

# Bush can't hide from mounting woes

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**MERIDA, Mexico** --President Bush's trip to sunny Latin America was no day at the beach. He was buffeted by complaints about immigration laws, ethanol tariffs, the Iraq war and accusations that the United States was ignoring its southern neighbors.

And back home, the problems continued to pile up.

The revelation of close White House involvement in the firing of eight federal prosecutors sent White House aides into full damage control mode on Tuesday - from afar.

Instead of following their scripted plan of celebrating a shoring up of diplomatic ties with Mexico, White House aides found themselves backing and filling on why the prosecutors were axed.

This came on top of revelations of shoddy outpatient care at Walter Reed Medical Center, an affair that has resulted in top-level Army resignations; the conviction on perjury and obstruction charges of Vice President Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, and the FBI's acknowledgment that it broke the law to ferret out personal information about Americans.

Democratic presidential hopefuls demanded the resignation of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., said Americans "deserve to know who in the White House is pulling the strings at the Department of Justice, and why." Said former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards: "Attorney General Gonzales should certainly resign now." Both are Democratic presidential hopefuls.

"The buck should stop somewhere," Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton said in an interview being aired Wednesday on ABC's "Good Morning America."

Gonzales accepted the resignation of his top aide and responsibility. "I acknowledge that mistakes were made here," he said, echoing the classic phrase from the Watergate era.

White House officials said the president still had full confidence in the attorney general.

As to all those Democratic calls for Gonzales' resignation, "I imagine before the day is out, every presidential candidate will call for his resignation," White House counselor Dan Bartlett said. "But the bottom line is the facts speak for

themselves. The reason why these U.S. attorneys were removed were for good reasons."

Asked about the convergence on the White House of all this bad news, Bartlett said, "I think you're trying to connect a lot of dots that aren't connectable."

Fred Greenstein, professor emeritus of politics at Princeton University, offered one explanation for why Bush was finding trouble at every turn: "When you're down, you're a target. It's the blood-in-the-water phenomena. The story becomes the shortcomings of the administration. I know that's happened in other presidencies. Things that might have been passed off suddenly become very important."

But the larger, overarching context is the war in Iraq and public discontent with it, Greenstein said. So missteps in other areas "look like the same story: This is a guy who's not up to the job. The administration has managed to be globally unpopular. Iraq is the great connecting tissue that does pull all the dots together."

Nobody disputes the president's ability to fire or not renew the jobs of federal prosecutors. They're political appointees who serve at his pleasure.

When the party in the White House changes hands, it is common for the new president to fire all the sitting U.S. attorneys, as Ronald Reagan did in 1981 and Bill Clinton in 1993. By contrast, Bush allowed some to stay on the job for several months when he took office in 2001, although all were replaced eventually.

In the current controversy, Democrats have accused the Justice Department of playing politics with the prosecutors' jobs. They suggested some of the prosecutors were fired for either investigating Republicans or failing to pursue cases against Democrats. Several of the ousted prosecutors have told Congress they were improperly pressured by Republicans on pending cases.

Even some Republicans suggest the rifle-shot dismissals of the eight prosecutors was handled clumsily, raising issues of political interference with the administration of justice rather than the president's undisputed ability to make political appointments. It displayed "idiocy on the part of the administration," suggested Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

And Republican Rep. James Sensenbrenner, a House Judiciary Committee member, warned that the Justice Department was "going to have to come up with some answers" in explaining the firings. "If they don't, they're going to lose everyone's confidence."

For Bush it all adds up to trouble ahead, trouble behind.