

Q&A: An interview with Alberto Gonzales

by CNS

After his resignation was announced last Monday, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales spoke with San Diego Union-Tribune editorial board member and columnist Ruben Navarrette Jr.

Q: President Bush said today that you were a talented and honorable person whose name was dragged through the mud. Do you think your name was dragged through the mud?

A: I think that Washington is a very difficult town, and many of the things that happen - not just in connection with me but generally in ALBERTO GONZALES - Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently resigned his post. CNS Photo by John R. McCutchen. government - it's very political, and that's the nature of it. And all of us who come to work in these positions, we understand that. And people who don't think politics drives a lot of what happens here are naive. So I would just say that. Sometimes people pursue agendas that are based on politics. Some people might say it's not fair. Some people might say it's not right. But, for all of us who serve in these positions, we have to acknowledge that's the way this town operates. It's gonna happen. I wish it weren't so. And I'm not saying that this is true for everyone, but it's certainly something that I've seen a lot of. I would say that, if anything, probably the most disappointing thing that I've observed (is that) it's so different in terms of what I observed in terms of Texas government. And maybe I was naive in terms of how government should work. But what I saw in Texas was what I thought was productive and good for the citizens of Texas. But there is a lot of what I see in Washington that is concerning to me as a citizen.

Q: Your critics accuse you of politicizing the office of attorney general. But, flipping that on its head, how much of the criticism that you've received do you think is a result of your critics politicizing the oversight process?

A: It's hard for me to say what their intention or motivation is, but all I would say is, look at the record in terms all these hearings have produced and what the documents have shown in terms of whether there was a political, an improper political, motivation in decisions about these U.S. attorneys. I know that I would never have asked for the resignation of any U.S. attorney for any improper political motive. It just doesn't happen. You know, I'll just stop there.

Q: You have said that you delegated many of these decisions in the style of a CEO. Some have said that this is part of the problem and that one can't run the Department of Justice like a CEO runs a company. Do you think maybe that's true?

A: I'd say that those critics have never served in these types of positions. I think that there are so many decisions that have to be made that you cannot make them all. You surround yourself with good people. The president nominates good people that surround the head of any Cabinet agency. And many decisions are made at other levels. So the notion that someone who runs an agency is going to be aware of all the decisions that are made in that department and is signing off on those decisions, quite frankly, is naive. Now having said that, I will say - and have testified in Congress - that I would have done things differently. I could have been more involved and should have been more involved. But that's not to say that I should be involved in every decision that's made in the department. That's just not possible.

Q: So would you agree that the whole process with the U.S. attorneys was bungled and badly handled, and that, as you say, things should have been done differently?

A: I still stand by the proposition that those of us who serve in government, that we should be evaluated based on our performance. It's good government. And I think the American people expect those of us in positions of leadership to ensure that those who are working for us - like U.S. attorneys - are doing their jobs. So the process of evaluating U.S. attorneys is a good one. I think there are things that I would have done differently - probably exercise more care as an initial matter in talking about the process without first having gone through the documents and having talked to people. You know, I did those early press conferences, and there were things that were said that, going back over the documents, that turned out not to be true, like, for example, the Nov. 27 meeting, which I had no recollection of. So, you know, when you ask if there is anything that I would have done differently. Yes, I would have told the press, "Guys, I'm sorry. I'm not going to answer any questions about what happened here because I don't recall, and I don't know, and I need to look at the documents." Of course, if I had done that, I think the press would have accused me of stonewalling. So it's a tough position to be in. No question about it.

Q: Some members of the Senate accused you, literally, of perjury. How do you respond to that?

A: At these hearings, you forget things. You hear a question and think about it a certain way. And then you

go back and look at the transcript and say, "Wait a minute. Maybe that's not totally true." So I'll just say that, from my perspective, I answered the questions as honestly as I could, to the best of my abilities. We have a process where, after the hearings, you're given a transcript, and you're able to go back and clarify the record.

Q: So you never intentionally misled Congress?

A: Absolutely not. Absolutely not.

Q: In your opinion, how much of the criticism that was aimed at you wasn't really about you at all but about getting at President Bush through you?

A: I'll just say that the president represents the biggest target, and I think that people who want to hurt the president will use whatever means to do so.

Q: Some have suggested that you were absorbing criticism that might normally have gone to the White House and specifically to (White House senior adviser) Karl Rove, who resigned last week. Did his resignation factor into your decision at all?

A: No. Again, for me, it was a question of what was best for the department and for me personally. Looking at where the department was, I thought it was the right time. Just looking at the calendar, my family, our finances, I just felt this was the right time for me. That's what motivated my decision.

Q: Of all the things you've heard about your performance, what really hurts you the most, and what do you consider the most unfair?

A: That I am political - that my decisions are based on politics. Which is ironic because there are some people in this town who don't believe I'm political enough. But I think that, for those people who really know me, they'll tell you that I make decisions based on what I think is right, not on what is politically expedient.

Q: What do you make of what I've said in the past - that much of the criticism that you got came from Democrats who were attacking what you symbolized, as the nation's first Hispanic attorney general and someone who was put there by a Republican and someone who wouldn't defer to them? What do you make of that theory?

A: I would just say that I am profoundly grateful to this president. I've always said that, if he were Republican, Democrat or independent, I would be supportive of him as a man because of what he stands for and because of the opportunities that he has provided me.

Q: But you don't think your critics were fueled by a desire to chip away at what you represent. I mean, you're this billboard that tells people that Republicans can be inclusive, too.

A: You'd have to ask them.

Q: How would you judge the level of support you received from Hispanic advocacy groups such as the National Council of La Raza, LULAC and others? Do you think they did a good enough job of standing by you?

A: I don't know. Sometimes people don't have all the information or they're not sure of what the facts are, and so they don't come forward. I don't want to be critical of someone for not taking a position on something. I think, at some point, all the facts will come out, and people can judge for themselves whether I did a good job or not. But I think I did.

Q: How do you want history to remember you - this man who made history as the nation's first Hispanic attorney general?

A: As someone who did the best he could, based on what was right and what was just. I think that's the most that anyone can hope for.

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