClellan also resigned, with several Fox News "journalists" being considered as his replacement. McClellan took over the job from Ari Fleischer in July 2003, and has been the public face of the president as Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction failed to materialize and public support for the war in Iraq steadily declined.

One of his most high-profile lies came in repeated declarations to the press corps that longtime Bush confidant Rove and Lewis Libby, vice president Cheney's chief of staff, had no involvement in the Valerie Plame CIA leak case. Libby was indicted last October after a two-year investigation by a special prosecutor. More recently, McClellan had the task of defending the administration's massive National Security Agency spying on Americans.

The replacement of Bolten by Portman, who will be replaced by his own deputy, Susan Schwab, and the shift of Kaplan from OMB to the White House to assume some of Rove's duties only demonstrate the musical-chairs character of the reshuffling. These are all individuals not identified

with any particular policy views or even any particular wing of the Republican Party, but rather personal followers of the Bush family who are prepared to shift their positions in the most cynical fashion based on what serves the immediate political interests of the administration. Which one occupies which office has little or no significance, given the White House commitment to continuing the war on the people of Iraq as well as its economic and social war on the working people of the United States.

More significant was the announcement that Deputy Chief of Staff Rove would be relieved of his policy-making responsibilities to concentrate on "long-term strategy" and to rally support for the Republicans in the upcoming midterm elections. In an effort to rebut suggestions that this represented a demotion, administration officials were dispatched to leak to the press the most obsequious and flattering descriptions of Bush's closest aide.

Nearly identical quotes appeared in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* accounts of the White House reshuffle. An "unnamed Republican official" told the *Times*, referring to Rove, "He's the best thinker in our party, and in the last year he's been doing all the staffing memos and making sure the paperwork is done on time and all that," but would now return to his "strong suit," electoral politics.

A Republican strategist who "did not want to be named because of restrictions on talking with the media" told the *Post* that the "principal goal" was to free Rove from the minutiae of domestic policy. "This allows our best and smartest thinker in the party to focus on strategic planning and the things he does best," the strategist said.

There could be no greater indictment of the abysmal intellectual and moral level of American politics than to describe Karl Rove as the "best thinker" of the leading American bourgeois party. Rove is a political thug, a man who trades in smear tactics, provocations and dirty tricks. His electoral "genius" is the product of the intervention of the Supreme Court in 2000, and the capitulation of the Democratic Party in 2002 and 2004.

In his overt policy role, assumed in early 2005, Rove has

been less than stellar. Given responsibility for domestic policy, he was the chief mover behind the failed attempt to privatize Social Security, and later played a major role in the incompetent and indifferent federal response to Hurricane Katrina.

The removal of the policy portfolio is not so much a punishment for these debacles as a recognition on the part of Bush, Cheney & Co. that they face the very real prospect of losing Republican control of one or both houses of Congress in the 2006 mid-term elections.

The concern is not that a Democratic-controlled House or Senate would reverse the policies of the Bush administration in Iraq or elsewhere, or—as suggested in mass e-mails to Republican Party donors—that a Democratic Congress might impeach Bush.

The real fear is that control of the House or Senate by the opposition party would create conditions where key administration officials—including the president—could face congressional hearings on everything from the initial decision to go to war, to profiteering by Cheney and Bush cronies on the billions spent in Afghanistan and Iraq, to domestic matters like the illegal NSA spying and the Katrina disaster.

Such hearings could well result, despite the best efforts of the Democrats, in significant revelations of Bush administration lawbreaking and provoke public demands for criminal proceedings against major figures in the government. Jail time and financial ruin are certainly a possibility.

What underlies the crisis of the Bush administration are two factors: the debacle in Iraq, and the deteriorating economic and social conditions of life for the vast majority of the American people. These objective factors account for the growing popular hatred of the administration reflected only very roughly in the opinion polls, and reflected not at all in the Democratic Party, which continues to support the war in Iraq and consistently looks for opportunities to attack the administration from the right on terrorism, on trade, on civil liberties.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted April 7-16 found 65 percent of those polled disapprove of Bush's handling of the Iraq war, with only 32 percent approving. A solid majority, 57 percent, felt the US made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq in the first place.

A poll conducted by Opinion Dynamics Corp. for Fox News published this week showed Bush's overall approval rating falling to 33 percent, a record low, down from 36 percent two weeks ago and 47 percent just one year ago. This drop was due in large part to eroding support among Republicans, with only 66 percent approving the way Bush is handling the presidency, down almost 20 percentage

points from a year ago. According to a figure published this week by SurveyUSA, Bush has an approval rating higher than 50 percent in only four states.

A CBS poll earlier this month exposed the impact this eroding support for Bush's policies would have on Republicans seeking reelection to the House and Senate. Among registered voters, more than one third in the poll said they would think of their vote as a vote against the president. If Bush backed a candidate, only 10 percent said they would be more likely to vote for that candidate, while 31 percent would be less likely. Under these circumstances, even more so than in 2004, the president campaigning for an incumbent Republican seeking reelection would be seen as a liability.

In this latest White House shake-up, Rove has been deputized in an attempt to put the brakes on this crumbling political support for the Bush administration. But like other Bush administration changes in its staff and cabinet, the rearranging of personnel is likely to have the effect of narrowing the administration's base even further.

Moreover, Rove himself is still a "subject of investigation" in Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald's investigation into the outing of former ambassador Joseph Wilson's wife, Valerie Plame.

An April 20 article in the *Nation* by Jason Leopold cited sources close to the investigation saying that "Fitzgerald told the grand jury that Rove lied to investigators and the prosecutor eight out of the nine times he was questioned about the leak and also tried to cover up his role in disseminating Plame Wilson's CIA status to at least two reporters."



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