

# THE POLITICS AND PREJUDICES SURROUNDING THE “STOP ASHCROFT COALITION”

Consistent with our mission, the Catholic League did not take a position for or against Senator John Ashcroft's nomination for Attorney General. We recognize that many of his critics simply had an honest disagreement with his thinking and thus had every right to oppose him. But we also know that a considerable segment of the anti-Ashcroft coalition was made of partisans who acted dishonorably. We stepped in when there was reason to set the record straight regarding the question of anti-Catholicism.

On January 9, a press conference was held in Washington by many organizations opposed to the nomination of Senator John Ashcroft for the position of U.S. Attorney General; 45 organizations pledged their opposition to his candidacy. Many of those opposed cited the honorary degree Senator Ashcroft received from Bob Jones University as critical to their position. What bothered the Catholic League was the hypocrisy of those making this charge.

Our members know that we have criticized Bob Jones University in the past for its anti-Catholicism, and we continue to do so today. Unlike the school's racist policy on interracial dating, which has changed, none of its anti-Catholic statements have been rescinded. That is why the league welcomes allies who want to join us in opposing the school's position, but we want genuine allies, not phonies.

To be specific, People for the American Way, the National Organization for Women, the Human Rights Campaign and Planned Parenthood all said that one reason why they opposed Senator Ashcroft was the anti-Catholic nature of Bob Jones University

and his link to the school. Yet as we pointed out to the media, all four organizations have made comments, or have engaged in activities, that are patently anti-Catholic.

Take, for example, the hypocrisy of Patricia Ireland, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In a conversation she had with Greta Van Susteren and Roger Cossack on CNN's "Burden of Proof," Ireland expressed concern for anti-Catholicism. In the course of the discussion, it was mentioned that Senator Ashcroft had accepted an honorary degree from Bob Jones University in 1999. When Cossack said the school had banned interracial dating until recently, Ireland commented, "It's a very anti-Catholic school."

Our comment to the media pulled no punches:

"The Catholic League always welcomes those who are genuinely concerned about anti-Catholicism to speak out on this important subject. But we don't like being played for a fool. Not only has Patricia Ireland never before spoken about this subject, she and her organization have contributed to anti-Catholicism. For example, she protested the visit of Pope John Paul II to the U.S. in 1993, saying, 'Women will not be silenced. We're going to keep on until the Pope stops calling U.S. Catholic feminists pagan.' Obviously, she offered no evidence for this outrageous remark, for the pope never said it.

"NOW has joined the anti-Catholic campaign of Frances Kissling to discredit the Vatican by subverting its permanent observer status at the U.N. It has formally attacked the Catholic Church for maintaining hospitals that do not allow abortions, holding that such hospitals should be denied public funding. In 1994, NOW held the Catholic Church responsible for the killing of an abortion doctor in Massachusetts. And so on.

"Patricia Ireland is a phony and a professed enemy of the Catholic Church. It matters not a whit that she calls herself

Catholic. If she wants to oppose Senator Ashcroft, let her do so. But she should stop exploiting the issue of anti-Catholicism to advance her political agenda.”

It wasn't just NOW that was on record for having joined the attack on the Vatican's U.N. status and we were feigning interest in Ashcroft's alleged anti-Catholicism. The following organizations were similarly duplicitous: Center for Reproductive Law and Policy; Center for Women Policy Studies; National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL); National Abortion Federation; National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association; National Organization for Women; Physicians for Reproductive Health and Choice; Planned Parenthood Federation of America; and the Sierra Club.

Evidence like this led us to remark to the media that, “Unlike Senator Ashcroft, who is not a Catholic basher, many of those who now oppose him have shamelessly contributed to anti-Catholicism.”

Just when we thought we were done with this issue, the matter of Senator Ashcroft's opposition to James Hormel being appointed ambassador to Luxembourg surfaced. At a news conference on January 25, Hormel contended that Senator Ashcroft opposed his confirmation as ambassador to Luxembourg “solely because I am a gay man.” Ashcroft denied this was the reason he opposed Hormel, and the Catholic League believed him.

Our members will recall that we led the opposition to the Hormel appointment at the time. William Donohue contacted the media recapping what happened:

“On January 21, 1998, the Catholic League issued a news release formally opposing the nomination of James Hormel as U.S. Ambassador to Luxembourg. We did so because of Hormel's reaction to an anti-Catholic group, the Sisters of Perpetual

Indulgence, during the 1996 San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Pride Parade. During the parade, Hormel joined two broadcasters from KOFY-TV in welcoming the nun-dressed drag queens, laughing at their antics. Worse than this was Hormel's refusal to dissociate himself from this Catholic-bashing incident. On December 19, 1997, Senator Tim Hutchinson gave Hormel an opportunity to 'repudiate those who would mock the church,' but the would-be ambassador declined comment.

"On June 19, 1998, I expressly stated in a news release that 'James Hormel should not be denied the post of ambassadorship to Luxembourg on the basis of his sexual orientation.' But I did say that he should be denied this position because of his tolerance for anti-Catholicism. On January 13, 1999, I wrote to every U.S. senator asking that the Hormel nomination be rejected. In a letter dated April 26, 1999, Senator John Ashcroft wrote to me saying, 'I believe that Mr. Hormel is not an appropriate nominee for the post of U.S. Ambassador.' Nothing in his letter gave even the slightest hint of an anti-gay bias.

"The issue all along has been Hormel's reluctance to distance himself from anti-Catholic bigots, not his sexual orientation. It is time to set the record straight."

We were most pleased that our news release on Hormel was cited by Robert Novak in his syndicated column, by Novak again on CNN's "Capital Gang," by talk Fox News TV commentator Sean Hannity, by the *Wall Street Journal* in a lead editorial, and by others.

Finally, there is one other matter in the Ashcroft story that is of interest to the Catholic League. Though Ashcroft is not Catholic, he is a serious Christian who holds positions on contemporary moral issues that are shared by millions of Catholics. The opposition to him was careful not to cite his religion, per se, as a reason to defeat him, but they danced awfully close to the line. So close that only someone

hopelessly naïve wouldn't have picked up on what was happening.

One person who certainly wasn't fooled was Charles Krauthammer. Krauthammer is a brilliant essayist with an informed religious (Judaic) perspective. A psychiatrist by training, he is confined to a wheelchair. But he is anything but confined in his writing. Here's a sample:

"A senator is nominated for high office. He's been reelected many times statewide. He has served admirably as his state's attorney general. He is devout, speaking openly and proudly about his religious faith. He emphasizes the critical role of religion in underpinning both morality and constitutional self-government. He speaks passionately about how his politics are shaped by his deeply held religious beliefs.

"Now: If his name is Lieberman and he is Jewish, his nomination evokes celebration. If his name is Ashcroft and he is Christian, his nomination evokes a hue and cry about 'divisiveness' and mobilizes a wall-to-wall liberal coalition to defeat him."

Krauthammer is exactly right. There is plenty of tolerance for mixing politics and religion if the mixer is Jewish, but there is none at all if he is Christian.

Just two months before Krauthammer wrote this piece, he had addressed a gathering of the Jewish Theological Seminary. He took the opportunity to say that the receptivity to Senator Joseph Lieberman's candidacy for vice president "had created a new consensus in America." Krauthammer said that the Lieberman nomination "would once and for all abolish the last remaining significant religious prejudice in the country—the notion that highly religious people are unfit for high office because they confuse theology with politics and recognize no boundary between church and state."

An honest man, Krauthammer then wrote, "How wrong I was." He

explained, "The nomination of a passionate and devout Christian for attorney general set off the old liberal anti-religious reflexes as if Joe Lieberman had never existed." Some things never change.

Whether Ashcroft turns out to be a good Attorney General, we do not know. But the fight that was waged against him was dirty. We were only too happy to help the pundits get it right.