

ACLU-TN is “pro-pornography” and doesn’t care about protecting children.

As Voltaire said, “I disagree with what you say but I defend your right to say it.” ACLU-TN strongly defends the right of individuals to read, view or download whatever they choose, free from government interference. This does not mean we believe that all ideas are equally good or that all individuals will make good choices — only that it is more dangerous to allow the government to choose which ideas may be transmitted than it is to allow citizens to make those choices for themselves. We believe that the proper way to counter bad ideas, including some considered pornographic, is with better ideas. Education, not government coercion, is the way to truly protect children.

ACLU-TN supports drug use.

No, but we don’t support drug prohibition either. During the past ten years, America has spent literally billions of dollars on the so-called “drug war” without significantly reducing drug use. The war on drugs has justified civil liberties violations while insuring drug peddlers’ profits. We should listen to the experts and fight drugs with appropriate regulation, education and treatment, the way we treat other public health problems.

If ACLU-TN really cared about victims and wanted to reduce crime, it would support the death penalty.

We oppose the death penalty because all evidence shows that it has absolutely no deterrent effect, costs far more than even life imprisonment, and is often unfairly applied. (People who kill whites get the death penalty far more often than people who kill blacks, and people with money virtually never face death.) Furthermore, the finality of the death penalty makes it hard to correct errors, and a study by Stanford University documents over 26 cases where the people executed were later found to be innocent of the crimes for which they were put to death.

ACLU-TN does not support traditional family values.

ACLU-TN has no position on “family values.” We do oppose attempts by government to dictate personal and family beliefs. Government can require certain behaviors — it can prevent citizens from hurting each other, or stealing from each other, for example — but government cannot tell individuals and families what personal or religious values to adopt. ACLU-TN strongly supports the teaching of civic values — liberty, equality, respect for law — enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and civic virtues like honesty, integrity, diligence and tolerance.

ACLU-TN brings frivolous cases that trivialize the law.

Often the way in which the media presents a case does make it seem silly. But when you look beyond the surface details, you will find the real reason ACLU-TN took the case — because a valid Constitutional principle was involved.

Why does ACLU-TN always have to “push the envelope?”


Because that’s our job. We are liberty’s lawyers — advocates for limited government and personal autonomy. It is our job to be vigorous in defense of those principles. It is the job of government lawyers to justify government action and the job of the courts to decide who is right in any given situation. The system only works when all of us are doing our jobs.



Answers to some of the questions ACLU-TN faces on a daily basis.

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This pamphlet is an effort to help members who have requested “snappy” responses to inaccuracies about the ACLU and ACLU-TN. While sound bites should not replace more complete discussions, they can be helpful in reframing the issues. It is in that spirit that we offer the following responses to some of the most frequent charges.

ACLU-TN is full of liberals.

The word “liberal” means different things to different people, but usually when people level this charge, they mean Democrats who favor big government. ACLU-TN enforces limits to government power, and our membership includes Libertarians, Republicans, Democrats and Independents.

ACLU-TN is so influential because it is rich, and members are drawn from a rich elite.

Actually, the opposite is true. While ACLU-TN members represent a cross-section of Tennessee citizens, the vast majority of our members are of modest means. We are school teachers, ministers, small business owners, college professors, doctors and lawyers. Dues are \$20 per year, and the average annual donation is under \$50. We depend upon donations and dues for most of our income. If we are influential, it is because a majority of Americans agree with us that government power must be limited.

ACLU-TN is the “criminal’s lobby.”

ACLU-TN’s mission is to restrain government. While most of our members care deeply about the plight of victims of crime and about the damage done by crime to the social fabric, our “job description” is limited to concerns about the improper use of government power. If the police are allowed to break the rules, how can we expect others to follow them? Most police officers are upstanding, hardworking people who follow the rules; they are just as anxious to get rid of the few bad apples.

ACLU-TN is anti-Christian.

ACLU-TN believes that religious beliefs must be freely chosen. We oppose government coercion of religious beliefs or observance, and government endorsement of any faith. The ACLU-TN membership includes numerous devout believers, including clergy of many faiths who agree that separation of church and state benefits both.

ACLU-TN opposes prayer in school.

Not true. ACLU-TN (together with most mainstream Protestant and Jewish denominations) opposes government imposed religious observance, including government imposed prayers in public school classrooms or at graduation ceremonies. We would sue to protect the right of any child to engage in nondisruptive, truly voluntary prayer — in the cafeteria before lunch, before a test, before class, or anywhere else.

ACLU-TN is pro-abortion.

No. But we are pro-choice. The government that can decide today that you cannot have an abortion can decide tomorrow that you must have one. The issue is the power of government to dictate our private morality.

ACLU-TN promotes the “gay life-style.”

No, and we don’t promote a heterosexual lifestyle either. We “promote” the proposition that who you love is none of the government’s business. Extending basic civil rights to gays is not an endorsement of their “lifestyle,” it is recognition of their status as citizens. Civil rights for gays are not “special rights” any more than civil rights for blacks or women are. The government has no business making tax benefits contingent on people’s sex lives. Job security ought to depend upon job performance, not sexual orientation.

ACLU-TN is filled with Communists.

This reputation stems from our defense of people’s right to hold communist beliefs in the 1930s. Just as we defend the right-wing zealots from government today, we defended left-wing zealots against governments overreaching then. For us, the ideology of the affected group is irrelevant; the issue is the power of the state to prescribe our ideologies.

ACLU-TN is an extremist group.

Actually, those on the far left and the far right of the political spectrum are arguing over the specifics of the agenda they want government to impose on the rest of us. ACLU-TN falls solidly in the middle, insisting that individuals be allowed to choose for themselves — free of government interference — what books to read, what prayers to say, what ideas to hold, who to love and whether or not to have children.

ACLU-TN supports the Ku Klux Klan.

We don’t support their message, but we do support their First Amendment right to free speech because a government that can suppress the Klan is a government that can suppress environmental groups, or Libertarians, or any minority or unpopular view. It is the same government that did forbid Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from speaking in many southern states in the sixties.

ACLU-TN wastes time and clogs the courts with prisoner lawsuits. Prisoners have given up their rights by breaking the law.

It is very true that prisoners have given up many rights by breaking the law. It is also true that we receive an enormous number of complaints from prisoners, many of which are without merit. We take a very small percentage of them. But even people who have committed crimes should not be subject to vicious beatings, or deprived of needed medical care, or raped while incarcerated.

In America, the majority rules. Why can’t ACLU-TN accept the will of the majority?

In America, the majority gets to make many decisions, but the Bill of Rights carves out certain liberties that are secured to each of us as citizens irrespective of the desires of the majority. In fact, the founders created the Bill of Rights as a defense against the tyranny of the majority. In America, your neighbors cannot vote to make you a Baptist or a Buddhist; the residents of your precinct cannot vote to ban certain newspapers. These decisions, and many others, are for each of us to make, free of the coercive power of government or the wishes of the majority.