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POLITICS



Linda Chavez, center, faces difficult times in the White House as nominee to become labor secretary.

Chavez caused her own fall

Former Labor Secretary

Tim Russert, NBC's Washington bureau chief and moderator of "Meet the Press," tells MSNBC that Linda Chavez lost her chance to be labor secretary by not being more forthcoming and suggests that the president-elect might want to look for a replacement who has warmer relations with labor.

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“The fact is it was her own unwillingness to step forward and be completely candid with the Bush campaign and with the FBI which led us here.”

— **TIM RUSSERT**

MSNBC:

Tim, put this into perspective, if you will. What does Linda Chavez’s departure mean?

RUSSERT:

I thought what we witnessed was quite striking. Obviously, Linda Chavez’s work on behalf of poor people is commendable, as she introduced America to these people. But that’s not the issue.

The issue is one of legality; the issue is one of truthfulness. And the fact is people in the Bush campaign, at the highest levels, believe she was less than forthcoming on when she found out that this woman was illegal, how long she worked for her, the type of work she did and how much she paid her.

The FBI had reason to believe that she may have been less than forthcoming.

What is suspicious to many people, according to our sources, was a phone call that Ms. Chavez made to her next-door neighbor, who had hired this same woman, where Ms. Chavez indicated she would not bring up this situation to the FBI or to the veters of the Bush campaign. That’s how the story broke.

So, while she is trying to cast it in the light of being a victim, if you will, or being persecuted by the media, the fact is it was her own unwillingness to step forward and be completely candid with the Bush campaign and with the FBI which led us here.

And one last point, in terms of her comments about the politics of personal destruction: She is a regular column writer and commentator on television outlets. She has led the charge against not only against Zoe Baird, but many other people — particularly liberal Democrats — who she did not agree with. She played actively in that game of, if you will, destruction or opposition to people she did not agree with philosophically.

MSNBC:

With Linda Chavez now gone from the picture, if you were advising the incoming George W. Bush administration on selecting a new nominee, is there an old hand; is there a former lawmaker known to all sides? What do you do?

RUSSERT:

Jim Talent, the congressman from Missouri, who ran unsuccessfully for governor of Missouri, is someone

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who is respected on Capitol Hill by Democrats and Republicans. He also understands the ways of Washington.

The fact is there are some unions, for example, the Teamsters, who the Republicans have had, in the past, a rather cordial relationship with. You can make some points by finding a conservative Republican who is not with you all the time but is someone you can talk to.

Many Democrats and labor leaders felt that the selection of Linda Chavez by George W. Bush was a real poke in the eye and not an attempt to send a signal of cooperation and consensus.



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George W. Bush won the election. It is his choice to pick whoever he wants. But the day he uttered “Linda Chavez” he knew he was prepared for a raucous fight. And only when her own shortcomings were exposed did she not measure up. This was her problem, her difficulty. And as soon as it began to bring in George W. Bush and his reputation, she was cut loose.

Despite her comments Tuesday, the Bush campaign made it very clear in every way, shape and form; they wanted her to step aside.

MSNBC:

How can both of those be true? She looked into cameras and said, “In no way was I contacted. This was my decision.” Were there perhaps nonverbal cues, allowing both sides to be right?

RUSSERT:

She said she was not pressured and it was her decision. I think everyone would agree with that. It was

her decision. But the best advice she was given was that it had become more than a distraction to President-elect Bush, it was beginning to cause difficulty in the transition for the confirmation process.

And George W. Bush made it very clear to his staff that he doesn't like surprises. And if someone is asked whether or not they have a "nanny problem," it's not enough simply to say no. It's enough to say, "you should be aware of this full situation," try to put it in context and let the Bush campaign and the vetters decide whether it's a problem or not.

Transfer of Power

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MSNBC:

Tim, was the Chavez situation more a question of compassion, or when and where she told the truth and to whom — including the FBI?

TIM RUSSERT:

That's the problem. Obviously the good works she may have done are commendable, but this is something much more serious than that.

The Bush campaign believes that she was less than forthcoming about how long this person lived with her, when she found out she was an illegal immigrant, how much she paid her and what kind of work she did.

And the FBI has reason to believe she may have been misleading to them.

There's also the matter of a phone call Ms. Chavez made to her next-door neighbor in late December, suggesting trying to get their stories straight.

All those issues underscore why she pulled out Tuesday.



MSNBC:

Does the elimination of one of the Bush nominees take some of the heat off the John Ashcroft nomination to be attorney general?

RUSSERT:



J. Scott Applewhite / AP file

John Ashcroft is viewed as one of Bush's most contentious Cabinet choices.

Some senators hope so, because he is a member of that club. But we've seen that break down as recently as Sunday when John Kerry and Joe Biden all but suggested that they were ready to oppose John Ashcroft. My sense is any Democrat who wants to run for president in 2004 will do that. Most Democrats up for election in 2002 will do that, because when you have a coalition of labor, blacks and women's groups against you, they can exert enormous pressure on Democrats — particularly in large, urban, populated states.

The fact that he is a senator who's been a governor and a senator and an attorney general in Missouri helps his case, because he has an internal constituency if you will. But many liberals who now smell blood in the water will continue to go after Ashcroft. He's going to have to hold on to all the Republicans in the Senate and a few Democrats.

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