

Bush Administration's Biblical Exodus

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WASHINGTON — Lord knows I have tried, over the years, to keep Colin Powell on the grammatical strait and narrow. And yet, announcing his resignation, the departing secretary of state said that after the president and he had "fulsome discussions on it, we came to mutual agreement. ..."

Fulsome means "offensively excessive," and when two people agree, it's always mutual. This otherwise good man is incorrigible.

We have had more substantive run-ins. After I recalled his mistake in failing to overthrow Saddam when he had the chance in 1991, Powell retorted, "Safire is getting arrogant in his old age." True enough, but he took me aside to apologize, and I came to admire some of his actions at State - especially the way he spun Pakistan's prime minister around on a dime after 9/11, which helped us defeat the Taliban.

In that spirit, I apologize for having quoted colleagues of Colin's deputy, Richard Armitage, as saying he was "better neckless than feckless." Armitage is leaving, too, presumably to help Powell write his next best seller, "The Secret Thoughts of Bob Woodward."

You didn't think Bush had an exit strategy? Six loyal cabinet members have exited so far, accompanied by a flock of pouting spooks at Langley who bet on a Kerry victory. More are sure to join the cabinet appointees and bureaucrats in a mass exodus usually described as biblical.

I expected Powell to stick around a few months to see if Arafat's death could give him a chance for shuttle diplomacy leading to a Nobel Prize. Wrong; he probably assumed, with reason, that the Palestinians are a long way from controlling Hamas, no matter whom they elect in January - and with no crackdown on violence, no serious negotiation is likely right away.

I also expected the Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz duo of idealistic hawks to stay firmly in place at the Pentagon well into the new term, backed up by Dick Cheney. Right; no exodus there.

What, then, will Condi Rice's move from national security adviser to secretary of state mean for U.S. foreign policy in Bush's second term?

The center of decision-making gravity will move slightly to the right, with the necessary hard fist in a softer glove. Powell's inclination to settle was a counterweight to Rumsfeld's drive to win. Though the two stayed personally compatible - remarkable near the center of power, where differences are usually personalized - their Weltanschauungs diverged.

Rice took pains to stay in the policy middle and on the operational fringe, the better to coolly advise the president. When she goes to State, will she adopt the Powell role as counterweight? Will she, as most Foggy Bottom secretaries do, "go native" - be absorbed by the accommodationist mind-set that is the hallmark of professional diplomacy?

Her friends tell me that she is more likely to surprise us skeptics, and to follow the pattern of one of her mentors, George Shultz, in taking control of the department in subtle ways. Let's hope so.

Condi was an effective administrator as provost at Stanford, but has not run a strong National Security Council staff. Her deputy, Stephen Hadley, now moving up to replace her and well regarded by Cheney, is more apparatchik than geostrategist. Though he will immediately be lionized by media seeking a source, he is not yet a player, and will find it difficult going up against his old boss, or Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz, or Cheney.

The secretary-designate, if not captured by State's bureaucracy or frazzled by travel to funerals, will be more of a player than before. At 50, she need not defer to the silverbacks of strategy, and would be wise to depend on the strength of her policy argument rather than on her unlimited access to the ear of the boss.

I like all this musical-chairing, with experienced insiders getting upside exposure and with fresh faces soon to carry out the Bush campaign promises. No "range of exhausted volcanoes" will slow the action, in a phrase of Disraeli's quoted by the re-elected Nixon.

This president is no sore winner, and has learned the hard way to have in hand a post-victory plan. In decisively choosing those who stay and those who come in, he shows a determination to win the policy battles of his second term.