

## **BLOODING THE A.G. DESIGNATE**

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Political peace and healing -- it's wonderful!

Originally, it was said that John Ashcroft would be confirmed as attorney general without too much of a fight because of "senatorial courtesy," a custom with a reason. Senators are few -- only 100. Senators gain serious respect for some of their colleagues. And there is self-interest in rubber-stamping a former colleague; after all, some day it may be you being confirmed, not confirming.

But we have learned that in times of stress senatorial courtesy can gain oxymoronic status. Sen. John Tower, R-Texas, was denied confirmation as secretary of defense because of alleged problems with whiskey and women.

This is one of the those times. Ashcroft's confirmation hearings will give the liberal cause groups an opportunity to bang their tambourines of terror once again. Such tactics sunk the nomination of Judge Robert Bork, about as well-qualified a jurist as is likely to come down the interstate. But Senator Edward Kennedy told America that Bork would mean a return to back-alley abortions, an end to free speech, rogue police and a revival of Nehru jackets.

Such tactics took Judge Clarence Thomas to the brink because he was charged with -- uh, what? Fact is, Bork and Thomas were serious conservatives. And so is John Ashcroft.

Institutional Washington is disoriented. They are dealing with a president-elect who will be trying to do what he said he

would do. He said he was a compassionate conservative and would govern that way. His appointments have reflected both strands of the slogan.

Bush said he was pro-life and pro-death penalty, that he had problems with more gun control and problems with affirmative action when it edged over to racial preferences. These are Ashcroft's positions as well, but clearly, he has a harder edge, substantively and in countenance. There are rumors that Ashcroft laughs in private. Liberals would like to describe Ashcroft as a redneck know-nothing, but his degrees are from Yale and the University of Chicago. His wife teaches business law at mostly black Howard University.

Ashcroft's principal sin concerns his successful campaign to deny confirmation of Judge Ronald White, a black Missouri Democrat nominated by Clinton for a federal judgeship. Ashcroft says that he got hot on White when he realized that White had written a dissenting opinion that a multiple cop-killer should be retried, rather than allowing the death penalty sentence to proceed.

Moreover, if you hadn't heard, this president-elect *didn't win a majority of the popular vote*. Eh? What's that you say? Didn't win the popular vote?

Democrats say Ashcroft's actions were politically and racially motivated, which proves that Ashcroft, and Bush, are non-conciliatory, racially insensitive and divisive. This, from a party whose presidential nominee claimed that a Bush victory would lead back to laws that bolstered slavery. This, from the now-partisan NAACP, which ran ads linking Bush with the chain-dragging murder of a black man in Texas.

Therefore what? Bush should endorse the liberal program to show reconciliation, healing, warmth and, of course, finally, intelligence.

The job of attorney general is important. He or she performs two principal functions. First is to enforce federal law as written, whether or not he agrees with it. Ashcroft has pledged to do that, and all sides agree that he is a man of integrity. The a.g. also works with the White House to recommend and help effectuate new laws, wholly subject to the support of the president, and ultimately the endorsement of the U.S. Senate, which is now split 50-50.

But Ashcroft is too tempting a target. In military parlance, what we are about to see would be called "blooding the army." When Supreme Court vacancies open up, and they will, the liberal shock troops want the climate and terrain to be propitious, and want their troops ready. They want a fast target on whose back they can raise money.

So get ready. Here comes Ralph Neas, the new chairman of People for the American Way, anxious to make his bones. Here comes Patricia Ireland of the National Organization for Women, and Nan Aron of the Bork-mugging Alliance for Justice. Here comes Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP. The activist gay groups will be there with their megaphones. Why, Ted Kennedy himself may utter a gentle word. If John Ashcroft ever scratched himself in the wrong place, you will hear about it in the 24-hour media spin cycle.

As in a ritual mating dance, senators wavering on the Ashcroft nomination will be targeted as anti-choice, anti-gay, anti-woman, pro-gun. Most Democrats will play along. Will the Republicans hold? For now, it would seem so. But if you

were one of the 19 Republicans up for re-election in 2002, would you want to start off tagged as a racist, homophobic, gun-totin' misogynist?

Isn't peace wonderful?

**BEN WATTENBERG IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND IS THE MODERATOR OF PBS'S "THINK TANK."**

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