

## Battered Bush takes time out to regroup

By Alec Russell in Washington

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With his second term in crisis, President George W. Bush pointedly flew out of Washington to a naval base yesterday morning to speak on a topic on which he and his audience could agree - the fight against terrorism.

"Thanks for the chance to get out of Washington," Mr Bush bellowed.

As he seeks to relaunch his presidency after the blows of the past week, Americans can expect many more such folksy asides. But Mr Bush knows it will take more than well chosen words to regain the initiative.

He is fond of White House history. Just as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton reshuffled their senior staff in the wake of the Iran Contra and the Monica Lewinsky scandals, he may be forced to break with his tradition of loyalty to his aides and bring in new faces to the White House.

He can also be expected to spend rather more time travelling abroad in his second term. Next week he heads to Argentina and Brazil on a trip that cannot come soon enough for his staff.

His reputation has in the last six weeks suffered a series of knocks - his faltering response to Hurricane Katrina, the 2000th American casualty in Iraq, the humiliating failure of his attempt to install a friend and aide on the Supreme Court, and now the prospect of years of investigations into the heart of the White House.

Even before yesterday his legislative agenda was stalled. Now the indictment of a senior adviser all but ensures that his staffers will have to spend his last three years in office at best partly focused on his agenda as they seek to fend off and yet satisfy the requirements of the law.

There is even a chance that the vice-president, Dick Cheney, will have to testify. This could expose to scrutiny some of the key decisions about the Iraq war, even as it becomes increasingly controversial in the heartland.

Mr Bush may have been spared the nightmare of losing his chief adviser, Karl Rove, known by his foes as "Bush's brain". But Mr Rove remains under investigation, and it is hard to see how he will not be distracted by the need to defend himself. Now more than ever Mr Bush needs Mr Rove in top form. He is the key link to the Right-wing "base" which rebelled over the nomination of Harriet Miers, the White House counsel, to the Supreme Court. He has also over the last year carved out for himself one of the most powerful White House posts of all time, dabbling in policy and personnel decisions as well as politics.

Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics, in the University of Utah where Mr Rove had a stint as an intern, said: "He is the master of the political game and anything he says [in the White House] is more important than ideology, morality or anything else." Yet as Mr Bush knows, it is Mr Rove's style of politics that has got him into this mess. Ever since orchestrating a dirty tricks campaign to take over the Republicans' student wing Mr Rove has been known as an unrivalled wizard of the political dark arts - the smear, the leak, the innuendo. While he has denied the specific alleged crime of outing the CIA agent, Valerie Plame, he was clearly involved in a vindictive leaking campaign against her husband. And that is just the sort of behaviour Mr Bush pledged to end on taking office.

By withdrawing Miss Miers on Thursday Mr Bush just may have taken the first step down the road to recovery. One confidant insisted last night that Mr Bush would rebound: "He is a very robust politician". But the mood music in Washington is awful. Some congressmen seeking re-election next year are even making clear they do not want to be seen at his side. Mr Bush last night repaired for the weekend to Camp David. Expect some big announcement on Monday - and a rejigged presidential schedule packed with appointments on the "people's business".

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