



Department of Justice

CLOSING REMARKS

BY

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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT THE

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE CEREMONY

IN HONOR OF

NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

2:00 P.M.
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 30, 1990
THE GREAT HALL
WASHINGTON, D.C.

I want to close today's observance of National Disability Employment Awareness Week with a brief recognition of our latest progress. You are all aware of the giant step forward we have all made with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Often, when speaking about a new upsurge for civil rights, the speaker sets a lofty goal: "Someday one of you may become President of the United States." But in this case, some already have.

Let me single out two of the most famous: the Presidents Roosevelt. Most people know about Franklin D. Roosevelt's polio, but usually aren't aware of his cousin Theodore Roosevelt's early struggle with severe asthma. As a small boy, Teddy Roosevelt didn't have enough chest room for his lungs, causing asthmatic attacks every three days. The doctors feared for the strain on his heart.

Through strenuous effort, TR literally built up his body into that of a Western cowboy. Not all of us with disabilities can reach so far. But all, in one way or another, can make our minds go as far as possible -- developing them to compensate for any limitations of the body. We do not think of either Roosevelt as "handicapped" or "disabled." We think of them as two American public servants with extraordinary abilities -- one a Republican, the other a Democrat -- who led this country through challenging times to great heights.

And that is precisely how we must view the prospects for all Americans with disabilities. Especially among the new work force, as this country faces increasing international competition for widening world markets. We are facing acute shortages of skilled and educated labor, and must utilize all our citizens to achieve the fullest employment.

Right now, there are 43 million people with disabilities in this country, most of whose full abilities are not being called upon. Currently, two thirds of them are unemployed. The vast majority of these citizens want to work, and many already have the skills -- or at least the potential -- to offer prospective employers.

The remaining third are really no different from the rest of us, except that, like TR and FDR, sometimes through new technology -- they have overcome the physical barriers that might have held back their minds.

The challenge over the coming decade will be to bring those two thirds who are unemployed within the ranks of the third who are employed -- so they too can fully utilize their abilities and realize all of their potential.

Just three months ago, on July 26 1990, President Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. The bill was actively supported by the President and this Department, and was passed by votes of 377-28 in the House and 91-6 in the Senate. I believe that the overwhelming support for this Act constitutes a mandate from the American people that all those with disabilities be allowed to contribute fully in the workplace and at last enter the mainstream of our society.

Assistant Attorney General John Dunne has presented an overview of the extensive provisions of the ADA, particularly of the role of the Department of Justice and other federal agencies in implementing the Act. This afternoon I am pleased to announce that the dedicated Justice Department personnel who were instrumental in developing Administration policy on the ADA will continue to work in a newly created unit within the Civil Rights Division.

Our new Office on the Americans with Disabilities Act will be established within the Coordination and Review Section, which has effectively handled the development and implementation of policy and a host of the Department's responsibilities under the ADA. I believe that a new office, created **expressly** to address ADA implementation issues is the clearest signal we can send of

the seriousness of our commitment here at the Department of Justice to the enforcement of the ADA as a major civil rights initiative.

As you have heard, requirements of the ADA do not apply directly to the federal government, since federal agencies are already prohibited from discriminating against persons with disabilities in employment under section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. We are required to accommodate our facilities to work-related needs under section 504 of that Act. Those provisions continue to be as applicable today as prior to the passage of the ADA.

Yet, while the ADA does not apply directly to the federal government, it does so indirectly. I have always believed that government must set an example for the rest of society -- we cannot expect those we regulate to respond as vigorously if we, as regulators, do not set an appropriate model. In imposing the substantial non-discrimination and accessibility requirements of the ADA, on state and local governments and on the private sector, all eyes will be on us to see whether we are meeting our own standards.

Fortunately, employing disabled persons is also in our own best interest. Two weeks ago, I spoke at the Business Week

conference at the Willard Hotel to an audience of business executives from corporations throughout the country on the requirements of the ADA.

Some of them were apprehensive about the costs of complying with the new law. I told them that the benefits of bringing disabled people into their workplaces can far exceed the costs. The impetus of the ADA will ultimately prove to be a great advantage in efforts to meet the challenge of a growing shortage of qualified labor. Indeed, I told them, those who early seize the employment opportunities offered by ADA will find they have enhanced their competitiveness domestically and increased their markets globally.

Private businesses will not be the only beneficiaries of hiring persons with disabilities. This talented new workforce will continue to be a tremendous advantage for federal agencies as well as private businesses. At the Department of Justice, we currently have over 2,000 employees who identify themselves as having a disability. We have done a good job in this area -- but we can always improve upon our current record.

So, I am asking you to recognize the continuing need to hire qualified persons with disabilities and to accommodate their needs. I am asking this not because it is the law -- which it

is. I am asking this not primarily because the country will be looking closely at our own record in employing disabled persons -- which it will be. I am asking you to do this because there are persons with abilities -- perhaps some as great as TR and FDR -- that we need in this Department, which has always had the highest human resource standards and accomplishments -- and the proudest employment record -- in the whole U.S. Government.