

Yosh!

Josh Bolten '80, nicknamed "Yosh" by President Bush, is one of the most powerful people in Washington. And he's a darned good bowler to boot.

BY JEFF BIRNBAUM

On paper, Joshua Bolten is the picture of a modern-day gentleman. He is a graduate of St. Albans prep school, Princeton University, and Stanford Law School, Class of 1980. He is a former London-based investment banker and an ex-Deputy White House Chief of Staff. At the moment, he is a member of President Bush's cabinet as Director of the Office of Management and Budget. And yet—he loves to bowl.

Bolten gives bowling shoes as birthday gifts. He gives bowling balls to his staff. On Election Day 2000, when he was working in Austin, Texas, for the President-to-be, he took his campaign colleagues bowling so they could relieve their stress. "I enjoy bowling," Bolten said matter-of-factly. "It's a great way for people to get a little exercise and also get out of their box to do something other than to stand around at a cocktail party."

Josh Bolten is a rare commodity in the nation's capital: a

powerful iconoclast. In a town as conventional and strait-laced as they come, the 49-year-old Bolten does his day job extremely well but also manages to move to his own rhythm. "He's one of the most capable people in government," said Nicholas Calio, a former senior aide to both Presidents Bush and now a top executive at Citigroup. "But he also likes to have bowling parties. He's famous inside [the White House] for holding the Bolten Pins Tournament."

Inside is right. Even if you follow the machinations of Washington closely, you might never have heard of Bolten. And until recently, that's exactly the way he wanted it. Before he took on the very public role of defending the President's budget, he had made anonymity a career as a staffer at the White House and before that in Congress and at the State Department. "In this job I have more [of] a public role, which I don't mind," he said, "But I don't particularly seek it either."

PHOTO BY WILLIAM K. GEIGER



At the same time, Bolten's drive to achieve is as high as his profile is low. Even in bowling. For a while he held this administration's record score for bowling at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland's Catoctin Mountains outside Washington—207 out of a perfect 300. He reached that height in a game against President Bush. Usually, it's not good form to beat the Leader of the Free World—at anything. “But it's a much worse thing to ease up when competing with him,” Bolten said. “If he senses that you're easing up because he's President, he really gets annoyed. You've got to do your best.”

Bolten should know. For the last 15 years, the man whom George W. Bush has nicknamed “Yosh” has spent most of his waking hours working for presidents named Bush. During the administration of the first President George Bush, Bolten served for three years as General Counsel to the U.S. Trade Representative and one year as a White House lobbyist—a.k.a. Deputy Assistant to the President for Legislative Affairs. He spent two years as Policy Director of George W. Bush's campaign for president before joining the administration, where he's had two jobs. Initially, Bolten was Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy and since June 2003 he's been OMB Director. For the five years in between—1994 to 1999—Goldman Sachs International in London employed him as Executive Director, Legal & Government Affairs.

With experience like that, Bolten could work almost anywhere. But it turns out that the job he has is the one he really wants. The allure of government service has always been too much for him to refuse. When the current President George Bush, then the Governor of Texas, was putting together his election team in 1999, Bolten was comfortable and happy in England. But Robert Zoellick, now the U.S. Trade Representative, recommended Bolten to lead the team of experts that would devise Bush's policy proposals for the 2000 campaign, and Bolten jumped at the chance.

Not that he adores campaigns. Elections aren't really his forte. What he really likes is to wrestle with difficult questions of policy and to make a big enterprise—indeed, the world's largest enterprise, the U.S. government—work well. So he packed up his flat in London, flew to Austin, and set up a new home. In his typically hyper-organized way, he gave himself eight hours to find a place to live and four hours to buy some wheels. He chose a used white 1994 Ford Ranger pickup truck, which he still drives today.

Now, sitting in the high-ceilinged office that once housed the office of the Secretary of War, Bolten is clearly a contented man. “I like it a lot,” he said with a broad smile. “If you're a student of government, which I have become, there are few if any better places to be than OMB.”

His co-workers at the White House are also thrilled to

have him. “First of all, he's really smart, he's very humble, and he has a great sense of humor,” White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card said in an interview. “He's like a sponge absorbing everything that everybody else says. He's not quick to respond but he generally responds with tremendous wisdom.”

“He's soft-spoken but very clear thinking,” said Karl Rove, Bush's chief political adviser. “I love him in an entirely appropriate way. He's a wonderful person. He's professionally and personally one of the best people I've ever worked with.”

Bush has relied on Bolten to take on some of the White House's most difficult roles. As Card's deputy, Bolten had to referee differences between cabinet officers and other officials on policies as wide-ranging as tax cuts and energy. And now, as OMB Director, he has to enforce the often-tough fiscal decisions that the President makes. “That is the most thankless job in the world,” said Rove. “Yet the people he deals with tend to understand. They feel well treated by him even if they've lost their appeal.”

The Office of Management and Budget, Bolten explained, “is at the fulcrum of government.” Nothing moves in the \$2.3 trillion federal government without one of OMB's nearly 500 analysts looking it over and giving his or her view. All of the President's policy proposals are also screened and often refined at OMB, and most policy pronouncements by members of the President's cabinet are reviewed there before uttered publicly.

“Anybody in the Bush administration who has to testify on Capitol Hill, their testimony has to come through OMB,” said Bolten. “It's our function to make sure that it's consistent with the President's policies. It's a crucial role. You can't have the Interior Department saying something different from [the] Environmental Protection Agency.”

During this time of supersized budget deficits, OMB often plays the “bad cop” of the administration. It's the job of OMB, and Bolten in particular, to tell agency heads and senior lawmakers that the pet programs they say the country simply can't do without are just too expensive to take on. In other words, Bolten's main job is, more often than not, to just say “no.”

Now that he's at OMB, Bolten doesn't see Bush as often as he used to when he was Deputy Chief of Staff. Back then his office was two doors down from the Oval Office in the West Wing and he met with Bush nearly every day. Now his office is in the Old Executive Office Building next door and he sees the President once or twice a week. But he has far

greater contact with the other top officials in the Bush administration. Because of OMB's important coordinating role for the entire government, "I probably speak with one or another of my cabinet colleagues almost every day," said Bolten. "When the budget is in the throes of being assembled, probably several times a day. That's why I think this agency is at the fulcrum of government. I have to interact with almost every other part of government."

If that sounds like a mammoth job, it is. And only a workaholic like Bolten would even consider taking it on. "My days are long," Bolten admitted. "I get here at 7:30 a.m. for the White House senior staff meeting and I'm rarely out of here before 10:30 at night." His only complaint is that he wishes he didn't have to show up as early as he does. "I don't like the 7:30 part," he said. "I'm not a morning person." Still, he clearly relishes the long hours. "Every day when I come through the gates, I feel privileged to work here. Even when I stay until 10:30, 11:00, or 11:30 at night, I'm often tired but very rarely dispirited or discouraged. I almost never have that feeling that I don't want to come back anytime soon."

Part of Bolten's enthusiasm comes from his sincere affection for Bush. "I think the President is a terrific leader and a great guy," he said. But he is also well aware that a job in the White House, especially these days, is more than a cult of personality. Bolten knows that his work has far-reaching consequences, which gives him an even greater sense of purpose. "Because of the times we're in, what goes on here isn't trivial," said Bolten. "In the midst of the war on terrorism, these are important times."

Almost immediately after the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, Bolten was handed a key responsibility. The White House's National Security Council, headed by former Stanford Provost Condoleezza Rice, was so overwhelmed with its antiterrorism duties that the President decided to hand off some of its tasks to an ad hoc organization called the Domestic Consequences Principals Group. He placed Bolten in charge. Starting a couple days after September 11, Bolten began to convene a daily meeting of cabinet officers who looked at ways to enhance protection of Americans in this country, an enterprise now known as homeland security.

"Andy Card and Condi Rice came to me and said, 'There's too much to do. Could you take away from the NSC the issues that aren't immediately essential [to] the

national security apparatus?' And I said, 'Sure.'"

At the core of Bolten's group were the Secretaries of Treasury, Transportation, Health, and Energy with regular appearances from other senior officials at agencies like EPA and Interior. The group reviewed the USA Patriot Act, which bolstered the government's domestic law enforcement powers after 9/11. It also set in motion plans to protect Americans from further attacks, including those from biological weapons, and decided when and how to open air space to commercial travel again. Still, Bolten said, "It wasn't a really good way to have government decision making." So as soon as he could, he phased the group out and returned to business as usual as Deputy Chief of Staff.



PHOTO: DOUG MILLS, THE NEW YORK TIMES

Josh Bolten answers a question posed during a July 2003 budget review, just two months after being appointed Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Bolten has the difficult assignment of helping corral the large federal deficit.

Bolten had about a year of what passes for "normal" in Washington, and then the President called on him again. "One day in the spring of last year, the President was having a sandwich for lunch in his side dining room off the Oval Office, and I had to be in there to talk to him about something," Bolten recalled. "He mentioned that Mitch Daniels would almost certainly be leaving as OMB Director to run for Governor of Indiana. He asked who I thought would be best suited for the job. I had some people in mind, whom I mentioned."

Bush inquired closely about Bolten's suggestions and then asked a surprise question: "How about you?"

Bolten says that taking the OMB job had never occurred

to him and his reaction was loud and visceral. “Nooooo!” he said. At least at first blush, Bolten thought he was the wrong person for the job and said so.

“Why?” the President asked.

“I love the job I’m doing now,” Bolten said. “And more important, I think you need a very tough character like Mitch Daniels to be budget director. I don’t think my personality is nearly as well suited as some other folks who could do the job.”

“Well, think about it,” Bush said.

Bolten and other staffers examined other candidates for a while, but Card and Bush concluded that Bolten was their man. In retrospect, the reasons seem obvious. No one else in the Bush orbit knew the President’s policies better than Bolten. He had supervised their development from the very beginning during the campaign, and he had coordinated their implementation in the White House as Deputy Chief of Staff.

Besides, Bolten was wrong about the kind of personality that Bush needed for the job. Bolten had once worked as a staffer in the Senate and, during the first Bush administration, was a White House lobbyist. In other words, his role in years past was to placate lawmakers even as he nudged them toward doing what his bosses wanted.

Bolten also accepted his fate. “I concluded that though I loved my job, this would be a good thing for me to do,” he said. So when the President asked a second time, Bolten said, “I’d be honored.”

Bolten now finds himself buffeted by criticism more often than ever. “I have no regret about taking this job,” he said. “But it is less pleasant than my old job. There’s a great deal more conflict. The budget director is in almost constant tension with the entire rest of the government over the allocation of resources because nobody thinks they get enough.” He explained: “We live in a world of finite resources and somebody has to say no.” Does he like to reject people’s pet projects? “No,” he said without hesitating, “but I just said it, and I’m getting comfortable saying it.” Besides, “There are different ways of saying no.”

The White House hierarchy agrees with that sentiment. “Josh could build relationships that were strained,” said Card. “He’s doing that and doing a great job.”

Bolten may be polite but he isn’t by any stretch buttoned down. He’s a big music buff, including country music, and plays guitar. He recites poetry, sometimes at great length. He keeps a copy of the best-selling children’s book *Walter the Farting Dog* on his office’s coffee table. His wall collection of Bush photos, typical throughout the White House complex, is unique. The pictures focus exclusively on Bush’s hands at key moments in his presidency. Not a single

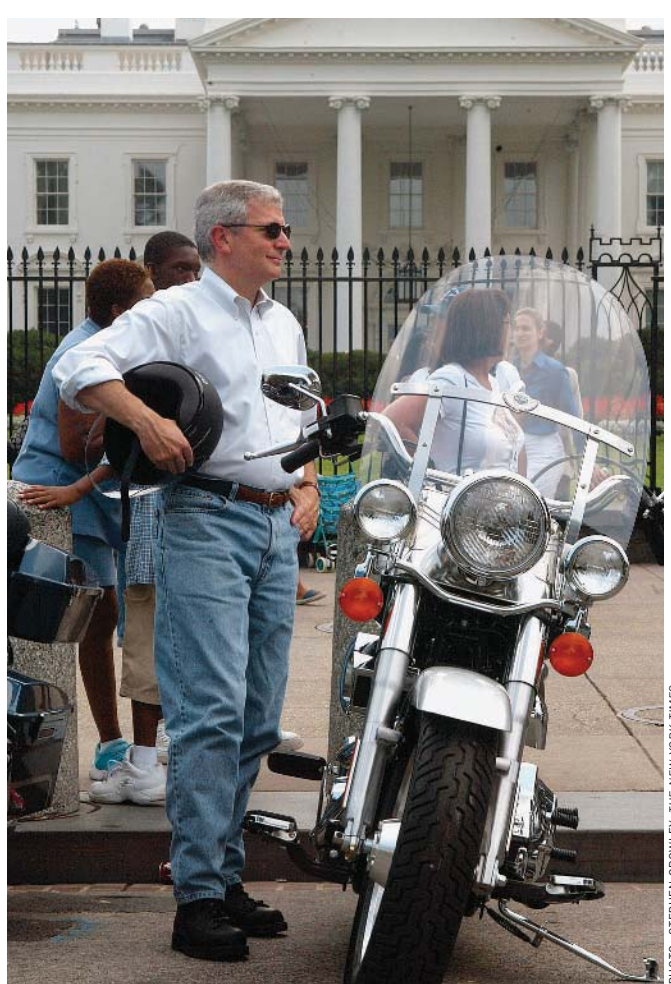


PHOTO: STEPHEN CROWLEY, THE NEW YORK TIMES

Josh Bolten standing in front of the White House with his silver and black anniversary edition “Fat Boy” Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Bolten helped start Bikers for Bush, one of the 2000 presidential campaign’s quirkier organizations.

photo of Bush’s face can be found. “Josh is extremely eclectic,” explained Card. “His knowledge base is much, much broader than just policy or budget numbers.”

Case in point: Bolten’s obsession with motorcycles. He’s owned and ridden motorcycles for years, and he helped conceive one of the quirkiest and most successful campaign organizations in 2000, Bikers for Bush. During the group’s first rally, Bolten rode a newly purchased bike to the Iowa Straw Poll in Ames. In honor of that trip, Rove only half in jest gave Bolten, who is Jewish, the biker handle “Bad Mitzvah.” These days Bolten is the proud owner of the Iowa-built Victory motorcycle that he drove to Ames and a beautiful silver and black anniversary edition “Fat Boy” Harley-Davidson. He and Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson presented a Fat Boy gas tank autographed by the President and the entire Bush cabinet to officials of Harley-Davidson in Milwaukee during the company’s 100th anniversary celebration last year.

Bolten, who is unmarried, has made the gossip columns partly thanks to his bikes. News photographers caught him giving a ride on one of his bikes to actress Bo Derek, of *10* fame, during a Bikers for Bush rally in Flint, Michigan, in November 2000. Bolten and Derek had actually met earlier in the year at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. Derek, a die-hard Republican, was scheduled

to give a speech during the proceedings, and she wanted to be briefed on Bush's policy ideas. "There were a lot of volunteers to handle this," recalled Bolten. "I took that task for myself." To Bolten's surprise, Derek was "a very independent thinker, very substantive."

Bolten attended the same elite private high school that former Vice President Al Gore went to, St. Albans in northwest D.C. He and Gore didn't overlap. But if they had, they wouldn't have agreed about much. From his earliest years, Bolten, though never a zealot, has always been a conservative. The only thing that he and Gore might have agreed upon is how important and fulfilling work in government could be. Gore's dad was a senator; Bolten's was a civil servant.

Bolten's father, Seymour, was a career-long employee of the Central Intelligence Agency. "He may not have been active as a spy personally, but he was certainly involved in spy operations," said Bolten. Then again, Bolten doesn't know exactly what his father did. An otherwise garrulous fellow on other matters (he often expressed his conservative political views), Seymour Bolten never said a word about his work at home. His wife, Analouise, or "Stacy," was less of a mystery. She returned to school in her 40s and got her bachelor's, master's, and doctorate in history from George Washington University, and went on to teach world history there for many years. "She's the smartest person I know," Bolten said proudly of his mom.

Josh Bolten tries to find time to practice his religion despite his busy schedule. He belongs to a local temple, tries to attend Sabbath dinner at his sister's house when he can on Friday nights, and doesn't eat pork. The Bushes have been sensitive to this fact and always put a big mushroom on their grill during barbecues so that Bolten will have something he can eat. At Bolten's first cabinet meeting last year, the President asked him to give the opening prayer and Bolten did—in Hebrew. "A lot of folks ask about being a Jew in the Bush White House," Bolten volunteered. "The fact is that the Bush family is open and welcoming and the President and Mrs. Bush are people of deep faith who respect faith . . . and not just their faith."

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1976 from Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Bolten chose Stanford Law School over other law schools because he had come to like the place when he visited his brother Randy, who went to Stanford's business school. "I was attracted to it because (a) it was such a nice place and (b) it was a small school, and I had the sense that there was a real community there that was intellectually active but in a relaxed way."

And the school proved to be just that way. Bolten has fond memories of riding his bike, which he bought for \$25, over the scenically beautiful few miles from his apartment to

the Law School. He also once hosted a pool party for his classmates that constitutional law scholar Gerald Gunther attended. "Gerry Gunther came with his great knowledge and great tan and sat in the shallow end, smoking a cigarette and chatting through constitutional law with the most attractive women in the section," recalled Bolten. "The faculty was very accessible and very good."

As a result, he says, he and his classmates actually like the law better than the graduates of other law schools. "My classmates and I learned as much as anybody else did in law school," Bolten said. "But we also had a much better time than anybody else and therefore came away from law school with a much better feeling about being a lawyer than others did."

Bolten has a similar feeling about government. And for that he has his father to thank. "He loved his work, and he loved what he was doing," Bolten said. "In many respects I would like to end up being as good a public servant as he."

Even with a close election coming up, Bolten is optimistic that Bush will get a second term. And if the President says he wants him to continue at OMB, Bolten says he would be pleased to stay. "I'm interested in serving as long as the President wants me to serve," he said. "For the time being this is by far the most interesting thing I could be doing."

But a tougher assignment would be hard to find. Annual Federal budget deficits are expected to hover in the hundreds of billions of dollars for years, and the OMB director is supposed to rein them in. As would befit a high Bush administration official, Bolten believes that the deficit is manageable in both the short and medium term. He insists that the President's budget would credibly slice the deficit in half over five years. But he warns that over the longer term the red ink could drown the system. "The real threat to our fiscal situation and to the economy is that we have unfunded liabilities in our entitlement programs that are overwhelming," he asserted. "Those cannot be addressed with modest changes in expenditures or even taxes. Those have to be addressed with fundamental reform of those programs."

Which could well put Bolten at the center of what would be one of the biggest legislative battles in decades. If the President is reelected, Bolten could have a leading role in rewriting two of government's largest and most troubled programs: Medicare and Social Security. Asked if Bush will push to overhaul Social Security next year, Bolten said, "I'm hopeful he will." Asked if he would be glad to help make that happen, Bolten grinned. "There is a great satisfaction any time you do a job well," he said. "But if you do a job well for the public, the satisfaction is magnified geometrically."

That is, of course, as long as he can still go bowling. ■