

Bush Seeks to Rule The Bureaucracy

Appointments Aim at White House Control

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President Bush has ousted Saddam Hussein, toppled the Taliban and defeated the Democrats, but last week he took aim at a more enduring foe: the federal bureaucracy.

In a flurry of actions in recent days, he and his top lieutenants have taken steps to quell dissent at two fractious agencies -- the CIA and the State Department -- and to increase White House control over others, including the Justice and Education departments.

The White House moves, and similar changes anticipated at other departments, are likely to quiet some of the already infrequent dissent that has leaked from agencies during Bush's first term. They may also put a more conservative stamp on the bureaucracy's administration of the laws and making of rules on everything from the environment to business to health care.

But political scientists and others who follow the Cabinet agencies say the Bush efforts, like those of several other presidents, are unlikely to cause fundamental changes in how the federal government is run.

James Pfiffner, a specialist in presidential personnel at George Mason University, said Bush's efforts are closest to those of Richard M. Nixon's after his 1972 reelection, when he installed eight new Cabinet members and several White House officials at sub-Cabinet positions. "It was seen as heavy-handed," Pfiffner said, and created an us-vs.-them tension between political appointees and civil servants. "They didn't get the kind of inside, deep-down control that they wanted."

Still, past failures to rein in the federal bureaucracy have not deterred the Bush administration, which even before the recent moves had been unusually successful at enforcing control over the Cabinet agencies.

Last Monday at the CIA, new Director Porter J. Goss issued a memo outlining the "rules of the road" for the agency. "We support the administration and its policies in our work," he wrote. "As agency employees we do not identify with, support, or champion opposition to the administration or its policies." At least three top CIA officials have resigned, and Goss has brought in loyalists from outside the agency.

On Tuesday, Bush named trusted aide Condoleezza Rice to be secretary of state, replacing Colin L. Powell, who frequently and publicly sided with the department's staff against the White House. Administration officials are talking about several other White House aides joining Rice at State, and about several top-level Foreign Service officers being removed from prominent positions.

The Rice announcement followed by six days Bush's announcement that he would nominate another White House aide, Alberto R. Gonzales, to be attorney general -- succeeding John D. Ashcroft, with whom Gonzales and others at the White House had feuded. Other Bush loyalists have been or soon will be tapped to head the Education, Energy, Agriculture and Treasury departments, agencies where, in some cases, past secretaries have embarrassed Bush with their independence.

Taming the Cabinet agencies is a daunting task. There are 3,000 political appointees and a U.S. civil service of 1.8 million workers, many of whom are nearly impossible to fire.

And the Bush administration has discovered that workers in the agencies -- political appointees and civil servants alike -- often stray from White House orthodoxy; examples of administration critics include CIA terrorism official Michael Scheuer, who wrote a book about flaws in the fight against al Qaeda; former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson IV, who criticized Bush about the case for war in Iraq; and former Treasury secretary Paul H. O'Neill, who frequently contradicted the White House.

Still, the Bush administration has done better than its predecessors at controlling the agencies. "They've created a multiplier effect in which these 3,000 political appointees feel like three times that many," said Paul C. Light, a New York University professor who advised the Bush campaign in 2000 about bureaucracy reforms. Light points out that political appointees now occupy positions in the top 10 or 15 layers of management at the Cabinet agencies. And he says Bush's top political adviser, Karl Rove, keeps the agencies in line by having a weekly conference call with the chiefs of staff to the agency secretaries and administrators.

Light said the new moves to enforce loyalty at Cabinet agencies, combined with the existing efforts, will drive many of the senior executives in the civil service to retire in frustration, which will give Bush "more coordination and control" over the agencies and "slow down the regulatory process." Still, Light said, he has found "no interest" in the more far-reaching overhaul of the federal workforce that Bush proposed after consulting with him during the 2000 campaign -- which would have, among other things, changed the rules for employing federal workers, making the bureaucracy more like the private sector.

Privately, officials in the White House say there is little hope of truly taming the bureaucracy. Publicly, there is little talk of attempting it. "I don't think any of the personnel changes at the senior level will influence" the broader civil service reforms, said Office of Management and Budget spokesman Chad Colton. "It's something we'll continue at the edges to improve."

That is not good enough for advocates of fundamental changes in the agencies. Fred Smith, who heads the free-market Competitive Enterprise Institute, said he has acquired a "natural, realistic despair" about hopes for major reforms of the regulatory process.

"Since Jimmy Carter, there has been an effort to get control of the regulatory process and nobody has come close to succeeding," Smith said. "It's worse than ever." Although "the body language" in the new personnel moves indicates Bush is serious about restraining the agencies, "the administration hasn't decided whether the regulatory threat is serious enough to expend capital on."

To some extent, every president since Nixon has tried to assert more White House control over the agencies. Some, particularly Nixon and Carter, found that Cabinet secretaries and other political appointees wound up representing their agencies' bureaucracies rather than the White House's wishes. Before Bush, the most successful was the Reagan administration, which controlled staffing of Cabinet agencies at the White House.

Bruce Reed, who was the White House domestic policy chief under President Bill Clinton, expressed some approval of Bush's personnel style. "It's a good idea to promote from within and there's nothing wrong with wanting a Cabinet whose agenda is the same as the president's," he said.

But Reed cautioned against expecting major changes. "When people take jobs at agencies, they tend to go native and start championing the institution rather than the agenda of the person who put them there," he said. "Someone who is blindly loyal to the president at the White House may try to develop dual citizenship."

