

In one of my attempted letters to the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle in March 2001 I, interestingly enough, found a reference to current attorney general John Ashcroft:

“Mr. Ashcroft is a man without conviction or purpose. He lacks the tenacity and fire of former attorney general Janet Reno. He only seems concerned about two issues: denying women the right to choose, and making sure every American can own assault weapons.”

Now in 2003, I can only wish that my assessment were true. Ashcroft plays an interesting role in the post September 11 dangerous world. An older man, and a representative of an older demographic, Mr. Ashcroft is surprisingly technology savvy. From issues of encryption, distributed library databases, DNA identification and corporate aided person tracking Ashcroft have a thumb in every pie. He has redefined what it means to be Attorney General.

Traditionally the Attorney General is the head of the Department of Justice and a member of the Presidential Cabinet. This entails legal prosecution of groups or individuals who perform crimes against the American people. Ashcroft, however, has a different plan.

Taking the war on terror as his platform he has leveraged technology in some of the most creative and devious ways to reduce the civil liberties of the American Public. Ashcroft has used surprising savvy as a bureaucrat to relax judicial policies on wiretaps, video and photo surveillance, and email interception. Even library records are subject to search in an investigative manner now, as opposed to post conviction. His newest plan involves making a database of Americans and visitors DNA.

My initial response to this was incredulity. How did this come to happen? Where is the debate about this matter? Aren't these policies congressional jurisdiction?

My research into the topic only brought up more questions. First of all the Justice Department is now allowed to hold secret hearings behind closed doors on matters of national security (also an initiative overseen by Ashcroft). Secondly, there have been mass deportations of Syrian, Pakistani, Lebanese and Egyptian citizens whose hearings and deportations have been kept secret. Finally, the Department of Justice now has the authority to strip an individual of his or her rights completely if they are deemed an enemy combatant, regardless of citizenship status.

This ideological shift in the Justice department from transparent and bureaucratic to secret and efficient is very alarming. In my opinion this shift is much more significant and scary than the Mr. Ashcroft's pension for guns, her prosecution of “medical marijuana” users in California, his push to have every capital crime punished by the death penalty, and his attack on Roe v. Wade.