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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Keynote Address before
The 87th Annual Dinner of
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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7:35 p.m.

Grand Ballroom
Capital Hilton Hotel
Washington, D.C.

P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you so very much.

Three months ago tomorrow I received a call at 11:45 at night from Senator Bob Graham, telling me that I might receive a phone call from the White House the next day, asking me to come to Washington. Up until that point I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me.

I went the next day to Washington, and on Tuesday night met in the Oval Office with the President of the United States, and on Thursday afternoon was nominated to be Attorney General. This has been one of the most incredible experiences that anybody could have.

[Laughter.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You have no idea what it's like to walk the snowy streets of Washington on your way to the White House early in the morning, to prepare for the nomination, to prepare for confirmation, to look out at the Washington Monument, to look at the White House, to look at the Department of Justice, and realize that you are going to have the opportunity, if the Senate confirms you, to serve the American people.

To go to the Department of Justice and see the

incredible people who represent the people of the United States -- there are wonderful, dedicated lawyers there who care deeply about the law, who write beautifully, who are splendid advocates, who are magnificent representatives of the people -- and you look at the strength of this nation and you marvel.

But there are experiences along this way that have made each moment seem finer and more extraordinary. I was asked to go to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Danish resistance assistance to the Jews in Denmark in 1943.

My father was born in Denmark. He came to this country when he was 12 years old. As I prepared to go, I became so moved, even before I got to the temple. He came to this country and at age 12 he was teased about his funny clothes and his funny language.

He spoke not one word of English, and he remembered for as long as he lived how people teased him, and he tried to be kind to people, and reach out to the young cub reporter and help the cub reporter, reach out to the secretary who was in desperate need of help because her husband had left her, and try to help her.

He was a loving and caring man, because he

remembered what it was like to be laughed at, and discriminated against because of where he came from.

And so, in 1945, when I was about seven years old, my mother told me the story of what the Danes had done, and it made me feel so proud. In 1951, I went to spend a year with an uncle in Germany. He was with the Allied High Commission Forces in occupied Germany.

I will remember for as long as I live driving by Dachau before it was really opened, and as a 13-year-old child, being unable to comprehend that in my lifetime something like this could happen. And then at the end of the year I was able to go to Denmark to meet my Danish relatives, and to tell them how proud I was of the Danish people, as I looked back over those years.

I never dreamed I would participate in the ceremony such as I did at the Hebrew Congregation, and I will remember for as long as I serve as Attorney General what it reminded me of that night: Never, ever take freedom for granted.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Always be vigilant.

But during the course of the evening, as we heard a reading of Hans Christian Anderson, and heard people relate

their experiences, I sat next to a man in his 80s, who had been key in the resistance effort. He seems just like a real human being, and here he was a hero in my eyes.

Each person, large and small, rich and poor, no matter who they are, can be a hero in the fight for freedom, by standing up during the course of a day to speak out against discriminatory tactics, to stand up during the course of a discussion and fight against people who would put others in any kind of bondage, to stand up for equality and to speak out.

And each of us must remember, as we go about our day's business, whether we be the Attorney General or the maid cleaning the floor, that each of us can speak out and protect others, and we must.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I spoke to the people who work at the Department of Justice, and I tried to lay out what I hoped, and the vision I had for the Department, and I said there was going to be one way we approached everything we did in that department. We were going to ask one principal question: What's the right thing to do?

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And we have tried, but as I warned them, trying to figure out the right thing to do is not often easy. Sometimes it requires extraordinary debate, sometimes it requires principled disagreement, but what we must do as we struggle to find the right thing to do in America is come back to a civility in discourse, a respect for the adversary, and principled discussion.

Good, old-fashioned loyal opposition -- I haven't heard the word in a long time -- but we have got to get back to disagreeing in America without writing the other side off. We've got to know that there are many, many issues, and we cannot let single issues divide us as we try to reach for the right thing in America.

In the course of the weeks that followed, as people came up to me, they would almost just touch me on my arm and say, "That's right, what's the right thing to do?" But sometimes it is so difficult.

One of the other moments that I will remember for as long as I live is going to Raymond Elementary in the Mount Pleasant area, before the alleged drive-by shooter had been apprehended. I went to elementary school classrooms, because that's where I had gone in Miami, to try to tell youngsters

what the criminal justice system was about, and to try to encourage them.

That old expression, "Out of the mouths of babes." Children have an innocence, and unvarnished innocence, that is so extraordinary, and they confirmed my faith again that afternoon at Raymond Elementary. As I asked the kids to ask me questions, one little girl raised her hands and said, "When am I going to be able to walk home unafraid? When am I going to be able to go out and play?"

And that is a question that we have to ask, and we don't have clear answers, but that child, and each of us, expects us to find the answer, and we can find the answer if we again approach the problem of crime, not with shrill political rhetoric, not of Republicans versus Democrats, but of all Americans concerned with violence, fed up with violence, and willing to sit down and say, let's approach it in the most common-sense, hard-headed way we can, and come up with answers that make punishment mean what it says, and give to people the opportunity grow as strong, constructive, law-abiding citizens.

[Applause.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The night at the Washington

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Hebrew Congregation was my rededication to doing everything I could to speak out against discrimination. That afternoon, at Raymond Elementary, was my rededication to doing everything I can to cut through all the rhetoric, to work with all concerned citizens, to say, "We cannot tolerate this any longer, we will find answers."

And then I saw justice prevail on a Sunday, as a remarkable trial team won a verdict in Los Angeles, and I saw a community move forward with a sigh of relief. But we cannot take that conviction in that courtroom as the ultimate answer. We have to look to what Los Angeles mirrored, what it represented.

It represented communities throughout America, with vast numbers of children being raised in unsupervised fashion, vast numbers of children living in poverty, vast numbers of children not having a sense of hope, a sense of purpose, a sense of self-respect, families disintegrated around them, and it reminded us all that we cannot rest on a conviction in thinking that just has been done.

We are going to have to look to communities throughout this nation to rebuild the fabric, and restitch the fabric around the families that have disintegrated,

around our children, to give them an opportunity and an environment where they can grow as free citizens.

Martin Luther King said, "What good is it to sit at a lunch counter if you can't buy a hamburger?" and we have got to address that issue, not just in throwing money at it, but in new and creative solutions.

Two years ago the governor of Florida asked me to serve as chair of a social service task force to recommend how to redesign the delivery system for social services in Florida. I held nine public hearings throughout the state, from Pensacola by way of Belglade to Miami.

They were incredible expressions of tremendous community sentiment, of things that could be done, of programs that were working, of single-person programs that were working and making a difference in the community. I had never seen such strength, and became convinced more than ever before that the ultimate answer to what is happening in America lies in our community, and we must forge a new partnership between the Federal government here in Washington and the communities where so many bold and innovative ideas are coming out.

This was a city that helped save a nation during

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the New Deal, during the '30s. This is where so many exciting ideas were created -- Harry Hopkins, Harold Ickies -- I could listen to my mother as a child go on and on about the exciting things that were happening during the Roosevelt administration.

What we have got to do is form a new partnership, though, that takes the excitement that can be generated in Washington, and combine it with the excitement in communities, not Washington down telling the people what to do, but America rising up with individual citizens knowing that they can make a difference, that they don't necessarily have to have government grants, that it doesn't have to be answered from Washington, but that each one of us can again make a difference.

And then came April 19, a day that I will never forget, and I looked out across America and wondered, and tried to answer the questions, and tried to respond, and tried to be accountable to the people, and tried to say exactly what I had done, and why I had done it.

Newspaper people have asked me, again and again, and the media people have asked me, why do you think America responded so? I would be presumptuous to answer the question.

but all I know is that there is a bond across this nation of people who care, of people who believe that each one of us can make a difference, that each one of us can try, that each one of us can reach out and touch, and let somebody else know that they care.

And the flood of mail, the phone calls, of people stopping me on the streets, of kids coming up to me in elementary school classrooms, has been one of the most overwhelming experience that anybody could have.

But that can't erase the tragedy of Waco, and we have to look to the future, not being satisfied that people say, "That-a-girl," but that we look to answers. We cannot rest on what has happened, we have to look to the future, to find answers to problems, to prevent future tragedies such as this, to rebuild America as a less violent nation, that talks together, reasons together, and builds again a nation in which we can be at peace with each other, free, and have a sense that there is a vision for the future.

But I think it basically comes down to turning a little bit inward, not so much that you forget your fellow person in this world, but a little bit inward to remember our family.

I can remember my afternoons after school, during the summer -- my mother worked in the home, my father worked downtown. My mother taught us to appreciate Beethoven symphonies, she taught us the poets she loved and the writers she didn't, and I've never liked Dickens since.

[Laughter.]

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: She taught us how to play baseball and to bake a cake, she taught us how to play fair, and she beat the living daylights out of us when she thought we deserved it, and she loved us with all her heart, and there is no child care in the world that will ever be the substitute for what that lady was in our life.

Somehow or another we have to look to the future of America, to return ourselves to our families, and put families first again in America, and I think it's best said by the last two verses from the Old Testament, from the book of Malachi:

"And behold I shall send you the prophet Elijah, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord, and he shall return the heart of the Father to the children, and the children's hearts to their Father, lest I come down and smite the earth with a curse."

[Applause.]

[The address concluded at 7:50 p.m.]

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