



ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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REMARKS OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

GENERAL RENO: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice Harding. President Valmer, thank you for inviting me. It is a very great honor to be here, and graduates, to each and every one of you, I congratulate you for what you have accomplished at this great university and what you have accomplished in helping others.

And to the families, congratulations. You have done such a wonderful job, for I have had an opportunity to meet some of you this evening, and then I've had an opportunity to hear the President describe your service and your excellence. I have been impressed with your realism, but I have been more touched by your idealism, and don't ever lose it.

You represent what this great university is all about, service. Service to others, so that you reach out beyond your own lives to help others. I am regularly asked what I think of the young people of America, and I regularly respond with great vehemence, I think they're absolutely wonderful.

They want so to contribute, they want so to make a difference, they want to be involved, they care, they're bright, they're funny, they're creative and innovative, and I think they're perfectly wonderful. If ever there was an example for America tonight, it is in this room tonight.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: From this great university, you will draw strength and wisdom, understanding and faith that will be with you all the days of your lives. The people who sit next to you, you will greet in 30 years and you will laugh and chuckle and tell wonderful stories about your life in Tallahassee. Lessons learned here will guide you in success and failure and joy and sorrow. Wisdom gained here will guide you through the world, which will change before your very eyes.

How do you navigate this world? What do you do? Don't let the vastness of the world overwhelm you. Take it one issue at a time, one problem at a time, but don't be daunted. Be yourself, and believe in yourself.

One of the most important lessons I ever learned was when I was 8 years old. We had four children in the family, and we had outgrown the little wooden house that we lived in. My father did not have enough money to hire somebody to build a bigger house. My mother announced she was going to build a house, and we said, what do you know about building a house, and she said, I'm going to learn, and she went to the brick mason, the electrician, and the plumber, and asked them how to build a house.

She came home and, over a 2-year period, built the house. She dug the foundation with her own hands, with a pick and shovel, she put in the wiring, she put in the plumbing. I have always liked plumbers better than electricians, because the electricians wouldn't give her a permit because she was a woman.

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: She had to send my father down and stand behind him and tell him what to say.

(Laughter.)

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: Every time I came down through the woods to that house, and saw that house standing there, it was a symbol to me that you can do anything

you really want to if you keep trying, overcome adversity, and keep trying, and do your best.

But that house taught me another, more important lesson, when Hurricane Andrew hit the area in 1992. At about 3:00 in the morning when the wind began to howl, my mother got up, sat down in her chair, folded her hands. She was old, and frail, and dying, but she was totally unafraid, for she knew how she had built that house. She had put in good materials, she had built it the right way, she had not cut corners, and when we came out the next morning, that house had lost only one shingle and some screens, and the rest of the world looked like a World War I battlefield.

Build your life the right way. You have started here. But don't forget to laugh at yourself along the way, and question yourself, and ask if what you're doing is really the right thing, and if you can't laugh at yourself, make sure you have a brother who calls you and makes sure that you know that you've gotten a little bit carried away with yourself, and then make sure you have a sister who calls you and tells you that you're being very foolish and come back to your senses. Make sure you have perspective.

Be prepared. I stand at this podium tonight because I was prepared, many years ago in about 1964, when I represented some poor landowners whose property was being taken by Florida Power and Light. I worked so hard the night before. I wasn't that good, but I was prepared, and I won the motion the next day. The young lawyer whom I was up against was a very fine young lawyer in Miami, very distinguished, and he subsequently offered me a job. He invited me here tonight. That's the young lawyer.

(Laughter.)

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: Stand for what is right. After I worked for the young lawyer in the legislature, I went home to run for office, for the legislature.

I campaigned on what I believed in, my opposition to capital punishment, on other issues, and one of my heroes, a man who had voted against segregation in our public schools and came home to face almost overwhelming defeat, said to me as he was running for mayor, Janet, just keep on doing and saying what you believe to be right, and you'll wake up the next morning feeling good about yourself, but if you pussy foot and equivocate and talk out of both sides of your mouth, you'll wake up the next morning feeling miserable.

Well, I woke up the next morning and didn't feel entirely good, because I had lost my election, but I remembered what John Orr taught me, and that has held me in good stead ever since. If you lose, if things go wrong, if you err, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and move ahead. You can overcome loss and adversity, and if you question that, I found that somebody had put a biography of Abraham Lincoln on my bedside table, and it helped an awful lot to know that Lincoln had lost his first election.

Finally, choose an occupation that you enjoy. I made a promise to myself when I left law school that I wouldn't do anything I didn't enjoy doing. There have been some days I could do without, but there is so much to do in this world that you should not waste the time in things you don't enjoy.

And so I wish for you all that you will go out and carry on the tradition of service that you have exhibited here at this great university. Remember that the banker can be the best, most customer-friendly, honest, finest banker, and perform great public service, but also be a tutor, and the plumber who gets up in the middle of the night for an emergency can also be the coach. We can serve in so many different ways.

And Chief Justice Harding is right. I wouldn't trade public service for anything in the world. I can't stand to charge people fees for defending their rights, and I can't stand to think about billable hours. I would much prefer to have the opportunity, the incredibly wonderful opportunity I have had to use the law to help other people.

All of us face challenges. To face these challenges, though, I think, and I challenge you and I challenge this great university to improve throughout this State and throughout the Nation two skills that every person should have, the skill as a peacemaker, and the skill as a problem-solver.

For us lawyers, we too often try to be advocates, and defenders, but we don't solve the problem. The prosecutor thinks she wins the case when she gets a conviction, not recognizing that she hasn't solved the problem of what caused the crime in the first place, and the public defender who gets the person off on a motion to dismiss oftentimes ignores the fact that he has a drug problem that is a worse prison than the prison he might otherwise have gone to.

We have got to solve the problems of the world, rather than just talk about principle, because problem-solving involves the application of principle, but an application that gets to the heart of the issue.

To become better peacemakers and problem-solvers, the first thing we've got to learn to do is to communicate, as the Chief Justice said, with small, old words. We've got to learn to talk to people, and look at them when we talk, and we have got to learn to listen.

I have seen too many instances now in meetings around this country where America is talking past each other, and looking over their shoulder to what's coming next, but not looking to the present and the here and now, and communicating by tone of voice and manner and respect with the other person.

We have got to make sure that we have full and complete sentences, particularly in the days of E-mail. It is a wonderful experience to sit in the conference room at the Attorney General's Office and hear someone present an argument in the clearest, most perfect way possible. We can persuade, and we can solve problems, if we speak clearly of the issues.

Conflict resolution should become part and parcel of our lives. If we can teach people to read, if we can send a man to the Moon, surely we can teach people to solve their conflicts without knives and guns and fists. When I went to law school, there was no coursework in negotiation. Now, every Justice Department lawyer is being trained in negotiation and encouraged in alternative dispute resolution techniques. We can do so much if we learn to be peacemakers.

But by becoming peacemakers, it is required that we better analyze the problem before us, understand the competing equities, figure ways to resolve the issues that divide people. We can do so much more.

We have got to stop going down our little pig trails. One lawyer specializes in this arcane field of specialty in antitrust. Another one becomes an expert in another area. But lawyers are not going to solve the problems of this world by themselves, nor are doctors, nor parks and recreation specialists, nor teachers, nor business people. The only way the problems of this world will be solved are by people coming together, and I challenge this great university to become the bridge that brings the disciplines together.

I would give anything in the world if I had gotten a law degree that was combined with a public health degree, because when I look at the issues of domestic violence, youth violence, drug abuse, and mental health, the combination of the criminal justice system working with the public health system is ever so much more effective than lawyers trying to do it by placing guilt and blame by themselves.

How do we learn? Let every teacher graduating with a teaching certificate have coursework in how to teach young people to resolve conflicts. Let every basic law enforcement academy graduate have the same type of training. Let us understand that we can teach this skill.

But as we address these issues, we have something else to do. We have to do all that we can to heal the divisions caused by intolerance and bigotry, to heal the youth who is angry, to welcome the immigrants, and to control the racial division in this Nation. We need to speak out against prejudice and hatred everywhere we find it, and too often, we stand mutely by.

Haters are cowards and, when confronted, they usually back down, but too often we let them become entrenched before we speak out. Because we're too busy, we don't want to get involved, it's not our problem, we're complacent. Hate and the turmoil it causes is everybody's problem in America. We must do more to reach out to each other before hate and bigotry can begin to come between us.

Too often, we live in our insular worlds, with each other enforcing our own voluntary racial separation. We pass each other on the streets or in the shopping mall, but we don't connect. With this separation, we risk a lack of understanding of the views and the perspectives of others. We risk not learning of the wonderful racial, ethnic, and cultural traditions that have made this Nation so strong. We must build on the great diversity of this wonderful land as reflected in this State.

There is another threat to tolerance and understanding in this country, and this is the growing development of antiimmigrant sentiments. There is a tendency to find in new arrivals a new opportunity for scape-goating. One of my first childhood memories is my father describing his arrival to the United States from Denmark when he was only 12. He spoke not one word of English. People teased him about his funny language and his funny clothes. He never forgot that.

4 years later, he was the editor of the high school newspaper, writing beautiful English, and he went on to become a reporter for the Miami Herald for 43 years. He always made clear to me that this Nation had done so much for him and his children, and that we must always honor this Nation's tradition as a Nation of immigrants.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: We cannot let demagoguery carry the day. While immigration is a complex and compelling area of public policy, we must not let the public debate be ruled by divisiveness and fear. Our immigration policy is not about fear from

those from other countries. It is not about the color of someone's skin, or the native tongue, or cultural tradition, or accumulated wealth of others. It is about upholding the rule of all in a fair and respectful way.

Finally, we have got to focus, if we are to ensure the future of this country, on the people themselves. There are too many people in this Nation who have dropped out, who are not involved, who are unemployed, who are not part of the workforce, and who do not have the skills necessary to fill the jobs to maintain this Nation as a first rate Nation. We have got to make an investment in people.

As a prosecutor, I was taken to our public hospital to try to figure out in 1985 what to do about crack-involved infants and their mothers. The doctors taught me that in the first 3 years of life, that's when it all counted. 50 percent of all learned human response was learned in the first year of life. The concept of reward and punishment was developed in those years.

And I suddenly thought to myself, what good are all the prisons 18 years from now going to be, if the person doesn't understand what punishment means, and doesn't have a conscience? What good are all the great schools of this State going to be if these kids do not have the foundation of learning?

If we are going to accept the challenge of the President and have a permanent impact on the culture of violence in this Nation, we are going to have to invest in our children from the very beginning to make sure they have proper medical care, proper educare in those early years, proper, strong education that can give them the skills to fill the jobs that will maintain this country as a first rate Nation, after-school supervision and activity that can provide opportunity.

We have got to end domestic violence in the homes, so that the child no longer will see his father beat his mother and come to accept violence as a way of life.

Ladies and gentlemen, violence is down 6 years in a row. We can become complacent, or we can accept the warning of Littleton and renew our efforts at making an investment in our children, but the most important investment of all will be in time, and care, and love.

We have gotten so carried away with our own selves that we sometimes forget how important it is to have somebody there for you when you really need them. When you come home from school after somebody has given you some insult, how important it is to have somebody that you can talk to that understands how hard it is to grow up.

I remember my afternoon after school and in the evenings. My mother worked in the home. My father came home and helped her with the heavy work at night. She taught us how to play baseball. She taught us to bake cakes, to appreciate Beethoven symphonies. She never liked Dickens, so I've been trying to overcome that ever since.

(Laughter.)

GENERAL RENO: She punished us. She loved us with all her heart, and there is no child here in the world that will ever be the substitute for what that lady was in our life.

I challenge you to go out and seek employers that will create family-friendly workplaces and give both parents the opportunity to have quality time with their children through telecommuting, through job-sharing, through two shifts a day, one for parents and one for not-parents, and just think, if you had two shifts a day, you could end the rush-hour problem and not have to spend so much money on highways.

(Applause.)

GENERAL RENO: We have got to make sure that we look to those 18 to 35-year-old young men who have been in prison or in the custody of the criminal justice system and can't get jobs because they can't -- they have a prior record. We've got to provide them re-entry into the workforce and use their skills and use their abilities to contribute to this Nation, rather than to see them sit silently and angrily by.

We can do so much if we put people first again in America, rather than money, or the biggest house that you can buy, or the best car that you can buy, and judging by what I have seen tonight, and the students that I have spoken with, and in the service that you have performed, you will lead the way into a century in which we put people, young people and old, first, and give them the chance to be all that they can be.

Thank you for inspiring us all.

(Applause.)

(End of remarks.)