

Democratic cave-in on White House testimony in US attorney firings

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Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York, who has been leading the Senate investigation into the Bush administration's firing of US attorneys, on Sunday signaled his party's capitulation to President Bush on obtaining testimony from Karl Rove and other White House officials involved in the purge.

Last month Bush rejected the request of the judiciary committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate for White House aides to appear at hearings and testify under oath about the 2006 dismissal of the eight US attorneys. Both committees, controlled by the Democrats, then voted to authorize the issuance of subpoenas to compel Bush's top political adviser Rove, former counsel to the president Harriet Miers, and others to testify, but did not actually issue the subpoenas. The White House made it clear it would defy any subpoenas on the grounds of executive privilege.

Instead, it made the derisory offer to allow Rove and company to meet behind closed doors with the committees and answer questions on the condition that the officials not testify under oath and that there be no transcripts of the sessions. Rather than confront the administration's assertion of quasi-monarchical privilege and assert the constitutionally mandated power of congressional oversight, the Democrats have, predictably, demonstrated once again their cowardice and indifference to democratic principles by offering a "compromise" on Bush's terms.

Schumer used his appearance on the CBS television program "Face the Nation" to announce the cave-in. In response to the initial question from moderator Bob Schieffer, who asked whether Schumer believed Attorney General Alberto Gonzales had lied about his involvement in the firings, Schumer demurred, saying, "Those are strong terms."

Then he changed the subject, declaring, "there's a real basis for an agreement here, which is to have Rove, Miers, other White House people come in with a transcript—you have to have a transcript—but privately at first, and we can reserve judgment as to whether we meet them publicly afterward. As for the oath, I think it's better to have an oath, but, as many have pointed out, there are statutes that say you have to tell the truth anyway. And this is along the lines of what Senator Specter has proposed . . ."

Schumer's fellow guest on the program, Arlen Specter, the ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, interjected blandly, "I proposed that two weeks ago," and went on to say, "I think that Chuck Schumer and I may have come to an agreement here."

Schumer reiterated his call for Gonzales to resign, a demand that has been taken up by a number of legislators, Republicans as well as Democrats. The attorney general's claims to have known little about the plans, two years in the making, to fire the US attorneys have been exposed as lies.

He is scheduled to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee on April 17 and his fate remains in doubt. While Bush has defended Gonzales in public, he has reportedly been less supportive in private discussions with congressional Republicans. Schumer's climb-down on obtaining testimony from White House aides suggests an implicit offer to make

Gonzales the fall guy and let Rove and other Bush aides off the hook.

Bush's senior counselor Dan Bartlett, who followed Schumer and Specter on the "Face the Nation" broadcast, was coy about Schumer's proposal. Without accepting or rejecting it, he said he had not yet heard from the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat of Vermont).

Schumer's offer is a capitulation to the Bush White House's assertion of virtually unchecked powers. It also serves to keep the American people in the dark about the administration's drive to destroy any independence of federal prosecutors and utilize the US attorney system to suppress working class and minority voting rights and manipulate elections by means of trumped-up federal "voter fraud" investigations. The evidence suggests that Rove is the main architect of this political conspiracy, and that it is directed in particular at maintaining Republican control of the White House in the 2008 elections.

That this was a central motive in the firing of the eight prosecutors has become abundantly clear. One of the purged prosecutors, John McKay of Seattle, had refused to launch a phony voter fraud case against the Democrats following a narrow Democratic victory in the 2004 gubernatorial election in Washington State. Another, David Iglesias of New Mexico, had defied pressure from Karl Rove and Republican legislators to indict local Democrats in the run-up to the 2006 congressional election in order to ensure the reelection of Republican Congresswoman Heather Wilson.

The effort to essentially fix the 2008 elections is also revealed in the individuals chosen by Attorney General Gonzales—a loyal aide to Bush going back to the president's stint as governor of Texas—to fill US attorney vacancies, both those created by the retirement of prosecutors and those opened up by the purge. One of the fired prosecutors, Bud Cummins of Arkansas, was replaced by a Rove aide, Tim Griffin. Not accidentally, Arkansas is where the putative front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, spent most of her adult life.

Bradley J. Schlozman was installed a year ago as US attorney in Missouri. As a deputy in the Justice Department's civil rights division, he had overruled career government lawyers in approving a Texas redistricting plan pushed by Tom DeLay, then House majority leader. He also approved, over the objections of Justice Department civil rights lawyers, a Georgia law requiring voters to show an official photo ID—a plan designed to disenfranchise poor and minority voters.

Schlozman also was involved in filing amicus briefs in the battleground states of Florida, Michigan and Ohio in 2004, seeking to prevent the counting of provisional ballots in the presidential election.

Six days before last November's election, Schlozman announced indictments of four voter-registration recruiters for a liberal group, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN, for allegedly submitting fraudulent registrations to the election board in Kansas City.

Other Republican operatives with little litigation experience have been

placed in US attorney positions in states likely to be vital in the 2008 election, such as Florida, Iowa and Minnesota.

An April 1 article in the *Washington Post*, headlined, “Prosecutor Posts Go to Bush Insiders,” reported, “About one-third of the nearly four dozen US attorney’s jobs that have changed hands since President Bush began his second term have been filled by the White House and Justice Department with trusted administration insiders...”

“No other administration in contemporary times has had such a clear pattern of filling chief prosecutors’ jobs with its own staff members, said experts on US attorney’s offices. Those experts said the emphasis in appointments traditionally has been on local roots and deference to home-state senators, whose support has been critical to win confirmation of the nominees.

“The pattern from Bush’s second terms suggests that the dismissal were half of a two-pronged approach: While getting rid of prosecutors who did not adhere closely to administration priorities, such as rigorous enforcement of immigration violations and GOP allegations of voter fraud, White House and Justice officials have also seeded federal prosecutors’ offices with people on whom they can depend to carry out the administration’s agenda.”

In 2006, the administration inserted a provision in the revised USA Patriot Act giving the attorney general the power to appoint interim US attorneys, with indefinite terms, without obtaining Senate confirmation. Some of the firings and new appointments were carried out under this provision, which was undoubtedly enacted with a view to the 2008 elections.

Not only have the Democrats signaled their readiness to forego any public or sworn testimony by Bush aides, they have refused to alert the American people to the extent of the criminality and anti-democratic conspiracies underlying the purge of the prosecutors. In both the public hearings that have been held on the matter, and in the dozens of television appearances by leading Democrats since the scandal broke last January, the issue has been deliberately presented in the most superficial and narrow manner, as though it were merely a matter of partisan politics.

Among those who appeared on the Sunday talk shows over the weekend was Senate Judiciary Chairman Leahy, who never broached the connection between the firings and the efforts to intimidate and harass likely Democratic voters and launch prosecutions to manipulate elections.

Nor can it be said that this cowardice and complicity are motivated by deference to popular sentiment. Quite the opposite. George W. Bush is arguably the most hated and despised president in the post-war history of the United States. He and his policies of war and social reaction were repudiated by the electorate in November, and his favorable ratings in the opinion polls are struggling to reach the 30 percent mark. Indeed, a recent poll showed that a substantial majority of the population believes Rove and other White House aides should be compelled to testify in public and under oath about the attorney firings.

In an extraordinary op-ed column published in the *Washington Post* on March 26, entitled “A President All Alone,” the right-wing Republican columnist Robert Novak wrote of the stark political isolation of Bush, even within his own party. “Last week, as Alberto Gonzales came under withering Democratic fire,” Novak wrote, “there were no public GOP declarations of support amid private predictions of the attorney general’s demise...”

“But this is less a Gonzales problem than a Bush problem. With nearly two years remaining in his presidency, George W. Bush is alone. In half a century, I have not seen a president so isolated from his own party in Congress—not Jimmy Carter, not even Richard Nixon as he faced impeachment.”

Moreover, Schumer’s capitulation came three days after Gonzales’ former chief of staff, Kyle Sampson, who resigned on March 12, testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee and flatly contradicted Gonzales’

claims to have had no significant role in the purge of federal prosecutors. Sampson also made clear that Rove, Miers and other White House aides played a central role in organizing the firings.

As always, the spinelessness of the Democrats stands in stark contrast to the political ruthlessness of their Republican counterparts. One need only recall the Republicans’ relentless drive to destabilize and topple the Clinton administration by means of the Kenneth Starr witch-hunt, culminating in the first-ever impeachment of an elected president. And the pretext for that attempted coup was a sex scandal that had nothing to do with the policies or official actions of the White House. It was carried out, moreover, in the teeth of overwhelming popular opposition to Starr and the Republican inquisition.

As in the Clinton impeachment, the theft of the 2000 election, the 9/11 cover-up, the lies used to drag the country into the Iraq war, and the countless crimes committed in the name of the “war on terror,” the Democrats seek in the US attorney scandal to conceal the gravity of the threat to the democratic rights from the American people. They thereby act not as opponents of these conspiracies, but rather as accomplices.

The Democrats launched their investigation primarily to provide themselves with political cover following the popular repudiation of the war and the Bush administration in the November election. They hoped to use it as a diversion from the catastrophe in Iraq and their own complicity in that criminal enterprise. But as soon as the scandal began to reveal the scale of the administration’s anti-democratic operations, they sought to contain it, in order to effect yet another cover-up.

Whatever their electoral calculations, the Democrats fear a further weakening, if not outright collapse, of the Bush administration, because of the dire implications of such a development for the foreign and domestic interests of the American financial oligarchy, whose basic interests both they and the Republicans defend. The last thing the Democrats desire is to provide a rallying point for massive popular discontent to assume political forms outside the capitalist two-party system.



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