

1 KEYNOTE SPEECH BY THE
2 HONORABLE JANET RENO,
3 ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
4 TO THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR
5 AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES,
6 PASTORS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS
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Monday, October 25, 1993
Thurman Chapel
Benjamin E. Mays Hall
Howard University School of
Divinity
1400 Shepherd Street, N.E.
Washington, D.C.

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P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:15 a.m.)

GENERAL RENO: That was one of the finest introductions that I have had since I became Attorney General, and you give me a lot to live up to and I'm going to try.

I think they were trying to accommodate me by jumping me ahead, but what I would love to do before I leave is Ms. Levy read her poem. Would you do that for us now, please?

(Applause, introduction of and poem recitation by Nekima Levy.)

GENERAL RENO: Ms. Levy, that was just magnificent.

For too long now, too many people have felt helpless against violence, against drugs, against children who are adrift in this world. But throughout America in these last several months I have seen a new spirit, a new dedication, a new sense and community of "We can do it, we can make a difference for our children, and we are going to be the ones who do it."

The police can't do the job by themselves, school teachers by themselves, doctors by themselves. The people have to be involved to make the difference and to make our children's future secure.

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1 I started looking at the problem a long time
2 ago, 15 years ago, when I became State Attorney and
3 started focusing on juvenile delinquency to try to prevent
4 crime. It didn't take me long to realize that we would
5 never have enough dollars to turn all the 16 and 17-year-
6 olds that I saw coming into the system after one or two
7 delinquencies unless we started much earlier, and I saw a
8 direct correlation between dropouts and those who became
9 delinquent.

10 So we started focusing on what could be done to
11 prevent dropouts from the school system. It quickly
12 taught me that you can't wait until a child is 11, 12, and
13 13 to start preventing dropouts, because by that time
14 they've already diminished their self-esteem. They think
15 they're dumb. They start acting out to attract attention
16 in other ways.

17 So we started focusing on four and five-year-
18 olds in early neighborhood intervention programs. But
19 then the crack epidemic hit Miami in 1985 and the doctors
20 took me by the hand through the neonatal unit at our
21 hospital as we tried to figure out what to do about crack-
22 involved mothers and their babies newborn.

23 I've learned an awful lot about child
24 development in this time, and it became clear to me that
25 unless we start investing in those children, in their

1 mothers, in terms of getting treatment, getting that
2 mother off drugs before she delivers that baby, before she
3 marks that baby for life, we'll never be able to build
4 enough prisons 18 years from now for that baby and all the
5 others similarly situated.

6 And if people don't care about children from
7 just that point of view, we'll never have a work force 15
8 and 20 years from now with the skills necessary to fill
9 the jobs to maintain America as a first-rate nation. And
10 that senior citizen who says that they've done everything
11 to send their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren
12 to school and that's not their problem any more, their
13 pension isn't going to be worth the paper it's written on
14 unless we have a strong work force and strong health care
15 institutions.

16 We are all in this together and America is
17 coming to understand it.

18 But then there was another trend. I watched
19 from my vantage point in Miami when the Federal government
20 came to town and said: This is the way you should do
21 things and you can have this grant, but it's got this
22 condition; and if you don't meet this condition you can't
23 have it, even if the condition is irrelevant to your
24 community.

25 I saw the Federal government come down and say:

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1 Here, we'll give you welfare; oh, you want to go get a job
2 making minimum wage? Sorry, you'll lose other benefits
3 and you'll be worse off than if you hadn't gone to work in
4 the first place.

5 I saw the Federal government come to town and
6 tell a lady who had a daughter with a chronic serious
7 illness, who the lady had lost her health care benefits
8 but she still made too much money to be eligible for
9 Medicaid, and I had a Federal government tell that lady:
10 But why don't you quit your job, so you can get Medicaid
11 treatment for your child?

12 The time has come when the Federal government
13 has got to understand that it must reach out to
14 communities and become a partner, not the dominant force,
15 in how we solve America's problems. And there is a burden
16 that has been placed on communities. People have got to
17 stop fighting with each other and come together to
18 identify community needs and resources, do it on a small
19 scale, work together and expand street by street, block by
20 block, until we see our whole community covered by a
21 structure and an environment where children can grow as
22 strong, constructive human beings.

23 As we come together as a community, it's going
24 to be the people who live in that neighborhood that are
25 critical to the success of the problem. We cannot go into

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1 neighborhoods and tell people how to do it. We've got to
2 ask the people's view of what needs to be done. We have
3 got to trust the people and understand that in the
4 American people there is a tremendous untapped strength of
5 great common sense, of considerable compassion.

6 But then we're going to have to form
7 partnerships in the community. Police, school teachers,
8 doctors, social workers, community-based organizations,
9 churches are all going to have to come together around the
10 people and be support for the people as we rebuild our
11 communities, our families, and our future for our
12 children.

13 The third thing I used to see was the tendency
14 to think that one intervention could make the difference
15 in the life of a child. I'd see a first grade teacher who
16 was one of my favorites and it seemed to me that every
17 child in her class was just headed for a wonderful future,
18 and then I'd check with her two or three years later after
19 I'd been to the class and she'd be just so sad because one
20 of the kids was getting in trouble because there was no
21 program for him afternoons and in the evenings and all her
22 good work was for nought.

23 Or she would tell me that too often her job was
24 made almost impossible because she got the child without
25 the child having been raised in a loving environment where

1 he could flourish and come into the first grade with a
2 chance of really learning.

3 So all these threads have to come together and
4 we have got to work together as a community, as all levels
5 of government, in a partnership with community and all the
6 elements of the community to establish a national agenda
7 for children.

8 The first step in this comprehensive approach is
9 to make sure that our parents are old enough, wise enough,
10 and financially able enough to take care of their
11 children. Children desperately want it.

12 About a year before I left Miami I spoke to a
13 high school and a middle school about half a mile apart,
14 absolutely coincidental, about three or four days apart.
15 They were in the inner city and the kids asked me all
16 sorts of questions about a prosecutor and about the
17 criminal justice system and was it fair. But then,
18 because I collected child support in Miami, they started
19 asking me questions about child support because they'd
20 heard the rap song.

21 They said: What happens if he doesn't pay?
22 What happens if she doesn't take care of the child? And I
23 answered those questions. But then in both auditoriums
24 jammed full of students I said, but the important thing is
25 that that parent be old enough and wise enough to take

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1 care of their children.

2 And those two auditoriums coincidentally just
3 spontaneously erupted into loud cheering storming
4 applause, with kids stomping their feet, and I couldn't
5 get them quiet for about five minutes. Children
6 desperately want that family.

7 But we've got to give our family the support.
8 There are so many wonderful parents out there who are
9 struggling, but they can't get the landlord to fix the
10 plumbing, things are going from bad to worse, the child's
11 running a temperature, it takes two bus transfers to get
12 across town to the doctor where the child can get treated,
13 and they're at their end of the rope.

14 We have got to weave the community around that
15 person in resources and ways that are convenient. So many
16 schools around this country are becoming one-stop shopping
17 centers, if you will, that are community-friendly and
18 helpful in terms of family preservation and family
19 support. They provide the answers, give the questions,
20 and they can be staffed by volunteers who care.

21 The next thing we've got to do is realize that a
22 lot of our would-be parents don't know how to be parents
23 because they didn't have a structure in which it was
24 handed down from one generation to the next, and we've got
25 to make sure that as our parents become parents they know

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1 about nurturing and bonding and raising children and all
2 the essential elements of what it takes to be a good
3 parent.

4 But then we've got to, in the next step of our
5 comprehensive approach, make sure that our children have
6 comprehensive health care. Ladies and gentlemen, it makes
7 no sense to tell a 70-year-old person, you can have an
8 operation that extends your life expectancy by 3 years,
9 but tell the child of a working poor person, you can't get
10 preventative medical care that will shape your future as a
11 strong and healthy child with a great outlook for the
12 future.

13 What can volunteers, what can churches, what can
14 community-based organizations and business groups do? You
15 can do so much in terms of making sure that as we reweave
16 the fabric of society around a community that there are
17 health care services there. And we have all got to
18 campaign hard to make sure that health care reform gets
19 passed in a form that truly provides preventative medical
20 care for our children.

21 We've got to understand something that the child
22 development experts have told me again and again. And I
23 even challenged all these newspaper reporters that were
24 more worried about whether my mother really did wrestle
25 alligators than what the subject of my comments were, and

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1 I said: Instead of worrying about the alligators, why
2 don't you worry about whether my comments that zero to
3 three is the most formative time in a person's life is
4 accurate? Well, they haven't come back to me saying it's
5 inaccurate.

6 That's the time the child learns the concept of
7 reward and punishment and develops a conscience. What
8 good are all the prisons 18 years from now going to do if
9 that child doesn't learn to have a conscience?

10 50 percent of all learned human response is
11 learned in the first year of life. What good is a great
12 education going to be 12 years down the line if you don't
13 have the foundation that will give you the opportunity for
14 that education?

15 As we come into communities and form a whole
16 picture, not only do we have to make sure that there's a
17 health care piece, but we've got to make sure that there
18 is strong, constructive educare from the time of birth to
19 Head Start, so that we can form a comprehensive
20 environment around that child that will enable them to
21 grow.

22 We have got to make sure that our teachers' time
23 is free to teach. We have asked teachers to be so much to
24 so many kids on the verge of getting into trouble. We've
25 asked them to fill out papers.

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1 With both parents working or many single parents
2 working, many, many schools tell me that one of the most
3 difficult issues they face is getting parents to school or
4 getting people to school willing to help teachers. But
5 again, churches and community-based organizations can form
6 together to make sure that there is time for school by
7 parents, by people who care.

8 To give the business community an example, as
9 State Attorney in Dade County I developed a new policy
10 that permitted parents to take additional leave time
11 beyond their annual leave, beyond their sick leave, to
12 participate in their children's school programs. And for
13 those employees who did not have children, I said: You
14 can go volunteer in the schools if you'd like during the
15 same time.

16 We can all make a difference, and that employer
17 has got to understand that that investment made in that
18 child now can only redound to the benefit of the economy
19 10 and 15 years from now.

20 We have got to understand that school can be one
21 of the most effective places for a child to thrive, and we
22 have got to get our children who are truant back into
23 school. How many of you have walked down the street,
24 11:00 o'clock on a school day morning, and seen a little 9
25 or 10-year-old walking along and didn't do anything about

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1 it? That little 9 or 10-year-old walking along is walking
2 straight into delinquency, straight into more trouble,
3 unless we intervene right now.

4 And too often the police will pick him up, take
5 him to the nearest school, the principal will call the
6 parent, the parent won't respond, and the principal takes
7 the child and puts him on the bus and sends him home.

8 If we had intervened at that point, we might
9 have found the woman just on the verge of sliding into
10 addiction, where we could have pulled her back a lot
11 easier than five years from now. We might have found a
12 woman who was just absolutely at her wit's end, desperate
13 and afraid, who needed support and counseling. If we
14 intervene early, we can make a difference.

15 But we've got to understand that the schools can
16 also teach something else. Every good program that I've
17 seen around the country in terms of providing conflict
18 resolution, to teach kids how to resolve conflict
19 peacefully, without knives, without fists, and without
20 guns is working. And I urge you all to work with schools,
21 work with the churches, to design programs in Sunday
22 schools and schools and everywhere that children come
23 together, teaching children: Look, violence is not the
24 way. Those programs can work. They can be successful.

25 But what happens if we do everything perfectly

1 in the schools and free our teachers' time to teach and
2 provide family support systems within the schools? What
3 about afternoons and in the evenings, those children
4 wandering through the community unsupervised or sitting at
5 home watching TV?

6 I need for you to join me in letting the
7 advertisers of America know that we don't want violence
8 advertised at a time that kids are watching television.
9 But more than that, it is important that we let the TV
10 industry know that that is a wonderful medium of
11 education. It is an incredible tool, and we need to get
12 TV programmed, by letting advertisers and the industry
13 know what we want, so that it is used not just not as a
14 negative, but as a positive force for educating our
15 children.

16 And the programming is going to have to show
17 some relevant programs that youngsters who are at risk can
18 come to know and identify with and identify heroes that
19 make them seem relevant to the world that child is living
20 in where he is at risk. We can do so much if we let the
21 industry know that we want to create an environment in
22 which our children can thrive, not in which they wonder
23 where they're going to, the next bullet is coming from.

24 Every time I turn around, I see somebody
25 spending time afternoons or in the evenings with children.

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1 It's not just sports. I think that's one of the things
2 that we think about, that all afternoon programs are
3 recreational programs. There are a lot of kids that don't
4 have aptitude in that direction. There are other kids
5 that are marvelous computer whizzes.

6 Has it ever bothered you to see public schools
7 closed at 4:00 or 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon, where the
8 kids can't get to the computer banks and can't make a
9 difference? We could develop volunteer systems where
10 those schools were open and the kid could be supervised
11 and the kid could have access to relevant and wonderful
12 tools that give them such extraordinary opportunities.

13 In the evenings we can do so much to make sure
14 that our children have somebody there or, if there is
15 nobody there, that there is some community center where
16 they can go to to get off on the right foot.

17 I have made it a point over these eight months
18 that I have been Attorney General when I go to a new
19 community to try talk with youngsters, to go to a
20 schoolroom and answer questions, to go to a juvenile
21 detention facility and meet with young people who have
22 been charged or who have been adjudicated delinquent, to
23 talk with ex-gang members in Los Angeles.

24 I always ask them: What could have been done to
25 have prevented you from getting into this trouble? Two

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1 things come out again and again: If there had just been
2 some programs afternoons and in the evenings that I could
3 feel safe and comfortable in, where I could do something
4 relevant, where I could have some involvement, it would
5 make such a difference.

6 And the second thing: If I had had somebody to
7 talk to, somebody who didn't put me down, somebody who
8 didn't hassle me, somebody who understood what I was
9 trying to deal with, who understood what it was like to be
10 growing up today, if I could just have somebody I could
11 talk to.

12 Surely we can all work together in America in
13 our churches, in our communities, in our businesses, to
14 make sure that the youth of America have something to do
15 in the afternoon and in the evening and, most of all, they
16 have somebody to talk to.

17 We've got to teach teachers and police officers
18 and people who come in contact with children how to talk
19 to children. Children have the most wonderful ideas.
20 They are so creative. They want so to be good.

21 Yeah, there are a couple of bad ones, but those
22 bad ones are few, few, few and far between. Most kids
23 want to grow up to be somebody and to be great and to have
24 a good family, and they don't want to be put down and they
25 don't want to be hassled. And if they do wrong they're

1 willing to be punished, but they want that punishment to
2 be fair and they want to be treated with respect while
3 they're being punished.

4 If we can do nothing else but teach those people
5 in authority over our children to talk to children with
6 respect and to treat them fairly and firmly, we'll have
7 gone a long, long way.

8 But then we've got to understand, too, that so
9 many of our children are coming out into the world without
10 skills that can enable them to earn a living wage. I
11 challenge the business community and I'm challenging it
12 throughout America to join in a true partnership with the
13 school system and start, say, in the seventh grade by
14 determining a child's aptitude and interest and then
15 matching summer job programs with after-school programs
16 and school educational programs, so that that child knows
17 that if he follows the track of summer, afternoon work
18 opportunity perhaps, and the school educational program,
19 he will graduate with a skill that he's good at, that he's
20 interested in, that can earn him a living wage.

21 That can go a long way towards addressing that
22 child's hopes for the future.

23 We've got to give the child something to be
24 involved in as he grows into adolescence so that he can
25 serve his community and have a sense of pride in his

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1 community: That's my community and you're not going to
2 mess with it, because I care and I have become part of it
3 and I am one of the building blocks of the community.

4 But no matter what we do, we're going to see
5 kids get in trouble, and that's where it becomes so
6 important, as we come together again. I have challenged
7 the law firms of Washington to adopt a block. Stop just
8 focusing on courtrooms; adopt a block.

9 And I point out when I am in this room of high-
10 powered lawyers that I bet every single one of them knew a
11 13-year-old who got in trouble, and they probably got his
12 father and a friend of the judge's and somebody who knew
13 the police officer and they all went down and said: Joey
14 is a good kid and you've got to give him another chance,
15 and Joey had another chance.

16 There are too many 13-year-olds who don't have
17 somebody to go down and fight for them, somebody to design
18 alternative programs for them, somebody to stand up for
19 them, somebody to tell the judge, please give him another
20 chance and let me help him get off to a fresh start.

21 (Applause.)

22 We have got to join together to make sure all
23 13-year-olds who deserve that have that. And there can be
24 some considerable links if every high-powered law firm in
25 Washington adopted a block or two or three blocks and

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1 became your advocates.

2 Those lawyers tell me: Well, how do I find a
3 block? I said: Find a minister that knows his community,
4 knows his neighborhood, link with him; go out and get your
5 doctor friend to volunteer as well, bringing them in
6 together. Well, I don't -- oh, just go try.

7 (Laughter and applause.)

8 I am here to tell you that people want to try,
9 they want to care. So we've got to open up our arms to
10 everybody working together and coming together and using
11 the resources that matter in that block as we work on it.

12 Somebody told me that they had moved a couple of
13 years ago into a block in the District and that block was
14 just kind of a magical block. The lady who headed up that
15 block effort still had her certificate on her living room
16 wall that had been given to her by Mrs. Johnson during the
17 Johnson Administration as the garden captain for that
18 block, and she had taken the garden foundation and
19 organized it even better.

20 That's an example of a community working
21 together. That community will need help. Now, there may
22 be that pothole out there that's caused accident time
23 after time and you can't get city hall to do something
24 about it. You can get that downtown lawyer to do
25 something about it. And if city hall tells the downtown

1 lawyer they don't have enough money, the downtown lawyer
2 can start looking at figuring out how to make things right
3 in the District to get the potholes fixed, and everybody
4 can become involved and have a stake in it.

5 But it's going to take people working together.

6 The other thing we need to understand, too --
7 and I think this is the most delicate issue that we have
8 to face -- I think raising children is one of the most
9 difficult jobs I know. It takes love and a nurturing
10 environment. It takes guidance. It takes limits laid
11 down by a caring parent. It takes punishment for somebody
12 who violates those limits, for the child who violates
13 them, but it's got to be fair punishment, consistent with
14 the degree of the violation, and it's got to be carried
15 out if it's threatened.

16 But what every good parent and child knows is
17 that after the punishment's been done and over that
18 child's going to be loved again and provided guidance
19 again and provided a structure again. And there are too
20 many children that are punished in the juvenile justice
21 system and then turned back into the community with no
22 love or anything.

23 (Applause.)

24 At the same time, there are too many children
25 who look at the police officer and say: Hey, man, you can

1 arrest me, but nothing's going to happen to me; nothing
2 ever happens to anybody in the juvenile justice system.
3 We've got to make sure that there is firm, understood,
4 consistent, fair punishment that's reasonable, but we've
5 got to provide re-entry programs that give our kids a
6 chance to come back to the community.

7 If they have a drug problem, let's get it
8 addressed quick. If they don't have a job and they're 16
9 and 17, let's look at job training and placement. But
10 let's address the whole problem.

11 If they're going back to the apartment over the
12 open air drug market where they got into trouble in the
13 first place, let's join together and see if we can start
14 thinking of alternative housing sites that give youngsters
15 who want to get off on the right foot a chance to do so.

16 But most of all, we have got to send a loud and
17 clear message that we are not going to give up on this
18 generation, they have a future, they can be somebody, they
19 can make a difference if only we will all come together
20 and give them half a fighting chance.

21 God bless you for this effort.

22 (Applause.)

23 (End of remarks at 9:50 a.m.)

24

25