



COMMENCEMENT SPEECH OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

Date: Saturday, May 15, 1999

Time: 12:33 p.m. - 12:45 p.m.

Place: Wilkes University

Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. BREISETH: Attorney General Janet, would you please come forward. Doctor Lennon, would you assist me.

Janet Reno, you have combined the wisdom of the Everglades of the simple majesty of the law in a self-governing nation to provide a new kind of leadership; calm, balanced and resistant to unwanted political pressure. Born to a father from Denmark who was a police reporter with the Miami Herold and to a journalist mother who was equally at home in a wickiup or at a congressional hearing. You learned early to express yourself with candor and eloquence. They would have been less surprised that their oldest daughter became State Attorney of Dade County or the Attorney General of the United States then that you became the first incumbent of either position to inspire a rap song.

Your whole career shows that there are no easy answers to the problems we face as a people. The tough love you learned from your parents shaped your approach to law enforcement as you tackled these problems. You loved the solitude of the Coral Islands of Florida, but you have had

to rend that solitude by land, sea and air in order to police the helm of the Florida coastline. You told the lawyers that you loved them, too, but you challenged them to reform themselves as a profession. You loved the rich diversity of our nation, but in enforcing the law you have frequently found yourself prosecuting individuals, even friends, for leading figures in our diverse ethnic communities, but who have broken the law. You love not just those two children for whom you are legal guardian, not just the nieces, nephews and young friends with whom you played, and for whom you may have provided financial support, but also the children diminished by their life circumstances or children of us all and to whom you must be the official national representative of the toughest love.

You have brought national focus to our share of responsibility to turn young offenders into contributing members of society. Although your most eloquent appeals have been to invest our best people resources in the education and careful nurturing of our youngest citizens while there's still time to help them grow into healthy teens and adults.

During your tenure as the longest serving Attorney General in the 20th Century, there has been a sharp drop in violent crime across the nation. You have challenged the law enforcement community and the congress to rethink the mandatory sentences for nonviolent first-time drug offenders and to concentrate in these cases on rehabilitation and job preparation even as you have dealt firmly with convicted violent felons. You have urged us to analyze carefully the causes of crime and to be imaginative and determined in addressing them as the surest long-term approach to prevention. At the same time you have had to deal not only with the routine violence of a society that loves its guns but also with the apocalyptic terrorism that has punctuated the final decade of the second millennium.

You have done all this while accepting personal responsibility for the unhappy consequences of specific law enforcement efforts and demonstrated the kind of personal courage and clarity in carrying out your constitutional responsibilities that has helped the nation through a

period of unusual political confusion while your rare combination of qualities has confused those motivated by more traditional political expediency. And by more conventional prosecutorial approaches to crime you have weathered a period of uncommon partisan ranker with broad public support, even the respect of your critics. In the process you have reinvested the Department of Justice and indeed the position of Attorney General itself with the integrity and political independence that will be your successors for Janet Reno legacy.

You are the general of all attorneys, the mother of all caregivers and the Olympian of all kayakers. It is with distinct personal pleasure that I, by the authority vested in me, by the Board of Trustees of Wilkes University and by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania confer upon you, Janet Reno, Degree Doctor of Humane Letters honourous causa with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO: Thank you, Chris, for this very special day. This morning I looked out the window, looked across the river and felt I was looking at America. This is a wonderful city and a wonderful university. And to the graduates, I wish you well. I wish you well. You've done it. And I am so impressed with the students that I have met this morning. And to the families who have made this possible, you should be so very proud. I have been impressed by the realism of these students and I have been deeply touched by their idealism and I hope you never ever lose it. I have listened to their examples of service and their commitment to service in the community. I am often asked, what do you think of young people today? And my answer is a very, very vehement I think they are perfectly wonderful.

They want so to contribute, to make a difference, to help others, to contribute to their community, they're funny, they're witty, they're creative. Yes, they're mischievous at times. But you are perfectly wonderful and I salute you for the generation that you will be in this next century.

But you have hopes and fears and you have question marks. You have a place to draw some answers to those question

marks from this wonderful university, the people you have met here you will draw strength and wisdom, understanding and faith that will be with you all the days of your life. And you will have friends that will be with you for all of your life. Lessons learned here will guide you in success and failure, joy and sorrow. Wisdom gained here will chart your course through a world which will change before your very eyes.

How do you navigate it? Don't let the vastness of the world overwhelm you. Take it one problem at a time, one day at a time and don't let it intimidate you.

How? First of all, be yourself and believe in yourself. I began to learn that lesson when I was eight years old. We lived in a little wooden house, we were outgrowing it. My father did not have enough money to hire a contractor to build a bigger house. My mother announced that 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 how do you build a house? She then came home and over the next two years she dug the foundation with her own hands with a pick and shovel, put in the electrical system and the plumbing.

I've always liked plumbers better than electricians because the electricians wouldn't give her a permit because she was a woman and she had to send daddy down to answer the questions while she stood behind him.

She and I lived in that house until she died just before I came to Washington and it is still my home. Every time I have come down that driveway over these years with a knotty problem to solve or a crisis that seemed insurmountable, that house standing there has been a symbol to me that you can do anything you want to if it's the right thing to do and if you try hard enough.

But that house taught me another very important lesson when Hurricane Andrew hit it in 1992. The winds began to howl, it was about three o'clock in the morning, with an

unearthly sound, trees crashed around the house. My mother got up, sat in her chair, folded her hands and was totally unafraid although she was old and frail and dying.

For she knew how she had built that house. She put in the right materials, she had not cut corners, she had built it the right way. When we came out the next morning, the world looked like a World War I battlefield, but the house had lost one shingle and some screens.

Build your life the right way, brick by brick, piece by piece, lesson by lesson and you will have the strength to withstand adversity. Secondly, stand for what you believe to be right, don't let people push you around, don't let people use polls to influence you. I ran for office once and on the campaign trail I've talked about what I've stood for, some of it was then politically popular. But a person I met on the campaign trail said, Janet, just keep on doing what you believe to be right, don't pussyfoot, don't equivocate, don't talk out of both sides of your mouth and you wake up the next morning feeling good about yourself.

But if you pussyfoot, if you try to be Miss Popularity and tell everybody what you think they want to hear, you'll wake up the next morning feeling miserable.

Well, I lost my election and I didn't feel very good the next morning, but I remembered what my friend taught me and it has held me in good stead ever since. It also helps to know that losing is not the end of the world, somebody put a biography of Abraham Lincoln on my bedside table that morning and it helped to know that he had lost an election, too.

When you have to make big decisions, prepare for them, analyze the issues carefully, learn as much of the facts as possible in the time afforded, apply your knowledge, consult others and then answer the question, what is the right thing to do. If you make the wrong decisions, you know you will be able to live with it because you tried your best to do what was right. And then if you made the wrong decision, just pick yourself up, dust yourself off,

and move ahead for there's a lot more to be done in this world and you don't need to stand behind.

Thirdly, make sure there's somebody there to keep you on the straight and narrow. Poke fun at yourself, laugh at yourself. If that doesn't work, make sure you have at least two brothers who are very good at poking a hole in your balloon.

Fourth, finally I commend to you a promise I made to myself when I graduated from law school, never do anything you don't enjoy doing. Life is too short and there are too many interesting things to do. And of all the experiences that I have had, none can match public service. Yes, you get cussed at, fussed at and figuratively beaten around the ears, but it's worth it. To use the law the right way, to try to help make America a safer, better place for all its citizens to live. I urge you to consider public service at some point in your life. You may be a banker and you may be the best banker in the whole county. You may have a customer friendly bank and you may be honest as the day is long. And that in itself is service, but you will also have time judging by what I have heard from this class to tutor a young student who needs help, who needs that push that we've heard about today to make a difference. You might be the plumber who charges a reasonable price, gets up in the middle of the night for an emergency, that's public service itself. But you might also be coaching little league and making a difference. Take time to serve others because there is nothing more rewarding. To walk down a narrow dirt road in South Carolina to dedicate a new church to replace one burned and to have a lady break through a rope line and say, Ms. Reno, how are you? I knew you in Miami. And I look at her as she gives me a hug that almost knocks me down. And she says, you got me child support for my children and here they are. And I look up and there are two young men just beaming at me, grown and prospering.

The man that stops me and says, thank you for arresting me. I said, what do you mean, thank you for arresting me? He said, you got me drug treatment and I've been drug free for two years and I've got my family and my job back. You will remember moments like that for all of the rest of your

life, and titles such as Attorney General fade in oblivion when you have these memories. Whatever you do we all must be involved in the service of this nation. How do we do it?

This is a great nation where you live in, one of the most prosperous times in its history. It's a time of great opportunity. We're the safest we've been in 20 years. But we cannot become complacent or with the signals of Littleton, with the national economies and other nations teetering, that the black man dragged through the streets of a Texas town and killed, with us looking to foreign work forces to provide skills for America, we've got a lot more to do. We've got to make sure that everyone in this country has an opportunity, a real opportunity to participate as productive, creative citizens who are treated with respect, regard and dignity. And right now we have too many people who are on the outside looking in feeling angry and alienated and misunderstood. We have too many children who are unsupervised, alone and at risk in the afternoon. We have too many who do not trust authority, too many people killing and being killed, too many people who have no hope.

How do we navigate this changing world and address these issues? We must enhance two very important fields that I think are often neglected in our education, the skill of peacemaking and the skill of problem solving. Consider an example, when we deal with a criminal, the prosecutor oftentimes thinks that they won the battle and they get the conviction and send him off to jail ignoring the fact that we don't have enough jails for housing for the length of time the judge sentenced him and ignoring the fact that there is no treatment program to deal with the drug problem that caused the crime in the first place. The public defender thinks he's won when he gets his client off on a motion to dismiss, ignoring the fact that the client is in a drug addiction that is worse than the prison that he might otherwise go to.

Why not solve the problem? Why not bring peace? The prosecutor and the public defender who come together to figure out how we get that person off that addiction, into recovery and into a secure job are going to be the true leaders, the true heroes of the next century.

The persons who come together to reach out to an angry young man to help him deal with his anger to come back to the community and to make a peaceful contribution to society these are going to be the people that lead us in the next century.

How do we become better problem solvers and peacemakers? First of all, we've got to learn how to talk with each other and use as Winston Churchill said, small old words that everybody understands. America has the habit these days of talking too fast, of E-mailing incomplete sentences that don't say very much in terms of human eloquence, of talking past each other and of looking over their shoulders. We've got to talk with each other face to face with clear language, we've got to listen with a listening ear as hard as we talk and understand what we hear. We've got to use a tone of voice that is understanding and positive, not diminishing or belittling or aloof or bored. Adults must learn to talk to young people, they're too busy these days to sit down and take the time too often to listen and to understand the hopes and fears. And the young person has got to be sure that that adult hears him. The 30-year-old whiz kid has got to understand the majesty of age and not ignore that wonderful elderly person that has made such a difference in their lives. The fifth-generation American must be able to put themselves in the shoes of the newest immigrant.

Use these skills of problem solving and peacemaking to heal the divisions caused by intolerance and bigotry. I have discovered that haters are cowards. And when you talk back to them and talk to them, they back down. But too often we don't want to become involved. We want to stand on the sidelines and watch the hate go on. We have got to speak out against hatred and bigotry in every form that it exists. For hate and turmoil in this land is everybody's problem for it diminishes each one of us and diminishes our nation. We can do it if we reach out and care for each other. But if we are to solve the problems of today, if we are to bring peace today, we must make a new and striking investment in our children. We must make sure that every child in America has appropriate medical care, appropriate

supervision, appropriate education to prepare them for the next century. Nobody should be left out, no child should be unsupervised without love and understanding of someone who understands how hard it is to grow up in this nation today.

I have one final challenge for you, I remember my afternoons after school and in the evening. I remember my place that Sandy Ungar talked about so eloquently. My mother worked in the home, she taught us to play baseball, she taught us to bake cakes. She taught us to love Shakespeare and she didn't like Dickens and I'm still trying to overcome that now. She punished us, she loved us with all her heart, she taught us to play fair. There is no child here in the world that will ever be the substitute for what that lady was in our life.

As you leave this wonderful university, you can start to solve problems right now. The problems that parents have faced for far too long the question mark is often asked, how do I do everything? How do I hold a job and raise my children and get a moment to breathe? As you go looking for jobs, find out who has the family-friendly workplace and get together with other graduates and form a consensus in this nation that says you want me and my Ph.D., you want me and my grade point average, you want me and my skill, you get it if you've created a family-friendly workplace that lets both parents spend quality time with their children.

You're starting a great adventure. You have come from a university that has given you wonderful tools, tools that will help you solve the problems. They can be solved. This nation can end the culture of violence. We can bring reason to the use of guns. We can give our children a future. And after being with you today I am more convinced of it than ever before. So go forth, have a good time in this great adventure and don't forget to remember the children.

Thank you.