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The man who guards Bush access

New White House chief of staff has mix of inside-Beltway, policy savvy

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WASHINGTON — Joshua Bolten, President Bush's new chief of staff, is the chief number-cruncher at the White House, but he's no stuffed shirt.

To clear his head from 14-hour days as director of the Office of Management and Budget, Bolten jumps on his black-and-silver Harley-Davidson and takes to the road.

"He's a man of candor and humor and directness who's comfortable with the responsibility and knows how to lead," Bush said Tuesday in announcing the staff change, part of a White House shake-up that Republicans said was needed in light of the president's low poll ratings.

After a two-week crash course from Andy Card, who is stepping down after 5 1/2 years as Bush's right-hand man, Bolten will take on the demanding job of directing the West Wing and deciding who gets the president's ear.

He'll start doing the job solo on Tax Day, April 15, a fitting date for a man who has been responsible for the federal budget. It's unclear whether he'll still carry around his trademark oversized calculator, or whether he'll still throw out yellow penalty flags during meetings to keep people from veering off track.

A "policy geek"

Bolten, a low-profile member of Bush's inner circle, is multidimensional.

On the one hand, he's a shy, conservative bureaucrat — a self-described "policy geek." On the other, the 51-year-old bachelor has a fondness for bowling, music and motorcycles, and has escorted the likes of actress Bo Derek to Washington social affairs.

White House aides say Bolten, who has a serious girlfriend, occasionally plays bass guitar in a rock band called The Compassionates. He's held the record for bowling the highest score in the Bush administration at Camp David — 207 out of a perfect 300.

He has long kept a motorcycle at Bush's Texas ranch to ride during extended stays. Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove coined a biker handle — Bad Mitzvah — for Bolten, who is Jewish.

Bolten once took a Harley-Davidson gas tank to a Cabinet meeting to get Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and the agency heads to sign it so he could give it to Harley officials at the company's 100th birthday celebration in Milwaukee.

"He is quite a motorcycle buff," said U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman, who has known Bolten for 20 years. "He has a beautiful bike."

Viewed as pragmatist

Bolten, viewed as a pensive pragmatist who likes to get things done, has worked on Capitol Hill and Wall Street, on

the White House staff, and for nearly three years as head of the Office of Management and Budget and its staff of more than 500.

He was sworn in as budget director in June 2003. He held the post when the government ran its three largest deficits ever — including the record \$413 billion shortfall in 2004 — though the economy and years of White House and lawmaker decision-making were largely to blame.

"Josh is a creative policy thinker," Bush said. "He's an expert on the budget and our economy. He's respected by members of Congress from both parties. He's a strong advocate for effective, accountable management in the federal government."

That might help Bush's strained relations with Congress.

Rarely holds interviews

Bolten, a native of Washington who attended public schools in the nation's capital before going to the elite St. Albans School for Boys, learned Texas-speak when he worked for Bush in Austin, Texas. He has served as unofficial translator between the Bush Texas clan and Washingtonians.

Publicly, though, Bolten rarely does interviews.

"He may not speak a lot, but when he talks, it's usually quite interesting what he has to say," said Bob McNally, a former member of the White House staff and vice president of an asset management firm who plays with Bolten in the band. "It's profound and/or humorous."

At the Oval Office announcement, Bolten was self-effacing, saying he was succeeding Card but not filling his shoes.

A senior administration official said both Card and Bolten are taskmasters, but they have different management styles. While Card manages with a fine-tuned intuition, Bolten is reflective. He likes to home in on detail — too much so, according to some former OMB staffers, who say the rub against Bolten is that he doesn't make decisions very quickly.

Both keep things close to their vests.

In an interview about his tenure at the OMB, Bolten boasted to C-SPAN: "I've been there almost two years and never had a leak."

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