

## POINT

## COUNTERPOINT

## Should John Ashcroft be appointed attorney general?

YES

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Like the new kid on the playground who knows the only way he can gain passage on a new turf is to stand alone, Attorney General-elect John Ashcroft stands on his playground--the Senate floor--and prepares to swing at the bully--his Democratic opponents.

During the week the Senate Judiciary Committee delayed his nomination, Ashcroft has kept busy answering close to 350 questions thrown at him from Democratic senators. Even yesterday's nomination, finally passing in the Committee by a marginal 10-8 vote, comes as a surprise.

Now Ashcroft goes head on with the Senate, making America realize this isn't just a scuffle on the jungle gym. It's all out war.

Democratic opponents' chief fear is that Ashcroft's far-right conservatism that ranks him among controversial traditionalists such as North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, will drastically change the make-up of such precedents as civil rights and abortion. What they choose to ignore, however, is that while Ashcroft attracts the right, throughout his political career he has more often appealed to the center.

According to the *New York Times*, as governor of Missouri Ashcroft backed legislation considered by Democrats to be solely part of their platform. He provided more accessibility to legal services for the poor by increasing spending in that area. He signed laws that raised penalties for hate crimes roused by bigotry. He also backed tax increases for road and schools--strongly endorsed by Democrats--three times. As Missouri's attorney general, he ruled that federal money could not be given to parochial schools and that distribution of religious literature was to be banned from public schools.

But he personally believed just the opposite.

The real problem lies not in whether Ashcroft will put his personal beliefs into policy, but instead, whether Democratic opponents are willing to listen.

Ashcroft has already proven he is qualified. He is a former

governor, senator and most importantly attorney general, all positions where he effectively implemented bipartisan ideas.

Sure, he is the son of a Pentecostal preacher, sings in the Singing Senators group along with Trent Lott and chooses not to participate in the fox-trot. But that doesn't prove that once in office, he will outlaw any legislation that does not fit into these categories.

It makes Americans wonder why his personal beliefs are such an issue. Democrats weren't screaming when Jimmy Carter, Joe Lieberman or Al Gore were evoking the name of God in their campaign speeches. In fact, it was Gore who said that he would do what Jesus would should he become President.

Why so tolerant? It could be because Ashcroft has been plugged as the poster boy of the Christian right, a lobby whose image has long been distorted to connote some extremist fringe group with members obviously worse than those of any terrorist regime headed by Osama bin Laden.

There is no doubt that his interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, which includes the equal protection clause, could change the course of abortion history. But we must trust he will do what he promises, to uphold the law of the land.

If the Constitution means anything to the country, we must trust that it will be honored by those who enter into public service. Those who abuse their power by setting agendas to perpetuate their own interests and beliefs cause the deterioration of the Constitution faster than time ever could.

Usually we interpret that as a given, believing our elected officials will not poison the public interest with their own opinions. But that's when they are Democrats. And we are all learning a new vocabulary. "Democrat" means tolerant. "Republican" is a fighting word. Ashcroft better watch out. We all know what happens when the bully gets wind of that. Let recess begin.

NO

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Americans typically have not let a potential leader's religious beliefs be a huge factor in their feelings about him or her. And once in office, leaders have typically not let their religious ideals take control of the policy-making.

John F. Kennedy did not take orders from the Pope. Jimmy Carter, a devout Southern Baptist, became the first "born again" president.

Most recently, Sen. Joe Lieberman was praised during the 2000 presidential election for being the first Orthodox Jew to appear on a national ticket.

But then there's John Ashcroft, Bush's nominee for attorney general, who has spent the last week and a half with the Senate Judiciary Committee, under review for the post of attorney general.

On paper he seems qualified to handle the position. A Yale graduate who received his law degree from the University of Chicago, Ashcroft was a two-time attorney general for his home state of Missouri and served two terms as state governor.

He became a U.S. Senator in 1995, losing his reelection race in November to Mel Carnahan, who was killed three weeks before the election (Carnahan's widow filled his seat in the Senate).

Ashcroft even tried for the Republican nomination for president early in the presidential race.

However, it is Ashcroft's ultra-conservative views on many of the nation's most controversial issues that remain questionable to most of the Democratic senators and many Americans alike.

Ashcroft has waded waist-deep through these issues for his entire political life, his deeply religious upbringing being the basis for his right-wing beliefs.

He has said more than once that if confirmed he will successfully separate his religious beliefs from his work as the U.S. attorney general, stating, "It's against my religion to

impose my religion on others."

Although he may yet to impose his religion on the American people, he has certainly let it negatively influence his decisions.

Typically he takes a religious approach to his interpretation of any controversial issue and has openly denounced the rights of women, minorities and gays. Based on his track record, Ashcroft would do little good for any American except a white male.

While representing Missouri as both senator and governor, Ashcroft pushed for outlawing abortion, even in cases of rape and incest, and the overturning of arguably the most well-known Supreme Court decision in recent U.S. history: *Roe vs. Wade*. He is also an outspoken supporter of criminalizing any type of contraceptive.

He refused to support the revision of a federal law that would extend recognition of hate crimes when the victim is a homosexual.

In the 1970s and 80s as Missouri's attorney general, Ashcroft tried to block a St. Louis busing plan, even though a federal court ruled that the state had unconstitutionally maintained segregation in that school system.

Controversy surrounded Ashcroft twice in 1999 when he blocked Ronnie White's federal court judge nomination because he believed White was too lenient in criminal punishment.

And in 1999 Ashcroft accepted an honorary degree from Bob Jones University and delivered the school's commencement address. Ashcroft is also a vocal opponent of Affirmative Action.

Even more disturbing is his interview just two years ago with *Southern Partisan*, a neo-Confederate magazine, an interview in which he praised the publication for helping "set the record straight."

By praising such Civil War leaders as Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis, Ashcroft hoped to appeal to Southerners at the time he was considering run-

ning for president.

Other causes Ashcroft supports are prayer in the public schools, vouchers for religious schools and the elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts.

He opposes United Nations, homosexuality and any type of gun control.

He has been criticized for being insensitive to minority issues, averse to the rights of women and extra-attentive to issues relating to conservative Christians.

Republicans and Democrats are split right down the middle in the Senate. Trent Lott, the Republican Senate leader from Mississippi, feels confident that all Republican senators will support Ashcroft's nomination.

Some Democrats are expected to support the attorney general-hopeful as well. For instance, Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia said he will vote for him because Ashcroft promised to uphold the law.

Ashcroft will need only 51 votes to fill the position and 60 to ensure that the Democrats don't filibuster. Orrin Hatch, a Republican from Utah and a long-time supporter of Ashcroft, is the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and can cast the tie-breaking vote.

There is nothing wrong with having strong religious faith. But Ashcroft may not be able to keep from letting his extremist beliefs taint his interpretation of the law.

George Bush said that as attorney general, Ashcroft would enforce--not interpret--federal laws. But it's risky to even give Ashcroft the chance since his views are clearly more extreme than much of the American public.

Given his previous record, Ashcroft can't be trusted when he says he won't mix personal beliefs with his potential position. Ashcroft has been known to use his power in high places before to promote his causes and he will do it again.