



# Department of Justice

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REMARKS OF  
ATTORNEY GENERAL JOHN N. MITCHELL

At the Opening of the  
New Court System, Washington, D. C.

Departmental Auditorium  
February 1, 1971

This is the moment I have looked forward to for many months and I am proud and grateful to be in this company this morning. In my opinion the event we celebrate today will be appreciated for generations to come by the Bench -- by the Bar -- and by the citizens of the District of Columbia.

I hope that the judges and lawyers who are here this morning share my estimate that the magnitude of these reforms of the judicial system is unparalleled in the history of the District of Columbia.

As President Nixon's Attorney General, I am particularly happy to be here in view of his deep concern with the subject matter. As you will recall, some of his most solemn promises dealt with the administration of justice and the prevention of crime -- and he pledged that the place where he would begin would be our nation's capital. This occasion marks the redemption of that pledge.

It is also a happy fact that we convene at a time when the crime rate in the national capital has just been reduced for the first time in decades. On all counts our great federal city now sets an example for justice and law enforcement everywhere in the land. And, I firmly predict that just as the wave of crime is being turned back here, it will be turned back in the nation.

Yes, this is an auspicious moment, but it is only the beginning.

The District program, of course, is part of a larger nationwide reform program inaugurated by President Nixon two years ago. This program, dealing with many aspects of life in America, addressed itself to federal-state relationships, to the need for federal financial aid in supporting state and local programs, to the problems of urban congestion and pollution, of discrimination, of welfare, and of family purchasing power as it is affected by inflation.

In general, this reform movement has been dedicated to elevating the dignity of the individual. It has sought to re-establish a climate in which the individual, far from being a dependent of the state, can find utmost latitude in reaching his full potentialities, on his own.

From the outset, reforming the machinery of justice in the District of Columbia has been a vital element in this nationwide program. The court system in the nation's capital was totally inadequate to deal with the cases thrust upon it. From 1958 to 1969 the District's serious felonies increased almost 600 percent. But the number of felony prosecutions in the District Court remained relatively constant. A backlog of more than 6,300 cases developed in the Juvenile Court alone. Trial delays averaged between nine months and a year -- an incredible period of time for an accused felon to be roaming the streets on bail, or for an innocent man to go unvindicated.

From the standpoint of both the accused and the community, here was a terrible example of the saying, "Justice delayed is justice denied."

As a stop-gap remedy -- and a very undesirable one -- many serious felonies were downgraded to misdemeanor status for trial in the Court of General Sessions. When an alleged felon is turned loose for nine months before his trial, or is tried on a misdemeanor charge, the criminal justice system has failed its objective. Deterrence in the criminal law is dependent on speed, fairness, and certainty; disdain for law and justice results from delay, unfairness, and uncertainty.

Recognizing these shortcomings, President Nixon proposed a comprehensive reform for the District of Columbia eleven days after he took office. It called for new legislation to revamp the courts and instructed various departments and agencies to determine what actions could be taken to curb crime and improve both justice and the conditions of life in the city of Washington. His comprehensive program included:

- The addition of more judges and a thorough restructuring of the D. C. court system and its procedures.
- Expansion of the United States Attorneys office.
- Planning for, and construction of, new courthouse facilities.
- Reform of the bail system, and new responsibilities for the bail agency.
- Reform of penal and correctional institutions.

- Establishment of a full-fledged public defender service to represent indigent defendants.
- Expansion and reorganization of the police department.
- Increased involvement by the citizens of the District of Columbia, particularly through a criminal justice coordinating board, in order to participate in planning and policy making.
- Intensified narcotics enforcement, particularly by the United States Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.
- A comprehensive program in the area of juvenile crime.
- And finally, delegation to the Office of Criminal Justice, within the Department of Justice, of responsibility for special attention to the administration of justice in the District of Columbia.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to note that the new court system being opened today is not the only reform called for by President Nixon that has been put into effect. The record of accomplishment in each of these areas is well known to all of you here. Let me mention just two significant indications of the impact already achieved.

First, the backlog of court cases is being reduced, and the tremendous backlog of juvenile cases has been virtually eliminated in what has become today the Superior Court. However, as we focus on our new local court system and its commitment to keep its judicial house up-to-date, we must not lose sight of the continuing responsibility of the United States District Court. This court, for one-and-a-half years after this date, will continue to be responsible for disposing of all of the most serious felonies in

the District of Columbia. Speedy and fair trials will become a reality only if the U. S. District Court will commit enough of its resources to dispose of these serious criminal cases, thus complementing the heavy demands borne by the local courts as they assume today a new caseload.

As a second result, we have all heard the announced statistics on reported crime for 1970 in the District of Columbia. In 10 months of 1970, crime decreased. In the third quarter, July-September 1970, crime decreased 19 percent as compared to the same quarter in 1969. In the quarter, October-December 1970, crime decreased 22.5 percent as compared to the same quarter in 1969. In December it was 23.8 percent less than in December 1969 and 8 percent less than in November 1970.

Finally, and most significantly, the annual statistics for 1970 show that reported crime in the District of Columbia decreased 5.2 percent compared to 1969, the first annual decrease in reported crime in 14 years, or since 1956.

These figures paint more than a parochial picture. They tell of presidential leadership in the nationwide war on crime and in reform of courts, law enforcement and corrections. They are supported by actions across the nation in federal prison reform and federal funding for the upgrading of state and local law enforcement agencies. They tell us that federal actions, and the federal city itself, are showing the way in solving America's crime and delinquency problem.

Nor is today's celebration the end of reform for the District of Columbia. It is in truth an inauguration. With regard to the courts, as most of you know, more judges and new powers for the courts are scheduled in the future. As further changes are required by the dynamic conditions within the nation's capital, we intend to make them. Reform is not a static event; it is a living, continuing process.

Most of all, statutory and administrative changes mean little unless they are supported and carried out by dedicated individuals. We have dedicated individuals, not only in the judiciary, but also throughout the system of justice in the District of Columbia, in every branch of government, and in the community. We have a distinguished and able Bar. We have an alert and concerned citizenry.

Together, we can and will meet President Nixon's challenge to make the nation's capital what he has called "A proud, glorious city, cherished by every American as part of his heritage and cherished by those who live here as a place of beauty, neighborliness and decency."