



Department of Justice

ADDRESS

OF

THE HONORABLE GRIFFIN B. BELL
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE

THE BAYLOR UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 18, 1978

10:00 A.M.

WACO, TEXAS

Last year I made 45 speeches in 18 different states. Just last week I spoke to representatives of almost all the major newspapers that cover the Federal government. On none of those occasions was I more conscious of the need to choose my message with care than I am here today. A little story will help to illustrate why.

Three summers ago my wife and I were vacationing in Aspen, Colorado. We were invited one evening to the home of some people who had small children. Justice Harry Blackmun of the Supreme Court and his wife were in Aspen at the time, and they were invited over too.

One of the children in the home was a 6-year-old boy named Matthew. At one point in the evening, Justice Blackmun sat down on a footstool with Matthew and just talked and visited with him for a little while. Later that night, as Matthew was going to bed and saying his prayers, he said to his mother, "I met the nicest man tonight."

His mother asked, "Who was that?"

Matthew said, "I don't know his name, but I think he was the Government."

Most of you are in the same position I was in at your age. At your stage of life, I was a student in a small college in Southern Georgia and had never met a member of the Federal government. For you, I probably represent to some degree the abstract concept of the government, just as Justice Blackmun

did for little Matthew. I hope that my brief remarks leave half as good an impression of the government with you as Justice Blackmun did with Matthew.

In my speeches I have often made the observation that our national life has been dominated for the past 20 years by three great issues. First was the civil rights revolution, which lasted from the mid-1950s through the 60s. The second was the Vietnam war, and the third was Watergate. You probably have no recollection of the civil rights movement, but no doubt a pretty good recollection of the war and Watergate.

Each of these great issues left its marks on our nation -- some of them good and some of them bad. Because Watergate was the most recent and in some ways the most traumatic for the Federal government, I have been particularly aware of its effects during my first year in Washington.

Some effects of Watergate were unquestionably good for our country. Government now is run much more openly than it was before. Both the American people and the officials of government recognize that the tragedy of Watergate occurred in part because of the secrecy in which many important government decisions were made. The veil has been stripped permanently from government now, and this is good.

We at the Justice Department strive to be as open with the public and the media as we possibly can, and I believe that

every other part of the government from the White House on down is doing the same thing. As a result, the American people will be much better informed about the activities of their chosen servants. They are in a better position to work their will on government, rather than having the government work its will on them. This is as it should be in a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Another good effect of Watergate is that the American people now demand much higher standards of behavior from all government officials. This is evident everywhere in Washington. Many departments and agencies have recently set up offices of internal inspection to investigate any allegations of wrongdoing by their employees. We have such an office at the Department of Justice, established by my predecessor, which reports to me directly. There is also a group of lawyers in the Department who now do nothing but investigate possible violations of federal law by public officials at all levels of government -- federal, state, and local.

These developments are permanent improvements in government. The American people will never again permit their government servants to abuse the powers with which they have been entrusted. I could list many other good results of Watergate.

But there were a couple of effects that were not healthy for our nation and that I want to discuss with you.

One unhealthy effect was that some parts of the media and some American people became unduly suspicious of their government officials.

I began personally to suffer this effect, which I call the "Watergate syndrome," as soon as I arrived in Washington about a year ago. Many of you probably know that I did not have an easy time getting confirmed as Attorney General by the Senate.

Some people opposed me because I was a friend of the President. Simply because Watergate showed that some friends of one President exercised poor judgment in public office, these people suspected that I would. Others opposed me because I was a Southerner and had been considered a moderate rather than a liberal on the civil rights movement. They seemed to suspect, without any evidence, that I was a racist.

It got so bad at some points during my confirmation process that I was reminded of a story about Abraham Lincoln. One of his neighbors in his hometown in Illinois asked him how it felt to be President. Lincoln is said to have replied, "You've heard about the man who was tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. A man in the crowd asked him how he liked it, and his reply was if it wasn't for the honor of the thing he would much rather walk."

I continued to see examples of unfounded suspicion throughout my first year in Washington. But during the last few months, I have sensed in my travels around the country and within Wash-

ington itself that the suspect atmosphere created by Watergate has begun to dissipate.

I have been so encouraged by this positive development that I recently ventured the opinion in a speech to the National Press Club that the Watergate syndrome was at an end. I said the confidence of the American people had been restored in the government, and that they were once again willing to presume the honesty of their public officials and to place the burden of proof on those contending otherwise. I was gratified to see those remarks carried on the network news that evening, which indicated to me that the media has perceived the end of the Watergate syndrome as well.

There was one other bad effect of Watergate that is particularly appropriate for mention to this audience. There has been some fear that Watergate caused a certain disaffection with government service among young people.

Many of you probably remember a particularly poignant scene on television during the height of the Watergate inquiry. A clean-cut young man who held a relatively low-level government job was testifying before a Senate Committee investigating Watergate. For several hours, he cataloged wrongful acts by government officials who worked around him and described how he had himself eventually become compromised and wound up doing wrong. One of the Senators hoped to end on a positive note and asked the young man if he had any advice to offer

young people who might be interested in entering government service.

"Yes," he said. "Stay away."

The word from the campuses in the last couple of years is that many in your generation seem to be taking the young man's advice. The media tell me that you are "turning inward," that you are concerned with establishing your own lives and gaining financial security, that you are little interested in most of the great issues confronting our nation and our government today, and that government service is not attracting the most talented among you.

I pray that the media are wrong. I hope that each one of you is already taking part in government at some level or looking forward to doing so in the future. If not, I beseech you to do so.

I am not simply asking that you take an active part in the issues of the day and that you consider government service. I am telling you that it is your duty. Just as you owe a tithe to your God, in my view we also owe a tithe to our nation.

We live in the greatest country on earth. Our people have more liberty and more opportunity than people anywhere else. America has been known through its history and is still known today as the country of the fair chance, where every person enjoys the fair chance to make of his life what he or she can.

But the bounties of our system are not free. To maintain them requires that the talented among us -- those like yourselves -- be willing to make whatever personal sacrifice is necessary to contribute your time and your talents to making the system work. We have never had a hereditary class of governing officials -- noblesse oblige -- such as exists in some other countries. The genius of our system -- our noblesse oblige -- has been that in each generation there have been numbers of men and women who have dedicated at least a portion of their productive lives to the service of their government.

Such government service often requires personal sacrifices. The task of governing is difficult, the pressures are great. Family life can suffer and the financial rewards are usually not as great as outside the government. But the satisfactions are lasting and warm. Foremost among them is knowing that you have paid a part of your tithe as a citizen.

I want to leave with you a few thoughts about the principles you should learn to live by in order to prepare yourselves to be good public servants, or, for that matter, simply good and effective citizens. I have tried to live by these principles during my year as Attorney General, and have encouraged my assistants in the Justice Department to adhere to them as well.

The first principle is restraint in the use of power. My year in the power center of Washington has confirmed to me the truth of a statement by the great political philosopher Montesquieu, that "every man invested with power is apt to abuse it; and to carry his power as far as it will go."

Everyone has some form of power over other people, whether it stems from a political position or an emotional relationship or some other source. I have long realized, now more clearly than ever, that the wisest exercise of power, more often than not, is not to use it at all. I commend that thought to you for any situation in which you wield power.

The second principle is fundamental fairness. One adheres to this principle if he or she remembers that everyone is entitled to respect as a human being and should be approached in a spirit of common decency and with a high degree of civility. Rudeness, temper, unfair dealing, and the like have no place in personal dealings either within or outside the government.

The third principle is integrity. This principle is uncommonly hard to explain, but I find its essence may be best captured by the simple phrase "doing what's right." We are each given by our Creator a still, quiet voice inside that says, from time to time, "You ought to do so-and-so."

President Lincoln knew the importance of listening to this voice. At one point in his administration, some powerful political friends urged a particular course upon him that he

considered against his conscience. In refusing that course, he made the point this way: "I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end, when I come to lay down the reigns of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside me."

You may have noticed that I have referred to President Lincoln more than once in this short speech. I obviously consider him a great American and a model for young people. In closing I want to tell you about one of the eulogies to Lincoln, because I think some of the things said about Lincoln represent qualities that everyone, and especially public servants, should strive to cultivate.

The tribute I am referring to was paid to Lincoln by the great Russian author and philosopher Tolstoy, who was a contemporary of Lincoln. Tolstoy was traveling in the mountains of Russia sometime after Lincoln's death and was the guest of the chief of a remote Russian tribe. The chief and his tribesmen requested that Tolstoy tell them of great statesmen and great generals. Tolstoy at first told them of the Russian czars and about Napoleon. Then the chief rose and begged Tolstoy to tell them about Lincoln, and promised him the best horse in the tribe's stock if Tolstoy could explain the greatness of Lincoln.

Tolstoy waxed eloquent about the American President, saying that he was greater than Frederick the Great, Napoleon, or Washington. He explained that Lincoln always operated on one motive: the benefit of mankind. He emphasized that Lincoln had wanted to be great through his very smallness. And he explained that all of Lincoln's actions were rooted in four principles -- humanity, truth, justice, and pity. According to Tolstoy, it was these things that earned Lincoln his preeminent place in history.

I would add that no man and no country can be great except on these principles -- humanity, truth, justice and pity. But I would add the rules of personal conduct I have mentioned: restraint, fairness, and civility, as well as integrity. These are in the nature of discipline, and I close on the note of discipline.

Someone has written that we lost the war in Vietnam because we had the first generation of spoiled Americans in our history. I doubt this statement, but we must beware of indulging ourselves. It was said of General Lee that a woman with a son in her arms said to him, "What can I do to make my son great." The General replied, "Teach him to deny himself." This admonition will help us all, whether as individuals or, collectively, as a government.