

wrong today," says Joe Lockhart, former White House press secretary for Bill Clinton. "She has been a moderate Democratic senator since she walked in, not a crazy liberal."

Adds Dan McGinn, a business consultant and specialist in public image-making: "Giuliani is trying to walk the line by saying, 'I am who I am—just look at the whole record.' Hillary is trying to say, 'I'm not who you think I am.'"

Barack Obama. Last year, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama was barely known as a freshman senator, but since then, his rise has been meteoric, thanks in part to the public desire for a fresh face. Obama has emerged as Clinton's main competitor in the polls, billing himself as a new-generation leader and an African-American who has wide appeal. "Obama is saying, 'I am not like these other folks,'" says McGinn, and Obama advisers argue that the less he acts like a Washington politician, the better he will do.

"He hasn't been in national politics long enough to have acquired a brand, and his past doesn't hem him in," says a Democratic strategist not working for any campaign. "He has campaigned on character and charisma. . . . What people are uncertain of is if he has the knowledge to make decisions day after day as president. And he's never run anything other than his Senate office."

John Edwards. In 2004, John Edwards was a sunny optimist who rarely attacked his opponents. As a presidential candidate, he called for reducing the disparities between rich and poor. But he lost the nomination and became John Kerry's vice presidential running mate, requiring him to take a back seat in every way. Now, after two years out of elective office, the former North Carolina senator says he has a better understanding of what the country wants, and he is running from the left, as a strong anti-Iraq war Democrat who advocates "transformational change."

"He's changed the most of anyone in the Democratic field," says a senior party strategist. "On the positive side, here's the guy who had time to think and figure out how to address the issues, but on the negative side, here's the guy who decided he had to get to where the party wants its candidates to be for 2008."

More broadly, the political recalibrations really have just begun. When candidates win their parties' nominations, they tend to rebrand themselves yet again, moving toward the center to capture as many voters as possible in the general election. "We'll need a wiring diagram," says Baker, "to figure out where they are." ●



Gonzales is sworn in prior to his testimony.

THE EMBATTLED ATTORNEY GENERAL

Gonzales still has the president's support, for now

By Chitra Ragavan

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales stood behind a crimson-draped table inside a packed hearing room on Capitol Hill last week, right hand raised, swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It was the sort of political theater that Washington specializes in, and there were supporting actors and bit players galore. Senators of both parties, angered by Gonzales's firing of eight U.S. attorneys, prepared to deliver a tongue-lashing. Protesters garbed in orange and pink lined the hearing room, while two dozen photographers clicked away in unison. In the midst of the throng was Gonzales, reinforced by a battalion of staffers armed with fact-filled binders, but nevertheless looking like the loneliest man in Washington.

Perception is reality here, at least to a point. Gonzales, who followed his mentor, President George W. Bush from Texas, has been an outsider throughout his tenure in Washington, both as White

House counsel and attorney general; he has little political capital at the Capitol, perhaps less now than ever. Indeed, he has generated enormous criticism for his role in crafting Bush's "war on terror" policies. But at Thursday's hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, despite blistering criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike, it seemed Gonzales might just survive, at least for a few more days, for one reason alone: In this high-stakes game of political poker, Gonzales holds the most powerful card of all, his boss, who—at least on paper—continued to provide what one White House official described as "unwavering" support. "That says to me that the president's loyalty," says former Justice Department spokesman Mark Corallo, "is the single most important factor here."

But for how long? Gonzales had gone to the hearing, hat in hand, with a mission impossible: to assuage angry senators who feel hoodwinked by the many shifting explanations for the mass pros-

ecutor firings and Gonzales's seeming inability to get a grip on the facts. But in this all-important performance, Gonzales didn't garner any rave reviews.

Instead, the AG settled on a shopworn *mea culpa*, acknowledging that the prosecutors "deserved better," and saying he regretted how they were treated. He stood by his decision to fire them, maintaining that he "firmly" believes "nothing improper occurred," though conceding that he had acted in a most unlawyerly fashion by failing to check internal E-mails, memos, and documents, or even his own calendar, before rushing to provide answers to Congress, the press, and the public.

Lapses. Even more troubling was Gonzales's cloudy memory. As the hearing lurched on, he grew increasingly enmeshed in endless loop-the-loops of "I don't recall," "I can't recall," and "I seem to recall" that made the follicle-challenged senators want to tear out what was left of their bipartisan hair. Seventy-one times in all, the attorney general fell back on a misfiring memory. Had Gonzales discussed the firings with the president in advance? asked Vermont Democrat Patrick Leahy, who chairs the Judiciary Committee. "I now understand," intoned Gonzales, "there was a conversation with myself and the president." Leahy also wanted to know when New Mexico prosecutor David Iglesias was added to the list of those to be fired. "Senator," Gonzales said, "I have no recollection of knowing when that occurred."

Democrats like Leahy and New York's Charles Schumer had been lambasting Gonzales over the U.S. attorney firings for weeks. What seemed more worrisome for Gonzales and the White House was the eroding support in the GOP. Before the hearing, among Republicans, only New Hampshire's John Sununu had called for Gonzales to go. But now that's changing. "I believe," said Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn at the hearing, "that the best way to put this behind us is your resignation." Others wouldn't go that far, but few Republicans had much nice to say. Sen. Lindsey Graham called the attorney general's explanations of the firings "a stretch." Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter, the committee's ranking Republican, said Gonzales's answers "did not stick together."

A stoic Gonzales vowed to press on. He conceded mistakes were made but promised to fix them. "I believe," he said "that I continue to be effective as the attorney general of the United States."

And there's much more to do. Gon-

zales has said he hopes to move past the acrimony to push through some of his top priorities—stemming the spike in violent crime in some areas of the country, going after violent international gangs, targeting illegal prescription drug sales over the Internet, protecting kids from pedophiles and sexual predators, and beefing up immigration laws

consultant Eric Dezenhall, who served in the Reagan White House. "I think the Bush administration is on a downswing, and he's caught in that larger vortex."

Some in the GOP believe that getting rid of Gonzales, and trying to get a new attorney general confirmed with just 20 months left for the Bush administration, would be more trouble than it's worth.

But other Republican legislators are grumbling privately that Gonzales has become a net liability for the 2008 campaign. They don't think he has the credibility, the competence, or the communication skills to de-

fend GOP policies on issues ranging from domestic surveillance to Guantánamo Bay, and they want a stronger advocate during campaign season. So, despite Bush's avowed loyalty, Gonzales's fate would seem to hang in the balance as the White House keeps a sharp eye out for more Republican defectors calling for the resignation of this most embattled and isolated attorney general. ●

With Kenneth T. Walsh

"As a general rule of thumb, whoever attacks wins; whoever defends loses. And Gonzales is in the defense position."

to make the borders less porous. "I will conclude with one final, and I believe urgent request," Gonzales told the Judiciary Committee at an oversight hearing in January. "Please give the president's judicial nominees an up-or-down vote."

But a determination on Gonzales's fate may come first. "As a general rule of thumb, whoever attacks wins; whoever defends loses. And Gonzales is in the defense position," says crisis management

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