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Directions: Interactively read the following article and do the questions in lieu of a summary.

Government by Trial Balloon

June 27, 1993 | By CARL M. CANNON and NELSON SCHWARTZ

Washington. -- Maybe this is what President Clinton meant by "re-inventing government": Call it government by "trial balloon." On almost every major issue facing the administration -- issues ranging from U.S. military strategy to key personnel appointments to a vast overhaul of health care -- the Clinton administration routinely floats an idea or a name or an approach so that it can gauge public opinion before it acts.

Going back to Franklin D. Roosevelt, presidents have used leaks to "run things up the flag pole and see if anyone salutes," in the words of William Leuchtenberg, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the author of several books on the presidency. But in this White House, the number of balloons floated, the fact that so many are about personnel rather than policy and the speed with which they are hauled back to earth when they catch flak is simply unprecedented.

"He does use trial balloons more than other presidents," said Mr. Leuchtenberg. "I can't recall anybody who let the names of so many appointees to such important posts get aired before he was certain in his own mind that he wanted to name them." To critics, this practice helps foster an image of an administration that doesn't trust its own instincts and is afraid to act decisively. "They cut and run at the slightest trouble," said former Justice Department spokesman Terry Eastland, a conservative author on the presidency. "It's like they put these trial balloons out there just to be shot down."

Mr. Clinton's allies however, point out that this administration, the first to come to power with the aid of such electronic town hall venues as "Larry King Live," may take naturally to trial balloons because they see them as a kind of pure participatory democracy at work.

"You will see the president and his advisers float policy ideas from time to time, but what's wrong with that?" said Paul Begala, a political adviser to the president. "It's responsive to the voters." Mr. Begala pointed to the ill-fated nomination of Attorney General-designate Zoe Baird -- a nomination withdrawn when voters, not the U.S. Senate, reacted with outrage to her hiring of illegal aliens to care for her child and her home.

"The reaction to [that] nomination was really a wake-up call for everybody in Washington," he said. "Bill Clinton ran on a theme of 'Take back the country,' and Americans decided that, by God, they're really going to do it."

The president himself, however, has smarted under criticism that he is either indecisive or disloyal to some of those whose names have been floated for high positions. Thirteen days ago, when the president nominated Ruth Bader Ginsburg to the Supreme Court, he did something extraordinary: He publicly denied that he had embarrassed two other candidates, Interior Secretary Bruce E. Babbitt and Boston jurist Stephen G. Breyer, during his lengthy search.

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"I regret the leaks, but it's not fair to say I hung them out," Mr. Clinton said at a White House press conference. "But do I regret the fact that there were leaks and that that may have exposed them more than they would otherwise have been. . . . We ought to do better than that."

This past week, however, the public airing of possible names and various policy options continued unabated. The reason is that they are part of a pattern that allows the president to hedge his bets on policy and people.

1. What are trial balloons?
2. What is an argument in favor of trial balloons?
3. Why do people criticize the use of trial balloons?
4. Weighing both sides of the argument do you think a president should use them? Why or why not?