

The Power of One

By DAVID GERGEN

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Washington - Give the man his due: George W. Bush is emerging as one of the boldest, most audacious presidents in modern history.

Whether he is also wise is a question that will preoccupy us for another four years, but the reshuffling of his team in recent days makes clear that he intends to stretch the powers of his office to their limits. Woodrow Wilson once wrote that "the president is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can." President Bush comes Texas-sized.

By sending members of his White House staff to run three of the most important departments in the government - with perhaps more such appointments in the offing - Mr. Bush is centralizing power in the White House in ways not seen since Richard Nixon. Nixon had his troika of Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Henry Kissinger to run the government. Mr. Bush seems destined to run the government with his own troika: Dick Cheney, Karl Rove and Condoleezza Rice.

Moreover, he believes he has a mandate for a revolutionary agenda. Conservative presidents, as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has argued, tend to be consolidators - men like Dwight Eisenhower, Nixon and even Ronald Reagan, who largely accepted the expansions in government made by their liberal predecessors. Mr. Bush is the first conservative whose policies would gradually unwind major commitments like Social Security and progressive taxes. It is increasingly clear that Mr. Bush embraces the view of Winston Churchill: that great leaders should set great goals. The president apparently intends no less than to overhaul government, achieve long-term Republican hegemony over American politics and ensure long-term American hegemony over the world.

In restructuring his team for the second term, Mr. Bush is also acting well within his rights. As long as he doesn't name his horse as proconsul, a president is traditionally accorded the right to choose anybody he wants in his cabinet, including members of his White House staff. Heading into his second term, Nixon named one member of his staff, Mr. Kissinger, as secretary of state and appointed five members of his staff to sub-cabinet posts; Reagan nominated two members of his staff, James Baker and Edward Meese, to key cabinet spots; and Bill Clinton also promoted a member of his staff, Alexis Herman, to the cabinet. Former members of the White House staff who have been good administrators have generally served well in departments. The ability to speak with their leader's voice has always enhanced their authority.

Presidents of the past would also sympathize with Mr. Bush's desire to quell rebellious voices at the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. For more than half a century, White Houses have resounded with complaints about the striped pants set at Foggy Bottom and renegades at Langley. Foreign service officers are especially out of step with the incumbent president: a rising star in foreign service confided a week ago that on a scale of 0-to-10, colleagues in the service would give a 9.5 grade to Colin Powell and a grade of 2 to the Bush administration. Bringing the foreign service on board will be one of the toughest challenges facing Secretary Rice.

The fact that Mr. Bush is acting within his rights does not mean, however, that he is also right. Critics mostly worry that the reshuffling of the national security team signals an even harder, more militaristic line toward the world. That is probably true, but one cannot discount noises from within that the president wants to turn more toward diplomacy. Every White House remembers, after all, how L.B.J. warned his staff after a landslide election in 1964 that they only had a year to get things done domestically. If you were Karl Rove working with the president, wouldn't you want a couple of years of relative peace on the foreign side so that you could concentrate on the domestic agenda now? (Yeah, let's fix Iraq, but for goodness sake, don't bomb Iran or North Korea ... at least not yet.) So, the jury is still out on where security policy is heading.

The more immediate danger is that Mr. Bush and his troika are falling into a trap facing other re-elected presidents: hubris. When presidents win their first elections, they and their teams think they are king of the hill; when they win re-election, they too often think they are masters of the universe. As Richard Neustadt pointed out, even the best of modern presidents, Franklin Roosevelt, fell into the trap when he was first re-elected in 1936. He immediately started overreaching, as he tried to pack the Supreme Court in 1937 and tried to purge Southern Democrats in 1938. F.D.R. nearly did himself in during his second term.

In Mr. Bush's case, his administration has already shown ominous signs of "group-think" in its handling of Iraq and the nation's finances. By closing down dissent and centralizing power in a few hands, he is acting as if he truly believes that he and his team have a perfect track record, that they know best, and that they don't need any infusion of new heavyweights. He has every right to take this course, but as he knows from his Bible, pride goeth before. ...

David Gergen is professor of public service at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and editor at large of U.S. News & World Report. He served as a White House adviser to four presidents.