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White House Opens Door To Dissenters

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Aversion to Criticism Appears to Be Fading

By [Peter Baker](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
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When retired Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey criticized the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq war three years ago, he was lambasted as an armchair general and deemed an adversary by the Pentagon. So even McCaffrey was surprised to find himself in the Oval Office this week giving President Bush his thoughts on Iraq.

A White House long accused of squelching internal dissent and ignoring outside viewpoints has been reaching out in its moment of weakness to prominent figures who have disagreed with the president. Bush just hired a Treasury secretary who opposed his policy on global warming and a press secretary who dismissed his domestic agenda as timid and listless.

How much such moves reflect a genuine opening up for an insular White House remains uncertain. Symbolically, at least, the White House is eager to rebut the longstanding public impression of a president in a bunker listening only to like-minded advisers. Substantively, Bush has hardly signaled a major course change in the direction of his presidency, and skeptics recall past instances when nonconformists within the administration were shut out.

Yet some Washington veterans detect signs of a tentative new willingness by the administration to heed the advice of others rather than sticking stubbornly to its position. Just this week, under pressure from European allies and U.S. foreign policy elders, the administration reversed itself and agreed to join talks with Iran if it suspends nuclear activities. And last week, Bush temporarily sealed documents seized from a congressman's office in response to complaints from Capitol Hill.




"It's a positive sign for going forward," said former congressman Robert S. Walker (R-Pa.), an outspoken critic of the FBI raid on the office of Rep. William J. Jefferson (D-La.). Walker attributed the shift to Joshua B. Bolten, the new White House chief of staff. "What you're seeing is a reflection of Bolten's belief that policy has to be multifaceted."

Others are more dubious. "I want to see the proof," said retired Col. Larry Wilkerson, who was chief of staff at the State Department until last year, when he emerged as a vocal critic of the administration. "I can hope, as I imagine 60 to 70 percent of Americans are hoping, . . . we are going to see some moderation and it's going to bear some fruit. But I've got to see the fruit, because I've seen this before."

To disaffected insiders such as Wilkerson, Bush has seemed powerfully indifferent to alternative views or shielded from them altogether. First-term figures such as Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, Environmental Protection Agency chief Christine Todd Whitman and Treasury Secretary Paul H. O'Neill ultimately left frustrated. Skeptical assessments of Iraq's weapons programs were largely disregarded before the 2003 invasion.


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In Bush's view, certitude has served him well -- a fidelity to core principles that avoids the sort of equivocation that he believes undermined Bill Clinton's presidency. But as he headed into his sixth year in office, the president was derided in a Newsweek cover story titled "Bush in the Bubble," which characterized him as perhaps "the most isolated president in modern history."

The White House shake-up orchestrated by Bolten has begun to crack that bubble just a bit. While he and other new appointees were already Bush aides, Bolten recruited radio host Tony Snow as the new press secretary, even though Snow had criticized the White House for giving up on Social Security changes and scaling down its legislative ambitions. And Bolten prevailed upon Goldman Sachs chief executive Henry M. Paulson Jr. to take over as Treasury secretary, even though Paulson headed an environmental group highly critical of Bush's approach to climate change.

"The notion that there hasn't been debate here over the last 5 1/2 years is flat wrong," said White House communications director Nicolle Wallace. "But it's also true that there's more people with more ideas and perspectives, and that's good."

Snow agreed. "My experience from my first day here is that debates are wide open, they're wide-ranging, and opinions, even those that disagree with the president, are aired, and people discuss them," he told reporters when Paulson was hired. "And I think Hank Paulson is certainly going to be able to express his views."

Still, neither Snow nor Paulson took that for granted. Before agreeing to take the jobs, they secured guarantees that they would have seats in the inner circle. The real test may be whether those promises are fulfilled. Bush has not agreed, for instance, to change his mind on global warming just because Paulson will join the Cabinet.

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