

## Gonzales Emerges as President's Point Man

### As attorney general, he must defend Bush and the Constitution

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**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – When Alberto Gonzales was White House counsel, he was a behind-the-scenes player who chatted often with his only client, George W. Bush.

Now that Gonzales is the U.S. attorney general, the Houstonian finds himself standing in the spotlight for the president on his controversial policies in the war on terror.

Whether the issue is defending Bush's military tribunals, which the Supreme Court says violate U.S. law and international treaties, or the president's authorization of warrantless eavesdropping on Americans' telephone and e-mail conversations, Gonzales has emerged as the administration's point man. That role has put him in the crosshairs of Democrats and his fellow Republicans alike.

"I think what's important for Congress to understand is that we need to have procedures (for) fair proceedings but ones that (also) reflect the reality that we are still at war," Gonzales said in an interview this week with the *Houston Chronicle*.

"They need to allow us to bring terrorists to justice in a way that we don't have to compromise sensitive information or classified information."

Gonzales has spent hours talking with reporters about Bush's latest proposal for trying foreign terror suspects held at Guantanamo Bay. On Wednesday, he emerged from a Cabinet meeting at the White House and stood next to the president as Bush urged Congress to get on board.

But across town on Capitol Hill, Republican lawmakers were already circulating their own plan for overhauling the tribunal system, revealing several major sticking points with the White House and Gonzales' Justice Department.

Gonzales insists that terror suspects should be prohibited from seeing some of the evidence against them, and that hearsay testimony and evidence gathered through coercive interrogations should be admissible at trial. Key lawmakers disagree and say that the administration's approach would never pass Supreme Court muster.

Despite negotiations during Congress' August recess, not much appears to have changed since Gonzales' appearance before the Senate Armed Service Committee in August, which featured a dramatic showdown between the attorney general and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., a Vietnam-era prisoner of war and torture survivor.

McCain asked: Should military courts trying terror suspects be allowed to consider evidence gleaned during illegal, inhumane interrogations?

The pause was long; the silence uncomfortable. Gonzales sighed deeply before answering. Such evidence — though it was obtained by violating the 1949 Geneva Conventions — should be allowed, he said, so long as a U.S. military judge deemed it reliable.

McCain gritted his teeth and snarled: "Well, I think that if you practice illegal, inhumane treatment and allow that to be admissible in court, that would be a radical departure from any practice that this nation ... "

Gonzales said in the interview that he views McCain as a hero. "He's sacrificed a lot for our country," Gonzales said, "and I think his views as we develop this policy are ones that should be seriously considered."

Gonzales said disagreements are inevitable as the administration and lawmakers hash out such complicated issues.

The attorney general also has drawn the wrath of Senate Judiciary Chairman Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the top Democrat on that committee, who took turns dressing down the attorney general at one hearing. They complained that Gonzales had repeatedly refused to testify before the committee overseeing his work, instead sending a parade of Justice Department underlings to Capitol Hill who were authorized to tell lawmakers virtually nothing.

Once Gonzales finally decided to grace the committee with his presence, Specter said, he flouted the panel's rules by turning in his opening statement too late for anyone to review it before the hearing. After berating Gonzales for several minutes and threatening to deep-six his opening remarks, Specter relented.

After calmly reading his prepared statement, Gonzales spent the hearing, as usual, smiling and politely responding to the senators' questions while closely guarding the information they were seeking.

Gonzales said lawmakers may get frustrated, but he is barred from giving more complete answers to some questions because the information is classified.

Gonzales also is taking a beating in the national press. The *New York Times* editorial page has accused him of going to the Hill to "stonewall, obfuscate and spin fairy tales." Ruth Marcus, a liberal columnist for the Washington Post, recently delivered what, coming from her, was intended as the ultimate insult: "Alberto Gonzales is achieving something remarkable, even miraculous, as attorney general," she wrote. "He is making John Ashcroft look good."

"My wife reads a lot of it," Gonzales said. "I don't."

"It's a tough job, and you're going to make some tough decisions that are going to please some people, not please other people. You've got to do what you think is the right thing to do."

Gonzales said his role in developing the administration's terrorism policies is essentially to provide legal advice.

"I also, as a member of the president's Cabinet, do have a role in providing my own views about what is appropriate policy," he said. "At the end of the day, however, the president decides what is the policy of the administration."

Still, Gonzales said he views his close relationship with Bush as a positive thing that allows him to speak his mind.

"When you communicate, you end up, honestly, sometimes being brutally frank," he said. "Lawyers appreciate being able to do that with their client, no matter if they are attorney general or a first-year associate at some firm."

But in his previous job as White House counsel and now, as attorney general, Gonzales said, "my No. 1 allegiance is to the Constitution."

"I think people need to understand that as attorney general, I wear two hats. I wear the hat as a member of the president's team. My job is to further his agenda, to further his policy objectives," he said. "But I'm also the chief law enforcement officer of the country and I understand very clearly where those lines diverge. And I take my obligations as the nation's chief law enforcement officer, very, very seriously."

As for Bush, Gonzales said, "He's very, very respectful about my role as attorney general."

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