

# Ashcroft leaves cabinet, Bush choose Gonzales: Both Ashcroft and Gonzales draw criticism

News in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, a lightning rod for criticism on his enforcement of war-on-terrorism initiatives, submitted his resignation one week after the elections, and President George W. Bush quickly nominated White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, who would be the first Latino to fill the post.

With the departure of Ashcroft, a Pentecostal layman who is a member of the Assemblies of God, Bush loses a cabinet link to conservative Christian groups. But Ashcroft was also a target of progressive religious leaders for the Justice Department's application of the Patriot Act and what critics said were encroachments on individual privacy and prisoners' rights.

A week before election day, Ashcroft hosted a breakfast group of religious conservatives in his offices to thank them for their help on "moral issues," chairman Louis P. Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition told the *Los Angeles Times*. "He had a thankless job," Sheldon said. "The Patriot Act was a very hard pill for everyone to swallow, but we're at war."

Ashcroft was termed "one of the most destructive attorneys general in the modern era" by Ralph G. Neas, president of People for the American Way. When Gonzales was announced November 10 as Bush's choice to replace Ashcroft, Neas said that the U.S. Senate, which must approve the nomination, should raise questions about Gonzales's role in the development of policies that led to prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and questionable treatment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

The Center for American Progress, a liberal group, contended that "the existing record raises grave doubts as to whether Mr. Gonzales is the person" to restore the good name of the Department of Justice. Citing a *Newsweek* article from January

2002, the center said that a White House memo by Gonzales argued that the Geneva Convention's strict limitations on questioning and treatment of enemy prisoners had been rendered obsolete by the war on terrorism.

The (Southern) Baptist Press news service called Ashcroft a "favorite of evangelical Christians" going back to his years as governor and U.S. senator from Missouri. The story noted that "some pro-family organizations" had criticized the Justice Department's failure to prosecute obscenity more vigorously, but they commended the department for defending the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act.

"Bush's selection of Gonzales probably will not be welcomed by at least some pro-life organizations," Baptist Press said. When it was thought in 2003 that Gonzales would be a Bush nominee to the Supreme Court if a vacancy appeared, several Christian right voices, including James Dobson's Focus on the Family, declared he was not conservative enough.