

# REMEMBERING GEORGE H.W. BUSH

During the 1988 presidential campaign, Bill Donohue was a Bradley Resident Scholar at The Heritage Foundation. His first book, *The Politics of the American Civil Liberties Union*, published in 1985, was the magnet that landed him the job.

It was also a time when Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee for president, loudly proclaimed that he was “a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union.” It didn’t take long before those working for Vice President George H.W. Bush contacted Donohue hoping to obtain inside information on the organization: Bush was running for president.

Donohue happily gave the Bush team what they wanted, and appeared on several talk-TV shows, notably “Crossfire,” defending Bush against his critics. The ACLU issue took off like a rocket. “It sometimes seems as though the election is more about the ACLU than anything else,” complained NBC anchor Tom Brokaw.

Before the first presidential debate, the Bush campaign asked Donohue to provide them with a list of some of the most controversial ACLU policies. He did, and Bush quickly mastered them (Donohue’s first of two books on the ACLU was an extension of his NYU Ph.D. dissertation on the organization; his other book, *Twilight of Liberty: The Legacy of the ACLU*, was published in 1994 and a new Afterword edition appeared in 2001).

During the debate, ABC anchor Peter Jennings asked candidate George Bush why he continued to make an issue out of Michael Dukakis’ membership in the ACLU. Here is what Bush said.

“I simply don’t want to see the ratings on movies—I don’t want my ten-year-old grandchild to go into an X-rated movie. I like those ratings systems. I don’t think they’re right to try to

take the tax exemption away from the Catholic Church. I don't want to see the kiddie pornographic laws repealed. I don't want to see under God come out from our currency. Now, these are all positions of the ACLU, and I don't agree with them."

The ACLU and the *New York Times* accused Bush of distorting the ACLU's record. They were wrong. Donohue supplied David Margolick of the *Times* with the evidence that he gave to the Bush campaign, taken straight from the ACLU's Policy Guide.

The ACLU was on record opposing the Motion Picture Association of America's movie rating system, even though this was a purely voluntary nongovernmental body. The ACLU Foundation and the New York Civil Liberties Union had filed an amicus brief in support of the Abortion Rights Mobilization to secure standing in its lawsuit seeking to strip the Catholic Church of its tax-exempt status.

The ACLU lost in a unanimous decision in the U.S. Supreme Court (*New York Ferber*, 1982) seeking to protect the production, sale, and distribution of child pornography. And its opposition to "In God We Trust" on coins was long-standing, a position that the founder of the ACLU, Roger Baldwin, told Donohue was "one of the more foolish statements" the organization ever made.

Looking back at this presidential campaign, Garry Wills noted how incendiary these cultural issues were. "The Bush campaign was able to exacerbate this struggle, calling on the advice of William A. Donohue, the sociologist who wrote the right wing's favorite book on the subject, *The Politics of the American Civil Liberties Union*. Donohue, for instance, gave the campaign the useful political charge that the ACLU would keep 'kiddie porn' legal."

"God bless President George H.W. Bush," Donohue said. "I am delighted to have played a small role in his life."