

SPEECH BY THE
HONORABLE JANET RENO,
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES,
BEFORE THE AFL-CIO

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1993

3:00 P.M.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Thank you so very much for this warm welcome. It's a little over 20 years ago that as a candidate I went to my first labor screening. My knees shook, I was scared, but after I walked out, I felt good. And since then over the years, my contact with the labor movement in Dade County has been very important to me.

I have watched in so many situations where labor has been there caring and concerned in its community. A person who was at that first screening is now very active with the United Way and is a liaison with labor.

I served on the Urban Service Corps with labor representatives who cared and who were dedicated to their community, and then in Hurricane Andrew I watched the labor movement in Dade County respond valiantly and with caring concern. The commitment of labor to the community was incredible.

I'm wondering what it would be like to come to Washington, to travel across the nation, what I would see there. Would I see the same thing? And then on my birthday this year I went to the Program for Community Services in Washington, and I saw so many examples again of labor caring and concerned about its community wherever labor was in action.

It's based on a deep and abiding belief in people, a trust in people, a commitment to people, and I think it is the very bedrock of our democracy.

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These are difficult times. People wonder about the economy. They wonder about the health of their families, the strength of their families. We see crime and violence. We see drugs. But I think that these problems are symptoms of a deeper problem in society.

For too long government has not trusted the people. We now have a President who does, a President who is willing to say let us invest in people, let us make a difference, let us hold people responsible, but let us give them the tools they need to become self-sufficient, to raise their children, to breathe free of concerns about health care, to make a difference.

We have a President who is willing to invest in prevention and intervention rather than in crisis. This is a nation for too long that would rather spend vast dollars on medical care rather than providing preventive programs up front. It's a nation that would rather spend time watching the tragedy of crime than developing prevention programs up front.

I think the time has come to invest in people, invest in people through communities.

If you look at the history of the nation, you see over these last several years the federal government pushing the responsibility to the state without pushing the dollars, the state turning around and giving the responsibility to the community without the community receiving the dollars. And then you watch in city after city throughout this land the communities

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pulling together with labor and the private sector and government and volunteers and the United Way, and people coming together to identify the needs and resources of their community and to develop programs that can make a difference. Labor plays a part in almost every successful community program that I have seen.

You have one extraordinary talent that it is important that you share with others, with the communities throughout this nation. You know how to organize. You know how to get people together. You know how to come into a neighborhood and get people to start talking and see their problems of mutual concern and build on mutual trust and develop a united front that can address the critical problems that we have today.

You know how to bring people from diverse groups together, representing all of the community, representing all of an area, and pull them together so that they are an organized, united front to deal with the critical problems that we face.

Each time I turn around I see a community reacting. I think the future of America in these next decades will not be the federal government top down telling communities what to do, but communities developing plans with labor being a key player in the development of those plans, labor being a force that understands the needs, the resources of the community and that can make a difference.

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Those community plans need to be reviewed by the federal government to determine how the federal government can help communities, where they can make a difference.

I sat around a table at home when the government would come to town, and there would be three or four different federal agencies sitting there. They would say, "We know best," or "You can have this money, but we've got all these strings attached. You can't have it because you don't meet all these conditions." Here was this federal official who didn't know what it was like to work in the trenches of Miami, didn't know what our problems were, and there they were telling us what to do.

We want to form a partnership with communities throughout this nation, a partnership between government and the private sector, a partnership between government and labor, between people who care and want to make a difference in their communities.

(Applause)

Much will depend on volunteers. As I learned in Miami on different occasions, there would be representatives of labor volunteering in afternoon programs for children after school, in tutoring programs, in block programs. Each of us can make a difference.

But where do we start, because this is a complex problem? I think the first place we start is recognizing that you can't make one effort and hope that you will succeed. A school teacher by

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herself focusing on a first grader is not going to make any difference unless she gets that first grader with some foundation for learning and unless that first grader has some opportunity after he leaves that first grade. There's got to be a continuum developed where this partnership intervenes in effective ways that can make a difference and can give people self-sufficiency, help restore families, help restore neighborhoods, so that it is the family and the neighborhood that is making a difference. They can do a lot better than other people if they've got half a fighting chance for doing it.

(Applause)

The first step is to do what we can to build strong families and parents in America, and we've got to make sure that our children are old enough, wise enough, and financially able enough and know what they're doing before they have children. It's the single most difficult job I know to do. It takes love, hard work, intelligence, and luck, and we've got to give the children of our future strong and healthy parents.

(Applause)

We've got to make sure they've got parenting skills. Too many of our would-be parents who want to be good parents have been born into worlds where they didn't learn how to raise children. Let's make a difference. Let's give our parents time to be good parents. The labor unions of America helped spearhead

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the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act, and you deserve credit for your magnificent effort in that regard.

(Applause)

But I look at people now struggling to get children off to school after breakfast, get to work, struggle home through rush hour traffic, get dinner on the table, the children fed, the homework done, Saturdays they run errands, Sundays they go to church. They don't have quality time with their children. We've got to make sure that children and family are first in the workplace and throughout America, and I look forward to working with you in that effort.

(Applause)

We look at what the lack of health care has done to the American child. If a mother receives no prenatal care, that child is three times more likely to be born at low birth weight, and that child born with low birth weight has a far greater chance of failure at school, of oppressive personality problems, of behavioral problems that are going to mark his or her life for the rest of time.

We see it in terms of family members who could be made well by some mental health service that they can't get because they can't afford it. We see that single parent who has worked hard who cares, whose company is failing, she loses her health benefits but she still makes too much money to be eligible for Medicaid and she cannot take care of her child with a chronic

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serious illness. So, somebody tells her to quit work so she can go on Medicaid. Ladies and gentlemen, that's just plain wrong.

(Applause)

We used to think drug treatment didn't work, but I bet every single person in this room has had a family member, a friend, a neighbor or a son or daughter of a friend or neighbor who's been touched by drug problems who couldn't get treatment because they couldn't afford the drug treatment; and it's pennywise and pound foolish when we see drug treatment working in too many areas in this community and in this nation.

We've got to make sure that we understand that it's far less expensive and far better for the human being to keep them in their home with long-term personal service care than to put them in a nursing home when they get old. They can still be constructive people in our communities.

(Applause)

In short, nobody disputes that we need health care reform. And what the President and Mrs. Clinton have done in leading this effort is nothing short of remarkable, but we have got to join with them and fight with them every step of the way.

(Applause)

And even as we fight for health care, we have got to remember that when you trust people, when you believe in people, one of the corollaries of that is that you're willing to hold them responsible, because you think highly enough of them to know

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that they can be responsible. And we have got to take responsibility for our health in terms of what alcohol and drugs and violence and guns have done to this world. We can make a difference by starting with ourselves.

We have got to understand how important education and educare are for our children. People are getting used to, finally, an Attorney General standing up and talking about prenatal care and zero to three, but the child development experts --

(Applause)

I just think it would be wonderful for all these people that say I'm just a social worker for the labor unions of America to start standing up and saying, "She's right about zero to three, that's when the child learns the concept of reward."

(Applause)

You care enough about family. You've walked that child at one o'clock in the morning. You know what it's like to have that child held and talked to. And then you go to a neonatal unit where a crack baby lies, not held or talked to except when changed and fed, and you know the difference. You know that that's why the child is learning the concept of reward and punishment and developing a conscience.

What good are all the prisons in the world going to do 18 years from now if that child doesn't learn what punishment means? What good are all the schools going to do if that child doesn't

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learn in that first year of life 50 percent of all learned human response, which is what a baby usually will if given half a chance.

We have got to provide for education from birth on when the family can't do it. But we have got to commit ourselves again to protecting, defending, enhancing, improving and making magnificent once again our public schools. I am a product of our public schools.

(Applause)

One of the rewarding experiences of these last seven months, this incredible adventure I've been on, is to hear from teachers that I had during my public school days -- my home room teacher, my fourth grade teacher, people who guided me, helped me grow, taught me. We have got to do everything we can. There will be before Congress in the next few days or weeks, the Goals 2000 Act, the Education Act for the administration. We have got to get that passed to develop excellence, to get aid to our schools that will help improve through community planning and community partnership our public schools.

We have got to make a commitment to the Safe Schools Act. We have got to get parents involved. We have got to get throughout America people of America involved.

Unions throughout this country are volunteering in public schools. Union members are becoming mentors. They're becoming

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tutors. They're becoming teachers' assistants in free time. And you say, "But what about me? I don't know."

One of my favorite stories is of an 84-year-old man who stood up one day at a meeting and said, "I'm 84 years old and do you know what I do three mornings a week three hours each morning?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "I volunteer as a teacher's aide." And the young woman stood up next to him and she said, "I'm the first grade teacher for whom he volunteers and the gifted kids can't wait for their time with him because he has such a marvelous power to expand their horizons. With me with 30 kids in the class, I don't begin to have time, and the kids with learning disabilities can't wait for him because he has incredible patience, and me with 30 kids in the class, I don't have the time."

Each one of us, no matter who we are, can make a difference. Just think what would happen if every single one of us adopted to make sure we did everything we possibly could for a child at risk in America, or if we adopted a classroom or if we adopted a school. The unions are helping to lead the way to show what volunteers can do.

And let us not forget the afternoons and evenings. Most of us had somebody there afternoons or evenings, somebody guiding us, telling us when we'd watch too much television, what we were doing wrong, to stop fighting, to resolve our disputes without fights.

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There are too many children adrift on the streets of America in these hours, too many children that need guidance and supervision.

And I turn around and I see police on the playing fields helping children in sports activities. But then I drive by a school at five o'clock in the afternoon. The school is closed, the lights are off. It's unused.

Then I go to a city commission meeting and somebody is there asking for a recreational program for our students and to build a sports facility for our students. Let us use the resources we have in programs after school and in the evening that can keep our children occupied and develop relevant --

(Applause)

My mother wouldn't let us have television because she said it contributed to mind rot, but it can be a marvelous tool. And I think we should send a message to the advertisers on television that television can be a wonderful tool, that it can be a wonderful tool for learning that opens the horizons for all of us, young and old alike, and that we're sick and fed up with violence in times when children are watching television.

(Applause)

This is a complex web. Education without health care may not help. Education without afternoon programs may not help. None of it will work unless our children can grow in safety in a safe and constructive world.

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We have got to get that crime bill passed and get community police to the streets in forms and fashions that can support local police and make a difference. We are trying to design programs with local police that can complement them and give them the support they need to do the job. I ask for your help in this effort.

(Applause)

On that February day a while back, one of the first groups that I met with were police unions. The first question they asked me, "Okay, Janet, if you put more police on the streets, what are you going to do when we arrest people? You're not asking for more prosecutors, for more courts, for more jails, what are you going to do about that?" Well, I've got ideas about that. Good community policing programs are doing as much to prevent crime as they are to identifying the serious career criminal and getting him put away and kept away. I need your help in helping make sense to the politicians of America that we've got to have enough prison cells to put the mean-bads away and keep them away, but for the nonviolent offender who can be returning to the community sooner rather than later, we need alternative programs that can help them get back with half a chance of succeeding without doing it again.

It makes no sense to send somebody off to prison for a nonviolent crime when they have a drug problem, not treat the drug problem, and pick them up and dump them back into the

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community without doing anything about it. Guess what they're going to do the day they get back.

(Applause)

We can do so much in terms of teaching our children how to resolve their conflicts peacefully. We've taught them an awful lot about drug education and prevention and treatment through the DARE program and through other programs. We can do the same thing with violence. And we've got to make sure that throughout the public schools of America we can make a difference in that regard.

Teachers unions that I have watched in action have been instrumental in helping these programs get off the ground in various public schools. But it's going to be back to neighborhoods, back to people in the neighborhoods taking control. And again, representatives of labor throughout this country help make a difference, that postman who cares and reports something different and odd or reports a crime, that construction worker who watches from the house that he's building next door and sees something happen.

Every single person who cares can make a difference by saying, "I'm not going to abdicate any longer. I'm going to be involved in my neighborhood and in my community." And the labor movement throughout America is setting a tradition for that.

But none of this is going to do any good unless we give our youth of America work opportunities. You have helped lead the

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way in developing school-to-work opportunities. I used to sit and watch summer job programs that kids had. They had a summer job that didn't mesh with their aptitude and interest. It didn't mesh with their school experience or their educational experience. Wouldn't it be wonderful with labor's good advice if we could develop programs that link the school educational program with summer jobs so that we knew that that kid, if he followed that route, could graduate with the skills that would enable him to earn a living wage?

You know what it takes. You know the skills that are necessary to develop high-wage jobs. You can be an incredibly important partner in this effort, as you have been in getting the National Service Act passed, an act that will give our young people opportunities similar to what we have seen young people do before. We have got to believe in them.

I have traveled across this nation for these last seven months. I have talked to young people who have succeeded, young people who have been the very best in their community. But I have talked to young people who have been in detention facilities. I have talked to ex-gang members. These young people want so to belong. They want to make a difference. They want to be somebody. They don't want to be hassled and put down. They want to be treated with respect.

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Most kids aren't mean-bad. They just get that way. And it's going to be easier if we pull them into constructive pursuits than if we let them go into gangs and into violence.

I just saw something two hours ago that I will never forget for as long as I live. I saw a 15-year-old girl with terrible developmental disabilities, terrible disabilities. But in the fifth grade, she made friends with people in her class. When she was ready to go to high school, her mother was told that she would have to go to a special school. These friends, 13 of them in Bakersfield, California, banded together. They took the Constitution to the teacher and said why she deserved to be with them. They had press conferences. They picketed the school board. They wrote rap songs. They lobbied.

And today, they were honored. They were honored by the disabilities community for caring and for making a difference and for making sure that that 15-year-old went to high school with them. And she enrolled with them this past month, and you have never seen anything more wonderful.

(Applause)

But then there is the future, and we're going to have to work together in developing retraining programs that are as automatic as education has been, as automatic as K through 12 has been, so that when an industry develops a new line of effort or when it becomes obsolete, people are not concerned because they

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know there's going to be an orderly progression through training and retraining. Working together, we can make these differences.

It's not an easy task. It's not a short-term task. It's got to be weaved together. It won't happen overnight, and it won't happen with politicians who think they can solve problems by promising stiff sentences without building the jails and just using 30-second sound bites that play on people's emotions.

(Applause)

It's going to be solved by painstaking, caring, loving effort from all of us. Some of you have heard this story, but the way I look at it is the way I look at what my mother did when she told us when we lived in a little wooden house that we had grown out of because there were too many children and daddy didn't have enough money to hire a contractor.

She said, "I'm going to build the house." And we said, "What do you know about building a house?" And she said, "I'm going to learn." And she talked to brick masons and electricians and plumbers. And she learned how.

She dug the foundation with her own hands with a pick and shovel beginning in 1947, shovel by shovel. She laid the block with her own hands, and it's still waterproof today even through Andrew.

She went to get an electrical permit, and the electrical inspector wouldn't give her a permit because she was a woman, and

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she had to come home and tell daddy what to say the next day and go down and stand behind him to get the electrical permit.

(Applause)

Daddy would help her with the heavy beams at night, some beautiful beams, cypress ceiling and a hip roof and a shingle roof. And she sat up during Hurricane Andrew and she put her hands in her lap, folded her hands. We had the second highest winds of all of Dade County, and she didn't seem bothered at all. It's because she knew how she had built it -- carefully, bit by bit, step by step. It was missing one shingle and some screens. We can build America together.

(Applause)