

Paying the piper

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

He who pays the piper calls the tune. This is reason enough to feel uneasy about the Bush administration's program to transfer public funds into religious programs. No strings attached? Of course there are. Whether money comes from Dad, government or foundations, one thing is certain: there are always strings attached.

The president is inviting religious organizations to compete for federal dollars under the watchful eye of his new Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This is the same president who on his first day in office cut off funds to overseas agencies that offer abortion. President Bush's guidelines are clear: We give you the money, you practice what we preach.

The proposed agency—it still needs congressional approval—was orchestrated with politically correct bells and whistles. The money would be available to all religious groups that want to apply. The president said, "When we see social needs in America, my administration will look first to faith-based programs." Since grants will be based on White House guidelines, however, it is highly unlikely that any funds will go to a United Methodist family-planning program or a Black Muslim food center.

Agency director John Dilulio Jr. is a Catholic layman with an attitude. Dilulio has advocated building more prisons to combat what he once described as the threat of "juvenile superpredators." His critics have accused him of overzealousness, and he has recently softened his stance, writing that "it is a profound mistake to think that violent crimes by and against juveniles can be prevented or controlled simply or mainly by increasing the punitiveness of the juvenile justice system."

Dilulio will have a soul mate at the Bush Justice Department in Attorney General John Ashcroft. As a senator, Ashcroft sponsored the first federally funded faith-based initiative. He is a strong believer in the ability of religious organizations to correct social problems.

Ashcroft arrives at the Justice Department with his own tough-on-crime record. During his reelection campaign, Ashcroft asked the Senate to turn down Missouri

Supreme Court Judge Ronnie White's nomination as a federal judge, charging that White was "pro-criminal." The allegation was specious. When White, an African American, testified at the Ashcroft hearings, Republican Senator Arlen Specter apologized to the judge for the charges.

Ashcroft is the son and grandson of Pentecostal ministers. Until recently, he aspired to be president of the United States. In a 1998 profile in *Mother Jones* magazine, when Ashcroft was a presidential candidate, writer William Saletan identified Pat Robertson, James Dobson and several of Pat Buchanan's former aides and key supporters as "unofficial" Ashcroft supporters. Saletan suggested that any chance Ashcroft had of winning the nomination depended on public outrage over the Monica Lewinsky scandal, an outrage that failed to generate enough force to give Ashcroft political momentum.

In 1998, however, Saletan suggested that Ashcroft was no longer a long shot for the presidency. His Reagan-like folksy manner diverted critics who accepted his promises to do the right thing, and saw Ashcroft not as a moral warrior, but as a leader saddened by immorality. His campaign unified the Religious Right. When he withdrew from the presidential race he endorsed George Bush, bringing most of the Religious Right with him.

As Saletan put it, "Ashcroft looks less like Robertson and more like Jimmy Carter, whose ethical purity endeared him to voters revolted by Richard Nixon's disgrace. . . . Ashcroft's Carteresque innocence complements his Reaganesque gift for framing divisive moral issues in benign ways. . . . Unlike Buchanan, Ashcroft talks about what he's for, not what he's against. When he speaks of abortion, he shows audiences a sonogram of his grandchild in the womb."

Opponents of Ashcroft's nomination argued that his record on race, homosexuality, crime and abortion was that of a conservative extremist. Senator Patrick J. Leahy (D., Vt.) refused to support Ashcroft because his "intemperate positions . . . raised doubts about his ability to enforce the law with an even hand." In addition, Ashcroft edged close to falsehoods in his Senate testimony, denying that race or homosexuality had anything to do with his opposition to federal appointments for White and for an ambassadorial candidate who was openly gay. Still, Ashcroft won senate approval. The fact that he was a former Senate colleague helped his case, but more important, his Democratic opponents failed to rally public opinion against his extreme positions.

On issues of race, abortion, gender and crime, Ashcroft has demonstrated strongly conservative positions throughout his political career. But when asked by committee members if he would “uphold the law”—for example, on abortion—what else was he to say but that of course he would? But what is settled can become unsettled.

Ashcroft’s agenda can now be implemented not from the White House, as he and his Religious Right supporters had hoped, but from the Justice Department. He is free to exercise federal prosecutorial discretion. He will also influence the selection of future federal judges and prosecutors, including vacancies on the Supreme Court. All 50 Republican senators (conservatives and moderates) and eight Democrats voted to confirm an attorney general whose ideological preaching and practicing have long been clear for all to see. Troubling.