

Not soon enough

by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales has belatedly announced he will step down from the national office he disgraced. Good. Now the focus must be on naming a successor who's more loyal to the Constitution and the American people than to the White House and the Republican Party.

Solicitor General Paul Clement will become acting attorney general until a replacement is confirmed. Perhaps Clement - a conservative who enjoys a reputation as an excellent litigator - should be that replacement.

Gonzales' resignation mustn't stop the congressional inquiries the attorney general triggered, particularly with the way in which nine U.S. attorneys were dismissed and with his troubling testimony about the firings before congressional committees. He displayed frequent lapses of memory and contradictions with the statements of others and the written record.

The evidence is that the Justice Department became overly politicized under Gonzales, the onetime White House lawyer. The firing of the U.S. attorneys was a case in point. Some of the prosecutors appeared to have gotten the ax because they failed to attack Democrats aggressively enough. If only to maintain the confidence of the public, partisan politics should play no role in decisions to bring charges.

But the problem at the Justice Department goes beyond Gonzales. In his remarks on the attorney general's resignation, President George W. Bush demonstrated he was part of the problem. He turned reality inside out by characterizing Gonzales as a victim of "unfair treatment," which entailed dragging "his good name ... through the mud for political reasons." Actually, Gonzales was the one playing politics. The real victim was the nation.

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff is being mentioned as Gonzales' successor. But a logical choice could be Clement, particularly with the clock winding down for the Bush administration. An outsider will barely get the seat warm before he or she has to leave.

In any event, the key criteria Congress should weigh for the job are ability and willingness to enforce the law with due regard for the key word in the department's name: justice.

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