

NEW YORK TIMES – NOVEMBER 16TH 2004

THE CABINET SHUFFLE

And Some Small Shoes to Fill

Three other cabinet members announced their departures yesterday, virtually ignored in the shadow of Colin Powell's resignation. Their accomplishments, or lack thereof, say a lot about the president's first term and the prospects for his second.

When George W. Bush called himself a "compassionate conservative," he invariably pointed to his No Child Left Behind reform plan. As secretary of education, Rod Paige argued valiantly for the premise behind the law: that poor minority children deserve the same skilled teachers and high-quality schools as their affluent counterparts. But beyond the words, Dr. Paige turned out to be politically tone-deaf and a disastrous manager. His failures were recently outlined in a scalding report from the Government Accountability Office. The report noted that the department had squandered the authority given to it under the law and had failed even to provide written state-specific instructions to local governments attempting to comply with the new rules.

Among the people most mentioned as a possible successor for Dr. Paige is Margaret Spellings, Mr. Bush's chief domestic policy adviser and a principal architect of No Child Left Behind. Her background would give her both credibility and closer ties with the White House than Dr. Paige enjoyed. But whoever takes the job will need to make wholesale changes in the top echelons of the Education Department, which has been busier currying favor with religious organizations and the school voucher forces than carrying out the central mission at hand. Unless the department changes course quickly, it will miss the opportunity to ensure that the states comply with the all-important requirement for every classroom to have a highly qualified teacher.

As agriculture secretary, Ann Veneman generally toed the administration's pro-industry line on issues like forest policy and food safety. But she provided one notably fresh initiative in 2001, when she endorsed a new farm policy that would have drastically trimmed old-fashioned subsidies in favor of freer markets and more generous land conservation programs - a form of aid that is particularly helpful to small farmers. Unfortunately, the White House failed to give her much support in the face of Congressional resistance. The result was a swollen farm bill that greatly increased conservation spending but kept most of the old subsidies intact.

Ms. Veneman also began well on the area of forest policy, endorsing a strategy to prevent forest fires that would have focused on overgrown forests near at-risk communities while leaving the more valuable old-growth trees in remote areas pretty much alone. Within a year, however, under pressure from the timber industry, the White House and Congress, she reversed course in favor of a strategy that encouraged more aggressive commercial logging with only a modest payoff in fire suppression.

The energy secretary, Spencer Abraham, arrived at his cabinet post with the dubious distinction of having introduced a bill, when he was a United States senator, to abolish the very department Mr. Bush asked him to run. With that beginning, it's not surprising that Mr. Abraham pursued a pro-industry strategy that did little to steer the country to an energy future that would be cleaner, more efficient and less oil-dependent. To his credit, he began several useful steps to collect and safeguard nuclear materials that the United States and Russia had scattered around the world for research

reactors. We have little hope that Mr. Abraham's successor will do any better at encouraging energy conservation, but given the president's campaign speeches about the importance of curbing nuclear proliferation, we hope that the next secretary will follow up on his lead on that critical initiative.