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Ashcroft

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cluding Catholicism.

The 58-year-old Ashcroft was nominated for attorney general on Dec. 22 by recently inaugurated President George W. Bush. Ashcroft served as Missouri state senator from 1995-2001; as governor from 1985-93; and as attorney general for eight years prior to that. Ashcroft lost his 2000 Senate re-election bid to the late Gov. Mel Carnahan, though Ashcroft was leading polls when Carnahan was killed in an October plane crash. Carnahan stayed on the ballot and won the November election. His wife, Jean, assumed the Senate seat.

Life and death matters

During the Senate hearings, Ashcroft stated that as successor to Janet Reno, he plans to carry out the laws of the land even when he doesn't agree with them. That includes the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision that legalized abortion.

However, some Judiciary Committee members doubt that Ashcroft can set aside his personal views while acting as the federal government's top law-enforcement officer. The attorney general, while heading the Justice Department, also serves as legal adviser to the president and heads of other Cabinet departments.

"Senator Ashcroft, the issue boils down to this. When you have been such a zealous and impassioned advocate, how do you just turn it off? This may be an impossible task," Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., asked during a Jan. 16 committee hearing.

In particular, Schumer and another Democrat, Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, are concerned about Ashcroft's strong opposition to abortion.

"This is a man who has dedicated his career to eliminating a woman's right to choose," Schumer remarked. "He believes that abortion is murder, that it is wrong and that it should be stopped. He has led the charge to enact new hurdles and restrictions against choice."

Kennedy cited numerous instances during Ashcroft's previous political tenure where the Missourian opposed laws that allowed for abortion rights. Kennedy has threatened a filibuster opposing Ashcroft's appointment as attorney general, though several fellow Democrats said they would not support such an action. The committee is also concerned that Ashcroft might be slow to enforce federal laws protecting abortion clinic workers and patients from violence by protesters.

Ashcroft has stated that he opposes abortion rights except to save a woman's life. As a Missouri senator he advocated to have *Roe vs. Wade* overturned or reversed. As governor he signed a law affirming abortion bans in public medical facilities, and also sought unsuccessfully to limit women to one abortion each except to protect their health.

Meanwhile, President Bush has said that he will oppose any legislation allowing late-term, or partial-birth, abortions; Bush has also pledged not to use tax money to fund abortions.

Dennis Poust, associate communication director for the New York State Catholic Conference, commented that the new administration puts anti-abortion activists "in a much better position" to make some gains than under Bill Clinton's regime.

However, Poust said, he's much more apprehensive about capital punishment laws in the Bush administration. The state of Texas led the nation in executions during Bush's governorship that began in 1994; as for Bush's attorney general nominee, seven men were executed in Missouri while Ashcroft was governor after the state reinstated the death penalty in 1989.

Also during the Senate Judiciary Com-



Reuters/CNS

Former Missouri Sen. John Ashcroft is introduced by his successor, Sen. Jean Carnahan, D-Mo., at his confirmation hearing Jan. 16 before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Ashcroft is the nominee for attorney general.

mittee hearings, Ashcroft was taken to task for leading a movement to block Missouri Supreme Court Justice Ronnie White's nomination for a federal judgeship. Ashcroft's actions are viewed by some detractors as racist, whereas Ashcroft has claimed that White has not vigorously enforced the death penalty in Missouri.

Another criticism of Ashcroft is his past opposition to affirmative-action programs. Adding up all the issues, Father Cool remarked that he cannot give a ringing endorsement of Bush and Ashcroft based on their anti-abortion stances alone.

"I have great concern about this administration's concern to the poor and the needy. I have greater concern about the death penalty," Father Cool commented.

Bob's back

Also of interest to Catholics was the Senate Judiciary Committee's scrutiny of Ashcroft's appearance at Bob Jones University in South Carolina in 1999, to receive an honorary degree. On the surface, one might not question a known fundamentalist's appearance at a fundamentalist college.

But controversy about Bob Jones University arose after Bush gave an address at the college in February 2000. At the time, critics cited the college's anti-Catholic sentiment and its ban on interracial dating (the ban was lifted in August 2000). For instance, the university has published articles on its Web sites branding Catholicism as "a pagan counterfeit of the Christian religion" and a "satanic ... ecclesiastical tyranny over the souls of men."

Ashcroft claimed he was not aware of these biases when he appeared at Bob Jones University, telling the Senate Judiciary Committee Jan. 17, "I reject any racial or religious intolerance that has been associated with religious institutions."

Asked if he would accept an invitation to return to Bob Jones University as attorney general, Ashcroft said not if such policies still existed. Even so, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, judicial committee chairman, advised Ashcroft that he'd be best off if he "put the honorary degree in an envelope and mail it back to them."

Despite the Senate's questioning on this matter, Lou DeFeo, former executive director of the Missouri Catholic Conference, told the *Catholic Courier* that he has never regarded Ashcroft as anti-Catholic. When Ashcroft was governor, DeFeo recalled, he invited then-Bishop Bernard Law of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau - Cardinal Law is now Archbishop of Boston - to speak at one of Ashcroft's annual prayer breakfasts.

"For an Assemblies of God governor to invite a cardinal to be principal speaker,

I think that said something," said DeFeo, who served the state Catholic Conference from 1969 until his retirement last year.

DeFeo went on to note that the current bishop of the Springfield-Cape Girardeau Diocese, Bishop John J. Leibrecht, was a eulogist at the 1995 funeral of Ashcroft's father in the family's hometown of Springfield.

DeFeo said it's highly uncommon for anyone outside the Assemblies of God to speak at such an event. "It was a clear demonstration that (Ashcroft) had no hang-ups with Catholicism," DeFeo said.

"We had nothing that indicated to us that he harbored any particular anti-Catholic feelings," added Larry Webber, the current Missouri Catholic Conference director, in a phone interview. "I do know that he was always willing to meet the staff at the conference when they requested a meeting."

"We have experienced no sense of anti-Catholicism from him whatsoever. His actions and stances have not been in total accordance with the Catholic Church, but nobody else's have been, either," remarked Mark Saucier, diocesan communications director for Jefferson City, the state capital, also interviewed by the *Courier*.

Church and state

The intense grilling of Ashcroft signals a disturbing trend, said Cathy Cleaver, director of information and planning for the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life. Cleaver termed opposition to Ashcroft's

anti-abortion stances "the establishment's new bigotry."

"People promoted for public service are now mocked for their pro-life views, as if no thinking person could be pro-life," Cleaver stated in a press release. "Those who pledge to defend *Roe vs. Wade* are held up for praise, while those who defend the fundamental human rights of all persons equally, including unborn children, are regarded as, well, un-American."

"We hope that candidates' commitment to life does not disqualify them from public life," added Poust of the New York Catholic Conference. "No one ever seems to question personal views unless you're talking about a pro-life candidate. I don't know if this is all about John Ashcroft or if it's about abortion."

Such wrangling about abortion rights is the sign of a new era in American history, observed Jann Armantrout, life issues coordinator for the Diocese of Rochester.

"Acceptance and tolerance of abortion on demand - you don't hear an overall total abhorrence (of abortion) throughout society, whereas 50 years ago you would have," Armantrout remarked.

Not only does Ashcroft rock that particular boat, he also draws both praise and criticism for his religious convictions. President Bush, also, has received mixed reviews for his open Christian beliefs and his intent to increase support to religious groups during his presidency.

To be challenged for such stances is a sad statement, said Janet Parshall, spokesperson for the Family Research Council.

"To suggest that strong personal faith disqualifies someone from public office not only violates the Constitution's ban on religious tests for office but it also represents a type of genteel bigotry that seeks to marginalize people of faith," Parshall stated in a press release.

DeFeo and Armantrout concur that Ashcroft has been raked over the coals for, essentially, espousing traditional moral beliefs.

"What I find disappointing is that a person is being challenged as not being competent for public office because he has moral values," DeFeo said. "I think I would rather deal with a person in public life who has values."

"I think society and our culture have done a disservice when we expect religious beliefs only to be exercised within the confines of the church and synagogue building," Armantrout said. "I personally believe that morality should generate legislation. You can't legislate morality, but it should drive governmental decisions. How else do you make decisions?"

President seeks rights for all

WASHINGTON (CNS) - In his inaugural address Jan. 20, President Bush used the words of Mother Teresa and colonial-era statesman John Page in calling for a society where everyone helps seek the common good and angels guide the country.

"Sometimes in life we are called to great things," Bush said. "As a saint of our times has said, every day we are called to do small things with great love. The most important tasks of a democracy are done by everyone."

The reference, which he did not attribute to her specifically, is a paraphrase of Mother Teresa's frequent observation, "We can do no great things; only small things with great love."

Bush's speech under cold, rainy skies outlined a bright view of the ongoing story of Americans. National ideals included "that everyone belongs, that everyone deserves a chance, that no insignificant person was ever born," Bush said.

He noted that "while many of our citizens prosper, others doubt the promise - even the justice - of our own country," and he cited failing schools, hidden prejudice and circumstances of birth as limits

faced by some.

Bush called on people to set aside petty politics and live up to a shared calling.

"Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment," he said. "It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos."

Among specific goals of his administration, Bush said he would "reclaim America's schools, before ignorance and apathy claim more young lives;" reform Social Security and Medicare; reduce taxes; "build defenses beyond challenge lest weakness invite challenge;" and "confront weapons of mass destruction."

Bush also said "deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation's promise." He cautioned against thinking of abandonment and abuse of children as acts of God, instead of as the "failures of love" that they are.

He said that although government has great responsibilities, "some needs and hurts are so deep they will only respond to a mentor's touch or a pastor's prayer. Church and charity, synagogue and mosque lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honored place in our plans and in our laws."