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Hate crime laws are brazen attempt to criminalize speech, warn Libertarians

Racist speech may be repugnant, but it shouldn't be a crime

WASHINGTON, DC — **Do bigots have First Amendment rights?**

Bill Clinton apparently doesn't think so — and that's why he wants to punish them with new "hate crime" legislation, the Libertarian Party said today.

"Bigotry is despicable, but it shouldn't be illegal," said Steve Dasbach, the party's national chairman. "When politicians start punishing people for what they *think* — not for what they *do* — they create a chilling new category of wrongdoing: Thought crimes."

Dasbach's comments came as Clinton proposed an expansion of federal "hate crimes" legislation to include criminal acts committed because of someone's gender, sexual orientation, or disability.

Current hate crime law already allows prosecutors to impose additional penalties for crimes motivated by the victim's race, religion, or ethnic background.

"Every violent crime is a hate crime, and is already covered by existing laws," Dasbach said. "Law enforcement should focus on stopping crimes in general — not punishing crimes which happen to be politically incorrect."

However, just discussing violent "hate crimes" masks the real issue, said Dasbach.

"The fact is, so-called federal hate crimes don't require violence — just unpopular opinions," he said. "In 1995, for example, 57% of the reported hate crimes were verbal. Those verbal comments may have been repugnant, or malicious, or offensive — but they shouldn't be crimes. If the First Amendment protects *anything*, it protects the right of Americans to hold and express opinions that are repugnant, or malicious, or offensive."

Eventually, Dasbach predicted, Americans will realize that we don't need new hate crime legislation to fight crime.

"We all want to live in an America where *no one* has to fear crimes of violence," he said. "Any thug who attacks or kills another American or vandalizes their property because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation should be apprehended and punished. Violence against innocent people should *never* be tolerated. But Americans need effective law enforcement, not cheap hate-crime symbolism.

"That's why politicians should stop punishing people for impure *thoughts* — and admit that hate crime legislation is actually a hate crime against the First Amendment," he said.

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