

# Bush's cramped mainstream

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During its nearly 70-year history, the American Civil Liberties Union has been the nation's foremost defender of individual rights. The ACLU has been lauded for its work by Presidents Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and Supreme Court Justices Felix Frankfurter and Earl Warren. Yet in his recent attacks on the ACLU, George Bush has suggested that the ACLU's devotion to the Bill of Rights is un-American or "out of the mainstream."

Bush's attacks have gravely distorted the ACLU record. Focusing on a few narrow issues, which he has largely mischaracterized, Bush has argued that Michael Dukakis should disavow the ACLU's positions.

The ACLU is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, 250,000-member public-interest organization devoted exclusively to protecting the basic civil liberties of all Americans - free speech, free press, the right to privacy, freedom of religion, equal protection of the law, and due process, among others - through legislation, litigation and public education.

The ACLU has defended the right to teach evolution in the public schools (the Scopes case); challenged the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II; fought against "loyalty oaths" in the 1950s; joined the legal battle for civil rights, desegregated schools and equal voting rights; and litigated in favor of women's rights.

Because the ACLU is involved in about 6,000 cases each year, the organization often takes positions with which some members, including Michael Dukakis, disagree. These positions are collected in 530-page policy guide, which covers such issues as the freedom to travel, police practices and the right to strike. Bush aides have apparently combed this policy guide for views that they consider unpopular. Yet Bush's attacks on the ACLU are as revealing for what they say as for what they do not.

First, his mistakes:

- The ACLU does not favor child pornography;

in fact, it supports laws punishing child pornographers.

- The ACLU has never challenged the use of the phrase "In God we trust" on our currency, although it is arguably inconsistent with the principle of church-state separation.

- The ACLU opposes tax exemptions for all religious organizations - not just the Catholic Church - because they constitute government subsidy of religion.

- The ACLU opposes governmentally imposed ratings systems for movies, and opposes industry ratings systems unless they are voluntary - i.e., allowing children to view movies with restrictive ratings if their parents give their permission.

What Bush does not mention is that the ACLU is not a liberal organization. We do not choose our clients on the basis of their political beliefs, and we have frequently defended the rights of conservative and ultra-right groups, such as the Moral Majority, Massachusetts Citizens for Life, John Birch Society, the American Nazi Party and the Ku Klux Klan.

From the ACLU's standpoint, the client is the constitution, not an individual. If the government can prevent the Klan from marching today, it can bar you and me from marching tomorrow. In the Skokie case, the ordinance that the ACLU challenged was identical to the ordinance passed in Cicero, Ill., to prevent Martin Luther King and other civil rights activists from marching. The ACLU succeeded in overturning both ordinances.

Former Chief Justice Earl Warren described the ACLU's contribution forcefully when he said: "The ACLU has stood four-square against the recurring tides of hysteria that from time to time threaten freedoms everywhere."

Bush's attacks have caused a flood of telephone calls to the office, requesting membership applications. Fortunately, there are many people who resent Bush's distortions of our record and who are proud to be "card-carrying members." It is disturbing that Bush's idea of what constitutes the "American mainstream" is so cramped that it does not allow for the Bill of Rights and its advocates.

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