Martin Picked for FCC Chairman

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President Bush has chosen Kevin J. Martin, a member of the Federal Communications Commission, to succeed the panel's outgoing chairman, Michael K. Powell, the White House announced today.

Martin, 38, is one of the FCC's three Republican commissioners and has been considered the front-runner to head the agency, which is the government's chief regulator of the media and telecommunications industries.

Martin, a former University of North Carolina student body president and Harvard Law graduate, was appointed to the FCC in 2001. He has close ties to the White House, serving as deputy general counsel to the 2000 Bush campaign. His wife, Catherine, works in Vice President Cheney's office.

With Martin's elevation to chairman and Powell's exit, a Republican seat opens on the commission. Earl Comstock, former counsel to Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), is considered a strong contender, along with Michael D. Gallagher, assistant secretary of the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the president's principal adviser on telecommunications policy.

Both may land on the commission, however, as another Republican commissioner, Kathleen Q. Abernathy, is expected to leave later this year. Democratic commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein recently was reappointed to a five-year term, and fellow Democrat Michael J. Copps, whose term...
pushed for renomination by Stevens.

The FCC under Martin is likely to be even tougher on indecency than Powell's agency. Martin and Copps frequently dissented in part from proposed indecency fines issued in the past year, saying they were not tough enough, occasionally calling for broadcaster license-revocation hearings.

Martin and Powell sometimes clashed on issues of policy and style, with Martin most notably splitting with the agency's two other Republicans during a 2003 vote on local telephone competition.

Also, the 30-year-old prohibition on one company owning a newspaper and television station in the same city likely will be a focus of Martin's tenure. He was the strongest proponent of lifting the "cross-ownership" ban, which was part of the proposed media ownership rules passed by the FCC in 2003 and later thrown out by a federal court. The court did not rule on the merits of the new rules but said the FCC had not done an adequate job justifying why it crafted them.

The FCC's research on the ban showed that in the handful of cities where cross-ownership has been allowed by grandfathering or waiver, the quality and quantity of local news has increased, although opponents say cross-ownership can lead to a reduction in diversity of views.

Martin, a former lawyer with telecom powerhouse Wiley, Rein & Fielding, likely would work to lift the ban.