COMMENTARY

Civil rights chief is no lapdog

Arthur A. Fletcher is not the most popular guy in the Bush White House.

He's a thorn in the side of Chief of Staff John Sununu, with a nasty habit of contradicting the president and his advisers in public. When George Bush threatened to veto the Civil Rights Act of 1990, calling it a "quota bill," Fletcher, who had just been named to head the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, wrote a blunt article for the New York Times calling it "the most important civil rights legislation of the last quarter-century" and accusing the opposition of turning its back on "the real world."

When Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack F. Kemp proposed vouchers for public aid recipients, Fletcher said it sounded like he was "confusing civil rights with welfare."

When Fletcher, a lifelong Republican who has served in the administrations of three other presidents, warns his own audiences of the dangers of political "race-baiting," he includes the notorious Willie Horton ads with which the Bush campaign fanned fears of racial violence in the summer of 1988. "It's not good for the nation for it to be done. Period," he says.

And he is now talking up the Civil Rights Act of 1991, which Bush has also threatened to veto.

So nobody was very surprised when Bush's aides left his name off a list of invitees to a White House observance of Black History Month. Nobody, that is, except Bush, at whose express order it was restored.

Fletcher may not say the things Bush wants to hear, but he offers that anecdote as an example of how much things have changed since the days of Ronald Reagan—who shunned his critics and packed the once fiercely independent civil rights watchdog agency with sworn enemies of affirmative action and busing, earning Fletcher's assessment as "one of the worst presidents in history." Reagan fostered "a lack of concern and an environment in which racists came out of the closet and did so comfortably," according to the 66-year-old commission chairman, whose record of civil rights activism dates back to 1948; he says he returned to government because it looked like "we were about to lose it all."

How effective one outspoken black appointee can be in a conservative-leaning administration that is regarded with distrust by many civil rights leaders remains to be seen. Bush operatives still whine about "quotas." And some are betting Fletcher's license to speak his mind won't last.

But Fletcher, who has emerged as the conscience of this administration, has already won over some of its detractors in Congress and persuaded them to restore commission funds they withheld during the Reagan years, when the 34-year-old civil rights monitoring agency appeared to have abandoned its mission.

Carole Ashkinaze

In Chicago to announce the reopening of a regional office that had been closed since 1986, he said Monday that he would ask Congress next year to restore the commission's outreach to its pre-Reagan levels by opening four more regional offices around the country, for a total of 10.

He demonstrated that he has kept his ear to the ground, rattling off new survey data about U.S. racial attitudes.

He described our town's racial and ethnic enclaves as poor examples for the nation.

And he strongly deplored recent outbreaks of police brutality and campus racism, asking those of us who aren't also deploring them where we expect the moral leadership to come from?

It has been so long since the Civil Rights Commission had a chief of this ilk, a chairman who was not a presidential lapdog, that it takes some getting used to. And more power to him.

Carole Ashkinaze is a member of the Chicago Sun-Times editorial board.