



NEWSHOUR A NewsHour with Jim Lehrer special for students

EXTRA

Powell Out, Rice Promoted in Cabinet Reshuffle

November 17, 2004

President Bush has nominated national security adviser Condoleezza Rice to replace resigning Secretary of State Colin Powell in a Cabinet shake-up that will help define the next four years.

Mr. Bush announced Rice's nomination Tuesday at a White House ceremony.

"The secretary of state is America's face to the world," the president said. In Rice, he added, people from other nations will see "the grace, strength and decency of our country."

If the Senate confirms her – which is expected – Rice will become only the second woman to hold the significant foreign policy post and the first black woman.

Long a close friend to the president, Rice's promotion is seen as a victory for conservatives who often clashed with Colin Powell on foreign policy.

"The one thing she would have going for her that Secretary Powell didn't have ... is that direct line to the president. There would be no equivocation or confusion about whether she spoke for the president of the United States," explained Alexis Simendinger, a reporter who covers the White House.

Powell's resignation was announced along with the departure of three other Cabinet secretaries: Rod Paige of Education, Ann Veneman of Agriculture and Spencer Abraham of Energy. President Bush accepted the resignations of Attorney General John Ashcroft and Commerce Secretary Donald Evans on Nov. 9.

Common changes

Political experts agree that changes like these are not uncommon and often express a second-term president's desire to reward loyal friends as well as create a more harmonious and effective executive branch of government.

"I think second-term presidents tend to tighten their control and basically say, 'I know what I'm doing, I know where I'm going and I want people at the Cabinet departments who are going to follow my lead,'" Paul Light of the Brookings Institution told NPR.

“Most of these second-term Cabinet people will be enforcers rather than idea-generators. That’s the tradition and I think you’ll see it heightened here,” he added.

David Gergen, who advised Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton, told the Washington Post that the level of turnover is high, but it has less to do with discontent than with the fatigue of long hours and difficult jobs.

Even though more resignations are expected (staggered to avoid the appearance of a mass exit), it looks as though President Bush won’t follow the lead of Richard Nixon, who notoriously demanded that all his Cabinet members submit their letters of resignation prior to the start of his second term in 1973. Nixon also tried to enforce loyalty by having Henry Kissinger serve as both national security adviser and secretary of state.

History of the Cabinet

The Cabinet has been a staple of American presidencies since George Washington held the first recorded meeting in 1791. According to Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, the purpose of the Cabinet is to advise the president.

The president "may require the opinion, in writing, of the principal officer in each of the executive departments, upon any subject relating to the duties of their respective offices."

By law, the Cabinet includes the vice president and the heads of 15 executive departments: Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor, State, Transportation, Treasury and Veterans Affairs, and the attorney general -- the head of the Justice Department.

President Bush also bestowed Cabinet-level rank on the heads of the Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Management and Budget, and National Drug Control Policy, and the U.S. trade representative.

The secretaries are appointed by the president, but must be confirmed by the Senate with a simple majority vote -- 51. Once confirmed, they report to the president, who is the only person who can fire a Cabinet secretary.

However, the power of Cabinet secretaries is declining, according to a panel of experts who study government decision-making at the Brookings Institution. Decision-making has become more centralized due to the complexity of the modern world.

The experts also remarked that it is important to distinguish between the inner Cabinet -- State, Defense, Treasury and Justice -- and the outer Cabinet of less critical departments. Agriculture is a key part of U.S. industry, experts agreed, but to have the Agriculture secretary at all important meetings is something of an anachronism.

Compiled by Annie Schleicher, Online NewsHour