



SPEECH OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

MARCH OF DIMES LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Arlington, Virginia

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ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very, very much. Somebody thanked me for coming today. I said, no, I thank you for letting me be here. I salute you all, the people who care, who volunteer, make such a difference in this nation. And the work of the March of Dimes is so incredibly important. In 1945, '46, and '47, I was a little girl in elementary school, and we had the paper drive that I always worked in. But I never quite understood what the paper was going to do for the war effort.

I bought savings bonds with the money I earned around the house, but I never quite understood the translation of it. But I understood what the March of Dimes did with my dimes that I stuck in the envelope, and of all the efforts that I have ever undertaken in public service, that was probably the first one and the one I will remember most vividly and understand the reason why people care. So to all of you, I salute you.

I come here today to suggest that we form a strong and lasting alliance, an alliance that can do so much because it is people together rather than the pieces that we sometimes create by the law functioning in its own world, public health in another world, education in another world. Let us come together and re-weave the fabric of community around our children and their families who are at risk. And let us, through law and medicine and public health joining together, use a rare moment in our history.

Crime is now down seven years in a row. America tends to become

complacent and say there are other problems now, but we've shown we can work together and bring it down. Let us not become complacent. Let us continue our efforts, link our arms together, and through prevention through public health initiatives with the criminal justice system acting as a good stick, as part of the carrot, let us continue to bring crime down until we eliminate the culture of violence in this country.

It's going to have to be based on cross-disciplinary efforts. It's going to have to be based at a national level and at a community level. But community is so important because I now have had the chance to see so many wonderful communities across this country, and each one is different. Each one has different needs and resources, different laws, and they don't need Washington telling them how to do it. Washington's good at perhaps suggesting, they say, but let us form a partnership with communities and people like you who care, and let us make a difference.

Let us make sure that we do not cut corners on our kids. Let us make sure that we involve our young people in what we do: that eight-year old collecting dimes for her book, that feeling of success when she'd finished collecting her dimes and turned in the book. There are so many children, there are so many young people, there are so many 17 year-olds out there who want to collect the dimes for children in the figurative ways of advocacy of help, of support, of collection of money. Let us harness that power of youth as the March of Dimes long ago harnessed the power of youth at the end of the war to make a difference.

Now you say, "You talk good, but what have you produced? You've got to sell people. They say you sound more like a social worker than an attorney general." But when you point out to somebody that you can save money by the investment of one dollar in prenatal care, if you point out the dollars you can save by investing in early childhood development, in terms of remedial programs that you're going to have to pay for six years from now, if we can show the world what we can save by investing just a little bit in children from zero to three in terms of what we can save and not having to build prisons 18 years from now, people are going to begin to get the message.

I've been there six and a half years, and they haven't called me a social worker recently. Maybe I haven't been listening, but at one of our recent appropriation subcommittee hearings, the chairman of the

Senate Appropriations Committee arrived and used his chairmanship to ask if he might ask me his first question. His first question was, "Madam Attorney General, will you help me on my initiative for zero to three?" And I said I would be delighted.

Now, how can we do this? We already have an example between us. We have linked arms and marched together through an initiative called Five Goals for Kids. There the Justice Department has developed an alliance with you, the Department of Health and Human Services, United Way of America, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and a half of dozen other nonprofit organizations to help hundreds of thousands of children take advantage of the new Child Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, to enroll in health insurance programs and get a healthier start in life.

You have been wonderful leaders, great partners, and I salute you for this effort. But one of the problems we seem to run into every now and then is we get into our own little pig trail, and we go down the pig trail and wind around and know all the rocks and the streams and everything along that pig trail. But if we knew all the trails and how they came together and crossed, we'd see new visions and new vistas and we've got to get our trails crossing, which I think then means we've got to understand the building blocks of childhood and not forget any as we pursue our particular advocacy, our particular specialty.

First of all, I think we've got to make sure we have strong and healthy parents, and I think we can make a difference in that regard. But let me give you some pieces that you may not have thought of. We now have a great number of people in the state and federal prisons of this nation. Anywhere from 400 to 500,000, mostly males, will be returning to their communities each year near the next five years.

We can bring them back through reentry programs in which we or the others from the community have worked with them while they've been in prison and bring them back as caring parents, as people who can get a job, as people who have skills, or we can do nothing while they are in prison and bring them back only to see them start all over again in the life of crime and indifference to their children.

That father brought back the right way can be a tremendous force, and the Justice Department is initiating a program called the Reentry

Program in which we hope we will be able to use courts in certain examples and tests to be the carrot, hold out the carrot and stick and say if you work with us, we'll get you back into the community with a chance of success. If you don't, you're going to find yourself back in prison.

Let us make sure that we learn from the wonderful announcement this morning on what is reducing teen pregnancy in communities across America and make sure that our parents are old enough, wise enough, and able enough. Let us make sure that they have the money to do it. When you're advocating in your state capital, when you're advocating in Washington, let's make sure that child support enforcement agencies have the tools to do the job and let's make it as important to collect child support as it is to collect income tax in this country.

Now, people say, "Janet, don't go into that; you're just going to marginalize yourself." But when I'm in the business forum, I see the heads start shaking yes. Let's figure out how we can make sure our parents have time to spend with their children. If we can send people to the moon, we ought to develop workdays that are parent friendly. I've got the suggestion. A parent shift and a golf shift.

(Laughter.)

Parent shift begins at eight o'clock in the morning. Both parents take their child to school, drop the child off. Both parents finish the parent shift at about two o'clock in the afternoon, both parents pick up the child and take them home and participate with them in children's activities for the rest of the day. The golfers begin at 11:00 and therefore, the west coast can do business for a little bit longer.

(Laughter.)

But being a parent is the single most difficult thing I know to do, far more difficult than being an attorney general that has to appear before congressional committees or anybody else. It takes hard work, love, intelligence, and an awful lot of luck, and there are too many parents today who do not know but would very much like to know how to talk, not at their children, but with their children.

Some people say, well, we'll develop parenting skills courses. You think you're going to learn parenting in a course? How can we teach it in a world that is so mobile with extended families split and gone? We've got to focus on this and give our parents the ingredients they need to know when to say no, when to give a pat on the back, and when to cry out for help because it is something beyond their ken.

Let us make sure there are parents that are violence-free. Twenty-one years ago when I became a prosecutor, nobody was interested in the prosecution of domestic violence cases. They said it was a domestic. Now more and more people are beginning to understand that unless we end violence in the home, we will never end it on the streets or in the schools of America.

Domestic violence programs are working. They are reducing homicides where they are comprehensive, where the police, prosecutors, the courts and social service agencies come together in full service efforts, but we've got to keep at it. And when you're in your state capital, when you go down to the county courthouse, when you're advocating, remember to advocate for programs that can provide a comprehensive initiative against domestic violence.

Let us make sure that we focus on the child who is the victim of abuse and neglect. It just cascades from one generation to another unless we end it with this one. Now, I bet a large number of you have been to dependency courts in your jurisdictions. You've seen crowded calendars. Why, you've seen judges without social resources that even begin to match the problem. We started a drug court in Miami in 1989. We operated on a carrot-and-stick approach. Work with us, test regularly, test negatively, and we'll get you off on the right foot. Test positively and you're going to see the stick part of the equation.

We had them evaluated. It looked like it was working. There are now over 300 drug courts in the country, and I am convinced that the courts can be a powerful partner with us. Only the courts have been the institution where everybody has ended up when the other institutions of this country have failed. Let us give our courts, particularly our courts that rule on abuse and neglect cases, the resources to do the job, small enough case loads. Let's back them up. Let's understand that a judge can be a powerful force in managing these cases and in ensuring that there are adequate resources.

Sometimes the child is not the physical victim; sometimes the child sees it and is scarred forever unless we do something right now. That community police officer responding to the domestic violence scene where the child is crying in the hallway can be a marvelous force for understanding that child and through immediate counseling beginning to erase the vestiges of that domestic violence scene. But we've got to do more for the child who is in deeper trouble, and we've got to end it there.

Let us focus on alcohol. Alcohol, of course, poses a serious threat to the health and well-being of babies and children. Heavy drinking during pregnancy can cause fetal alcohol syndrome. Yet, as you well know, some 21 percent of women reported drinking alcohol during the past month, and nearly 3 percent reported binge alcohol use. We've got to teach parents young and old about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy and beyond. And furthermore, youth violence does not rise out of drug abuse nearly as much as it arises out of alcohol abuse.

In 1988 there was no course of toxicology in American medical schools. Now most medical schools are beginning to teach it, but we still grapple with the problem of alcohol and how we deal with it. Let us make that a major research effort. Let's make it a major treatment effort. Let us combine the criminal justice system and the public health system and do something about drugs and alcohol in a sensible way with sufficient resources to make a difference.

Health care. Through CHIP we're making a difference, but let us join forces and link arms and march together and make sure that no child in America goes without proper preventative medical care. And you can take the organizational skill and the know-how in this room and make a difference, because there are a lot of docs in the world. There are a wonderful bunch of pediatricians who would like to volunteer their time if they can figure out the liability issues.

Let's get the legislature working with everybody to work out the liability issues in a sensible way that properly protects everybody. Then that child that is across the city who needs to see this particular pediatrician who is an expert, let's figure out transportation systems that can get that child across the city to that doctor in a reasonable way. If we can send men to the moon, we can send that child across town in safe transportation.

Don't forget mental health. One of my first jobs was as the fill-in for social workers who were responsible for indigent patients in the Dade County Welfare Department. I had drunks with DTs at the local sanatorium, elderly patients in the nursing home, and the mentally ill at the psychiatric institute. We didn't know very much then. We sure do know so much now, and it is inexcusable if we do not reach out and help people to identify children with a mental or emotional illnesses that can be helped.

We have got to make sure that mental health treatment becomes a reality for all of those who need it, and the instances of young people who do not know how to speak out, do not know how to tell us how much it hurts, we've got to be able to listen with the listening ear and see the signs without labeling that child but with every effort made to get them the treatment they need.

And while we're about it, the engineers and others have taught us about lead and other building difficulties involved with safe buildings. Let us be sure that we have environments where our children can grow. Now, I had a great discussion about lead paint this morning and how we do something about it. I couldn't stand up here and tell you, so it occurs to me that we need to get books out to particularly neighborhoods where the buildings are of such character and such age that there is lead in it and let people know: simple little books, mimeographed books.

They don't have to be fancy books, but let's get information out to people. Let's get rid of the digital divide so we make sure everybody's got it and we don't have to do little books; we can just put it on the Web.

Let's join forces, link arms, and march together to get guns out of the hands of kids and people who should not have them. You know the cost and loss of life and injury and medical cost, both intentional and accidental. Let us make sense of guns. Let us speak out. I understand that I am now the subject of an ad. We don't have to have ads. All we need to do is work together, use some common sense, make sure that guns aren't in the hands of people who don't need to have them and don't know how to safely and lawfully use them, and we'll be saving more lives.

But let us learn other issues. Have you been to a child care facility

recently? My child care facility just came to me at lunchtime for Halloween. This is the fifth time they've come. I put on a peacock mask. You watch the child learn don't hit, and he pulls back. "Now, talk it out with Joey and you two figure out how to share, and you've got to share," and the two year-old starts to listen. There are too many two year-olds that don't have people around them teaching them how to communicate, to listen, to solve problems, to avoid conflict, to work out their problems.

I have a dream, and you can help me with that dream when you go to the state capital or otherwise to lobby. I have a dream that every teacher in America at least in K through 12 will have course work in how to teach their students to resolve conflicts without knives and guns and fists. When I went to law school, we were taught how to try cases. We weren't taught how to negotiate. Now appropriate dispute resolution in various forms is teaching us that we do not have to have the cost and the hurt that is often associated with trials.

Let us teach our children that we do not have to have the tragedy and the death from guns and other conflict if we learn how to resolve our conflicts the right way.

Let us join forces, link arms together, and march on to see what we can do through mentoring, education, and outreach to make sure that our children have supervision during the afternoon hours if we can't get our work schedules changed so that we can truly give our children the chance to grow in a strong, constructive way.

The first time I ever saw my mother cry, and I still remember it so vividly because we went up to pick up my father at the bus on the afternoon of April 12, 1945. A man came over to the car and said the President is dead, and my mother just burst into tears. From the time I could first remember, I could hear the President's voice, and now when I come home at night and I think of us moaning and groaning about what happens to us in public service and I look at what President and Mrs. Roosevelt did dealing with the depression that was not of their making, dealing with Pearl Harbor, dealing with World War II, the President doing it with ten pounds of steel on his legs, not in the best of health at the end, Mrs. Roosevelt, magnificent and wonderful.

When you think of them, we can do this if they did what they did to

set this country on the road to peace, a more lasting peace than we have known for a very long time in terms of world engagement, we can give this country the belief the President gave it, that we can move forward. We can make sure that all people are included, not just some. We can harness the energy of this nation and make it greater. Somebody thanked me for coming. I can't thank you enough for all that you do and for letting me be here today, because you represent what I think Americans should be all about.