



Department of Justice

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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

BY

THE HONORABLE DICK THORNBURGH
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

TO THE

1989 GRADUATING CLASS

THE NATIONAL LAW CENTER
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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SUNDAY, MAY 21, 1989

Members of the class of 1989:

It is a great source of pride for me to join in observing the finale of your formal law school education. I know my pride is dwarfed, however, by that which you and your families feel as you reach and pass this educational milestone.

As always, substantial challenges await this generation -- in large part derived from the unfinished agenda of those of us who have preceded you. As you embark on your legal careers, you are entering some very exciting times. Times of anticipated success and accomplishment, to be sure, but also times of rapid change and of kaleidoscopic alteration of our social, political and economic landscape -- all of which makes it difficult to know today, where you may end up tomorrow.

That may be disconcerting to many of you. And, unfortunately, I cannot offer much useful advice on setting a career path and sticking to it. In fact, I may be one of the worst people to talk to on the subject in that, since graduation from law school in 1957, my career has been somewhat akin to that of an itinerant peddler.

Following more of a circuitous unmarked trail than a nice clear career path I have been, successively: a corporate lawyer, a federal prosecutor, a high-level bureaucrat in the Justice Department, governor of one of our major states, an academic of sorts, and now, as you know, Attorney General of the United States.

My good wife still says to me, "What do you want to do when you grow up!"

So if you were hoping to hear a commencement speaker who could give you advice on a game plan for your future...you're listening to the wrong guy.

But for those of you who may be troubled by such uncertainties, I hope my experience serves as some consolation and helps you understand that any lack of clarity you may be experiencing now, stems from the wealth, not the paucity, of opportunities that your legal education has provided you.

You know the law. You're ready to practice it. And I don't propose to offer you another lecture on the finer points of jurisprudence or on the complexities of professional ethics.

In a sense, I've really not come here to talk about the law at all.

We are, to be sure, a nation which prides itself on our adherence to the rule of law. We remind ourselves, frequently, that ours is a government of laws and not of men.

But, as Attorney General, as our nation's chief law enforcement officer, I've lately had a chance to reflect not just on the rule of law but on the role of law -- on what the law by itself can do and what it cannot.

And on the importance of some of those things upon which enforcement of the law depends so heavily, but that are beyond its reach.

In particular, I've found myself thinking a lot about the relationship between our laws and our values.

Sometimes we think of laws as values as the same. They're related, but they're not the same.

We establish laws to codify certain rules and standards that allow us to live together peacefully as a free people.

But it's our values that inspire our laws, not our laws that establish our values. Laws tell us what we must do. Values summon us to what we should do.

The better we maintain our values, the less resort we need to the law. And it's those values we choose to live by that define our civilization.

Kindness...compassion...decency... generosity...these have all been deeply ingrained in the American spirit.

So, too, has a rigorous sense of justice and fair play.

Americans are indeed touched by "the better angels of our nature." When we see someone in trouble, we rush to respond. When we see someone in need, we open our hearts and our pocketbooks.

As Americans, we believe in freedom. We believe in opportunity. We believe in the inherent rights and dignity of every individual.

We believe in the capacity of the arts and culture to liberate the spirit and elevate the mind.

We believe that the environment we live in is God's gift to us and our trust for the next generation.

We believe in the mutual respect and mutual restraint that allows each of us to live in freedom secure in our lives and our homes.

But, you may ask: What does all of this mean in today's America?

Well, at the risk of sounding like a grandfather -- which I now happen to be -- let me give you a very homely example: When I was growing up, we rarely locked our doors at night. We seldom thought about locking our doors at night. We didn't have to.

But now, nearly everyone locks their doors and in many of our great cities, people double and triple lock their doors, even in the daytime.

Is it the law that has failed?

No, I suggest not.

I suggest instead that a society's laws, be they old or new, only make explicit that society's underlying sense of values -- a sense of values which, in our case, too many people somewhere along the way, have lost. And that is what's different, and that is why we lock our doors.

But this misplaced sense of values goes beyond unlocked doors.

Too many people today seem to have a warped internal guidance mechanism. They have failed to learn and appreciate the kinds of moral restraints that are essential to a civilized community. They fail, or refuse, to make what should be elementary distinctions between right and wrong. In short, certain values no longer seem to govern our behavior.

That is very troubling, and a matter which should be of great concern, not only to us as members of the legal profession, but to all of American society. Because we are not talking about the loss of small courtesies or changes in etiquette. We are talking about the erosion of very old and long established principles set down by those who founded this nation.

Let me see if I can more specifically illustrate my point. Foremost among our concerns in this nation today is what President Bush properly calls the "scourge" of drugs...a true paradigm, I suggest, of the ways in which victory or defeat will finally turn more on values than on laws.

The war against drugs affects every one of our communities. In it, law enforcement, of course has a vital role.

We can be, to be sure, and are, unrelenting in our efforts to put drug dealers behind bars.

But as long as enough people are willing to pay exorbitant prices for illegal drugs, others will risk prison and even exposure to street-level cross fire to try to make themselves rich by supplying the demand.

So we'll fight the drug war with all the law enforcement resources at our disposal.

But let's not kid ourselves.

The only way we will win this war, conclusively, is on the battlefield of values. And here we're truly engaged in a struggle for the soul of the next generation.

We'll win the war on drugs only when changes in values force drugs out of fashion.

When the yuppie on the move no longer thinks its hip to score from the corner supplier on his lunch hour.

When drug-using rock stars and athletes cease being popular idols.

When, in the inner city school, the dealer with his gold chains and flashy car becomes an outcast rather than a role model for impressionable kids.

This struggle won't be decided in the courtroom. But in the classroom, in the workplace, in our houses of worship, in the community and, yes, in the family.

Because it's a struggle not over laws but over values. The values of self respect and self-reliance and, above all, of the integrity of the individual mind and spirit functioning as God designed them to function, and not subject to the "uppers" or "downers" of chemical dependence.

I believe that we will win this battle because we must win it.

And the whole history of America is that what we must do, we do.

But it's going to take more than police, more than law enforcement, more than even the military might some suggest.

Above all, it's going to require our unstinting commitment to the values that have made us what we are.

And this is where your role emerges.

Some part of your quest for individual self-fulfillment -- for financial security, professional distinction, for prominence in whatever field you choose -- must be overlaid with an effort to apply sound values to enriching the lives of those about you.

Life is not just about getting and keeping in either the material or personal sense.

To the extent that you commit yourself to sharing and giving to others of your talents, your resources, your care and compassion, then to just such an extent will you grow in your own sense of self-esteem and inner peace.

Some of you, I expect, will find careers in public service, as I have. A future governor, senator or president may be among you. But running for and holding high political office is not the only -- nor necessarily the most important -- constructive arena for citizen involvement. Indeed, more meaningful political and governmental activity often takes place on the local school board or borough council than in the rarefied atmosphere of our state or national capitals.

And, as many of you already know from personal experience, opportunities for volunteer activities still constitute one of the unique strengths of this nation. These efforts make a special contribution, in ways unknown and alien in most regions throughout the world, to the welfare of those with special and particular needs in our society.

There are plenty of challenges to which you can apply your talents. In addition to the drug problem I have already addressed, they range

- * From achieving a higher marketplace ethic...to a renewed emphasis on making things rather than making deals.
- * From the need for a technology to deal with the every day problem of waste disposal...to the devising of cures for cancer and for AIDS.
- * From the further, and ultimately, we hope, complete, breakdown of barriers of race, ethnic origin, gender and disability...to the seemingly simple, but in fact highly complicated, matter of balancing a national budget.
- * From neighborhoods free of violent crime...to a world free from the terror of nuclear weapons.

The contributions which you as lawyers and as caring citizens can make on your own in these and other areas will demand your very best. Moreover, as advisors and counselors to other individuals and institutions, you will frequently have a role to play as the "conscience" of your clients. And this will also require that you apply your own sound standards to the resolution of their problems.

You embark today on a new phase of your life. You have been well prepared. You have acquired the tools to practice law. You may now enter upon a professional career that can bring further pride to you, your family, your professors and your community.

We salute you and we wish you well. In bidding you farewell and welcoming you to an honorable profession, I cannot help but refer to the, perhaps all too familiar, perhaps hackneyed, observation of Harrison Tweed, one-time President of the Association of Bar of the City of New York, who said long ago:

"I have a high opinion of lawyers. With all their faults, they stack up well against those in every other occupation or profession. They are better to work with or play with or fight with or drink with than most other varieties of mankind."

May it ever be so!