

Democrats target Ashcroft in 2004 presidential race

Bush's attorney general is under attack for his conservative views and Democrats vow to oust him

By Michelle Mittelstadt
The Dallas Morning News (KRT)

WASHINGTON — While George W. Bush is the top target of Democrats on the presidential campaign trail, his attorney general, somewhat unexpectedly, runs a close second.

No one else in the Bush administration — not Vice President Dick Cheney, not Bush chief political adviser Karl Rove, not Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld — draws the sustained barrage of criticism that Democrats in the crowded nine-candidate field train on John Ashcroft.

"When I am president there will be no John Ashcroft trampling on the Bill of Rights," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said recently.

"John Ashcroft has proven through bad judgment and divisiveness that he is the wrong man to serve in one of the most important jobs in our nation right now," said Rep. Dick Gephardt, D-Mo. "He will not last five minutes in my administration."

"He's not much of an attorney, and I know for sure he's not a general," retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark quipped.

Though some of Ashcroft's predecessors, most recently Janet Reno, served as lightning rods in some ideological circles, it's not often that an attorney general figures so prominently in a presidential campaign, political and legal observers say.

Ashcroft isn't deterred by the scathing words lobbed his way, aides say.

"It is campaign season, and when politicians running for national office are out on the stump, they say a lot of silly things," said Justice Department spokesman Mark Corallo, dismissing the rhetoric as "red meat for the most extremist part of their base."

"We just kind of shrug it off and keep doing our job," Corallo said.

Tapped for the Bush Cabinet after losing his Missouri Senate seat, Ashcroft has long been a flashpoint for Democrats and liberal advocacy groups opposed to his staunchly conservative views on abortion, guns, judicial nominations and other hot-button issues. That animus was reflected in a bitterly divisive Senate confirmation battle that he won by the narrowest margin ever posted for an attorney general.

Ashcroft's response to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks has proved the most polarizing of his tenure as the nation's top law enforcement officer, drawing praise

from many quarters for keeping the nation safe from further attack, but condemnation from civil libertarians, Arab-American groups and others for the USA Patriot Act and other anti-terrorism tactics they view as encroachment on Americans' rights.

The fact that four of the five members of Congress vying for the Democratic presidential nomination voted for the Patriot Act hasn't stopped them from seizing on Ashcroft as a handy foil in their campaign to limit the Bush administration to a single term.

Look for them to continue harping on Ashcroft as the campaign continues, political consultants and analysts say.

"One of my informal rules of this presidential campaign is, the first person to attack John Ashcroft in a debate wins the biggest applause line," said Anita Dunn, a Democratic political consultant who was a top strategist for Bill Bradley's presidential campaign in 2000.

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D-Mass.

"Ashcroft, in many ways, is seen as the logical conclusion of what many Democrats dislike about the Bush administration, which is the perception that he is willing to do anything to further his political goals and to use the mechanisms of government to further an ideological agenda," Dunn said.

The Democrats' sustained focus on Ashcroft serves both policy and political interests, says political analyst Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute, allowing the candidates to showcase in shorthand their policy differences with the current administration while also rallying their core constituencies with pointed barbs.

"Now with the Patriot Act and the whole set of issues associated with it, his name is a kind of trigger for the things that they don't like and distrust about the Bush administration in Democratic Party ranks," Ornstein said. "Anything that gets that base's adrenaline flowing, that gets them convinced even more that they have reason to work night and day to remove this administration, is not good news for Bush."

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Today's crossword solution

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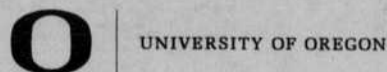
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Scandinavian film series, 7 p.m., EMU International Resource Center. Featured movie will be "Jerusalem."

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