WASHINGTON - President Bush (news - web sites) has chosen White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, a Texas confidant and the most prominent Hispanic in the administration, to succeed Attorney General John Ashcroft (news - web sites), sources close to the White House said Wednesday.

The White House hinted that formal word from the president could come later Wednesday. "I would not rule out an announcement today," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said.

Ashcroft announced his resignation on Tuesday, along with Commerce Secretary Don Evans, a Texas friend of the president's.

Gonzales, 49, has long been rumored as a leading candidate for a Supreme Court vacancy if one develops. Speculation increased after Chief Justice William Rehnquist (news - web sites) announced he has thyroid cancer.

Gonzales' career has been linked with Bush for at least a decade, serving as general counsel when Bush was governor of Texas, and then as secretary of state and as a justice on the Texas Supreme Court.

Gonzales has been at the center of developing Bush's positions on balancing civil liberties with waging the war on terrorism — opening the White House counsel to the same line of criticism that has dogged Ashcroft.
For instance, Gonzales publicly defended the administration's policy — essentially repudiated by the Supreme Court and now being fought out in the lower courts — of detaining certain terrorism suspects for extended periods without access to lawyers or courts.

He also wrote a controversial February 2002 memo in which Bush claimed the right to waive anti-torture law and international treaties providing protections to prisoners of war. That position drew fire from human rights groups, which said it helped led to the type of abuses uncovered in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

The American Civil Liberties Union (news - web sites) said it expected the Senate to closely examine those issues during confirmation hearings. The ACLU said it had no position on Gonzales, but added: "Particular attention should be devoted to exploring Mr. Gonzales' proposed policies on the constitutionality of the Patriot Act, the Guantanamo Bay detentions, the designation of United States citizens as enemy combatants and reproductive rights."

Some conservatives also have quietly questioned Gonzales' credentials on core social issues. And he once was a partner in a Houston law firm which represented the scandal-ridden energy giant Enron.

Gonzales would be the first Hispanic attorney general.

But shifting him to Justice would create a vacancy in the White House counsel's office. Bush advisers said two people would be naturals for the job. One is White House staff secretary Brett Kavanaugh, a lawyer who has been waiting nearly 16 months for confirmation on the influential U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. He was also a top lawyer in two cases that dogged the Clinton White House. As associate independent counsel under Kenneth Starr, he worked on both the long-running Whitewater case and the 1998 Clinton impeachment case.

Harriet Miers, a deputy chief of staff who was once Bush's personal lawyer, would be another candidate, one Bush adviser said.

After a National Security Council meeting, Bush sat down Wednesday with Secretary of State Colin Powell (news - web sites), another figure being closely watched. Powell has been largely noncommittal when asked about his plans.

The gospel-singing son of a minister, Ashcroft is a fierce conservative who doesn't drink, smoke or dance. His detractors said he gave religion too prominent a role at the Justice Department (news - web sites) — including optional prayer meetings with staff before each work day. He has also been a willing lightning rod for critics who said his policies for thwarting terrorists infringed on the rights of innocent people.

Ashcroft championed many of the most controversial government actions following the Sept. 11 attacks, most notably the USA Patriot Act. It bolstered FBI (news - web sites) surveillance powers, increased use of material witness warrants to hold suspects incommunicado for months. When there was a break in a terror case, he was the man at the lectern soberly informing the American people.

"The objective of securing the safety of Americans from crime and terror has been achieved," he said in resignation letter to Bush, dated Nov. 2 — Election Day.
McClellan said Bush got the letter that same day, before the results of the election were known.


Evans, Bush's 2000 campaign chairman and close friend of more than three decades, said he longed to return to Texas.

Bush was considering this year's campaign money man, Mercer Reynolds, for Evans' job. As national finance chairman for the Bush campaign, Reynolds raised more than $260 million to get him re-elected.