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Senate OKs Gonzales As Attorney General

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Alberto Gonzales made history by becoming the first Hispanic attorney general, but the road gets much rougher from here as he and the Justice Department try to protect the country from terrorism.

His plate is already overflowing with serious tasks: Lobbying Congress for reauthorization of the USA Patriot Act, the Justice Department's premiere, and widely criticized, anti-terrorism law; investigating who among his former White House colleagues leaked a CIA employee's name to the media; and coming through on his promise to the Senate to prosecute anyone who tortured or abused foreign detainees.

And that's all before he shows up for his first day of work at the Justice Department on Friday.

Despite nearly unanimous praise for Gonzales' intelligence, his life story as the grandson of Mexican immigrants and his extensive work with Senate Democrats on judicial nominations and other administration issues, he was confirmed on a 60-36 vote with all of the "no" votes coming from Democrats and Democratic-leaning independent Jim Jeffords of Vermont.

He was quickly sworn in as the nation's 80th attorney general by Vice President Dick Cheney in a private ceremony at the White House. President Bush, during his trip Thursday to North Dakota and Montana, called Gonzales to congratulate him after the vote.

Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said, "I like and respect Judge Gonzales as a person and as an inspiration," but "I am unsure Judge Gonzales is the right man for this crucial job."

Many said they couldn't look past his participation in administration policies they said had led to abuse of prisoners that occurred in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. They also complained he refused to answer their questions on how those policies were created inside the White House.

"Mr. Gonzales was at the heart of the Bush administration's notorious decision to authorize our forces to commit flagrant acts of torture in the interrogation of detainees," said Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.

The ACLU already is calling for Gonzales to remove himself from any torture investigations by the Justice Department, and Schumer has suggested he not participate in his department's investigation into who inside the administration leaked a CIA employee's name.

His friendship with Bush does cause some concern, critics said. "Gonzales pledged to be the attorney general of all Americans, and not be in the president's pocket," said ACLU lawyer Christopher Anders.

Republicans say Gonzales will do an excellent job as attorney general, praising him for how he worked his way up to being Bush's top lawyer in the White House.

"His life story is inspiring, and another shining example of how the American dream can be reality for all who are willing to work for it," said Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn.

Sen. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., the first Cuban-American senator, even broke with Senate tradition and praised Gonzales in Spanish on the Senate floor on Wednesday. "This is a breakthrough of incredible magnitude for Hispanic-Americans," he said in English.

At first, many Democrats had joined Republicans in praising the former state judge who traveled with Bush to Washington after the president's 2000 victory. But some Democrats turned against him after he sidestepped questions during his confirmation hearing on what advice he gave Bush and other administration officials on the interrogation methods that could be used on suspected terrorists or witnesses.

Pressed on the issue, Gonzales defended language in which he labeled as "quaint" some of the Geneva Conventions' human rights protections for prisoners of war and said they did not extend to al-Qaida and other suspected terrorists.

But he also declared, "Torture and abuse will not be tolerated by this administration." He told senators that, as attorney general, he would "ensure the Department of Justice aggressively pursues those responsible for such abhorrent actions."

Gonzales shouldn't be a scapegoat for what happened overseas, Republicans said. They also insinuated that the Democrats wanted a big vote against Gonzales to keep Bush from making him the first Hispanic Supreme Court nominee if a position comes open.