

# PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS: PAST AND PRESENT

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Every four years the big political prize is up for grabs, and with it comes pressure politics of an unrelenting sort. This campaign season is no exception, but what is different for the Catholic League is that it has drawn us into a fight with Republican and Democratic candidates alike.

For the record, our members should know that the Catholic League does not engage in partisan politics. According to the IRS, we cannot endorse or work against any candidate or political party. What we can do is address issues. Can a clergyman or head of a non-profit organization make a personal endorsement of a candidate or party? Yes. And that is what Rev. John Hagee did. He is entitled to do so. For my part, I refuse to make endorsements, even though I could do so legally, as a matter of personal choice.

The mission of the Catholic League is to combat anti-Catholicism. It is not to act as a surrogate for any political party. We are pro-life, but we are not a pro-life organization. We are pro-school vouchers, but we are not a school choice organization. And so on.

When anti-Catholicism surfaces, we react. What we don't do is deliberate over whether someone should be given a pass because he's been good on Catholic issues in the past. If we did, we'd forfeit our credibility, independence, integrity and effectiveness.

Over the past year, several of the presidential candidates for the Republican nomination have sought to meet with me (none of the Democratic candidates showed any interest). I turned them all down. I did so because I don't want to compromise the

Catholic League. In other words, once they think they have you on board, you're finished.

In the 1988 presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis bragged about his "card-carrying membership" in the ACLU. I was finishing my stay at The Heritage Foundation at the time and happily supplied Republican candidate George Bush with inside information on the ACLU (I had recently completed my first of two books on the organization). He put them to good use.

During the Clinton years, I spoke out against pockets of anti-Catholicism in his administration, taking out newspaper ads and issuing news releases. Indeed, the very first news release I wrote as president of the Catholic League was in opposition to Jocelyn Elders, Clinton's choice for Surgeon General; to my surprise, an editorial in the *Washington Post* agreed with me.

In the 2000 presidential campaign, I led the charge against George W. Bush after he spoke at Bob Jones University. I also put the issue to rest when I appeared on "The Today Show" accepting his apology. This came on the heels of ticking off Republicans when I blasted them for conspiring to sunder the nomination of a Catholic priest as House Chaplain.

During Bush's first term, I took on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) for its cozy relationship with Catholics for a Free Choice. After we spent \$100,000 over a period of a few years, the DNC dropped its association with the anti-Catholic front group. I also stood up to a bully lawyer from the DNC who tried to intimidate me. He lost.

We got involved in the 2004 presidential election when the Kerry campaign and the DNC each hired totally flawed persons as their religious outreach directors. One woman was silenced and the other quit under pressure, and both condemned me.

After Democratic candidate John Edwards hired two anti-

Catholic bloggers to work for him, we went ballistic and got rid of them without delay; again, I was blasted by the two women. And lately we were busy taking on Republican presidential nominee John McCain.

In other words, we don't give either party a break. We don't create the problems, we simply try to fix them. If that means that we are inadvertently helping a candidate who is worse on the issues that matter most to practicing Catholics, so be it. To play favorites would kill us in the long run. It would also be unprincipled.

To be sure, it is sickening to hear those who have never gotten bent out of shape over anti-Catholicism—some have actively contributed to it—now get exercised over the McCain-Hagee relationship. That's why groups like People for the American Way, and politicians like Nancy Pelosi, are such phonies.

Tough as it is to watch this circus, it would be worse if we turned a blind eye to an issue we are pledged to address. It cannot be said too forcefully that while I am a conservative, I am not a Republican. I don't belong to any party, and it is precisely because of issues like the latest one that I don't. To be compromised is to lose.

One more thing. D.C. doesn't have a monopoly on arrogance, but it sure is number one. I love it when I'm told—I've sometimes been ordered—to meet with some high official or participate in an on-the-record conference call. They don't ask, they just tell you. And then I tell them where they can go.