

## *Will John Ashcroft Put His Religion in a Blind Trust?*

THE BEST ENTERTAINMENT we have been offered in this dull, depressing inaugural season was the John Ashcroft hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee. At issue was whether a man should be attorney general who thinks a woman should be forced to give birth to her rapist's child, and one who, in a related development, is soft on slavery.

The Democrats did not attempt a particularly vigorous attack on these views, knowing them to be shared by a statistically significant number of voters. But at least they called Ronnie White to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Mr. White, an African-American who is chief justice of the Missouri Supreme Court, had been shot down from ambush by John Ashcroft in 1998 when President Clinton tried to make him a federal judge.

Could Mr. Ashcroft be that hideous beast not seen in Washington since the Voting Rights Act of 1965—a *racist*?

Not in the opinion of the injured party himself. "I don't think John Ashcroft is a racist," Chief Justice White averred, stoutly.

John Ashcroft didn't think so either. He was guilty only of being tough on crime, whereas Judge White was squishy-soft on it.

But the record showed that Judge White had voted for the death penalty 41 times, which made him just about as blood-thirsty as anybody else on the Missouri bench, including a lot of Ashcroft appointees...

What reason other than racism could there have been for Mr. Ashcroft to torpedo Judge White? Would the committee have to breach senatorial comity by voting down a man who, until his recent defeat by a corpse, had been a colleague?

Fortunately not.

It developed that in 1992 the Governor of Missouri, then Mr. Ashcroft, had sent an antiabortion bill to the General Assembly only to see it blocked in the House Judiciary Committee by its then-chairman, Ronnie White.

Mr. Ashcroft thus turned out to have had a perfectly acceptable reason to lie to his colleagues six years later about a man's judicial record. The colleagues understood, then and now, that it made no difference whether the victim was black or white or green. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and John Ashcroft was sent here to do the Lord's bidding.

THE OTHER GREAT QUESTION before the committee was whether as attorney general John Ashcroft would be capable of doing the bidding of Congress and the Supreme Court, both of which have made civil rights and the right to abortion part of the law. And both of which so-called "rights" are abominations unto the Lord, insofar as John Ashcroft's understanding of the matter reacheth.

Mr. Ashcroft satisfied the committee on this point by lying, as of course he had to do if he didn't want to spend the rest of his life as a lobbyist in Jefferson City. He testified under oath that he would have no trouble enforcing laws he considered contrary to the laws of God. You got to render unto Caesar, guys. If you catch my drift.

Listening to this nonsense got me to wondering about bridges and Brooklyn. Would Orrin Hatch be so gullible if the Supreme Court had appointed Al Gore president and the nominee were a lifelong opponent of the death penalty—the Pope, for instance?

“Actually there’s precedent on that point,” said a veteran federal prosecutor who consults with me on these matters. “Janet Reno was a lifelong opponent of the death penalty.”

Improbable though this sounded, it turned out to be true. And no doubt it was a great consolation to the 103 prisoners sentenced to death during her 15 years as state attorney in Miami.

Ms. Reno, too, promised to uphold the law when she was sworn in as Dade County’s chief prosecutor and later as U.S. Attorney General. But she lacks the suppleness of mind that might have allowed her to take the truly moral course, which in her case would have been to talk the talk but not to walk the walk. She should have spent her 15 years searching for just the right death penalty case, and never quite finding it.

But that, as a great Republican moralist once said, would be wrong.

On the other hand, John Ashcroft’s fully automatic falsehoods about Judge White’s record show clearly that he is not a man who sweats the small stuff. Our next attorney general understands perfectly that dishonesty in the pursuit of virtue is no vice.



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