

itics April 11, 2005 Members of Congress from both political parties outdid themselves last week in heaping praise upon Pope John Paul II in the wake of his passing. Many spoke at length on the floor of the House of Representatives, and some even flew to Rome for his funeral. I'm happy to witness so many politicians honoring a great man of God and peace. The problem, however, is that so few of them honored him during his lifetime by their actions as legislators. In fact, most members of Congress support policies that are totally at odds with Catholic teachings. Just two years ago conservatives were busy scolding the Pope for his refusal to back our invasion of Iraq. One conservative media favorite even made the sickening suggestion that the Pope was the enemy of the United States because he would not support our aggression in the Middle East. The Pontiff would not ignore the inherent contradiction in being pro-life and pro-war, nor distort just war doctrine to endorse attacking a nation that clearly posed no threat to America-- and conservatives resented it. September 11th did not change everything, and the Pope understood that killing is still killing. The hypocritical pro-war conservatives lauding him today have very short memories. Liberals also routinely denounced the Pope for refusing to accept that Catholicism, like all religions, has rules that cannot simply be discarded to satisfy the cultural trends of the time. The political left has been highly critical of the Pope's positions on abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, feminism, and contraception. Many liberals frankly view Catholicism as an impediment to the fully secular society they hope to create. Both conservatives and liberals cannot understand that the Pope's pronouncements were theological, not political. He was one of the few humans on earth who could not be bullied or threatened by any government. He was a man of God, not a man of the state. He was not a policy maker, but rather a steward of long-established Catholic doctrine. His mission was to save souls, not serve the political agendas of any nation, party, or politician. To the secularists, this was John Paul II's unforgivable sin-- he placed service to God above service to the state. Most politicians view the state, not God, as the supreme ruler on earth. They simply cannot abide a theology that does not comport with their vision of unlimited state power. This is precisely why both conservatives and liberals savaged John Paul II when his theological pronouncements did not fit their goals. But perhaps their goals simply were not godly. Unlike most political leaders, the Pope understood that both personal and economic liberties are necessary for human virtue to flourish. Virtue, after all, involves choices. Politics and government operate to deny people the freedom to make their own choices. The Pope's commitment to human dignity, grounded in the teachings of Christ, led him to become an eloquent and consistent advocate for an ethic of life, exemplified by his struggles against abortion, war, euthanasia, and the death penalty. Yet what institutions around the world sanction abortion, war, euthanasia, and the death penalty? Governments. Historically, religion always represented a threat to government because it competes for the loyalties of the people. In modern America, however, most religious institutions abandoned their independence long ago, and now serve as cheerleaders for state policies like social services, faith-based welfare, and military aggression in the name of democracy. Few American churches challenge state actions at all, provided their tax-exempt status is maintained. This is why Washington politicians ostensibly celebrate religion-- it no longer threatens their supremacy. Government has co-opted religion and family as the primary organizing principle of our society. The federal government is boss, and everybody knows it. But no politician will ever produce even a tiny fraction of the legacy left by Pope John Paul II.