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SPRING COMMENCEMENT

KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF
JANET RENO, UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL

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CONTENTS

	Page
Keynote Address by Attorney General Reno	3
Certificate of Reporter	17

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
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P R O C E E D I N G S

(The following text is the verbatim keynote address given by United States Attorney General Janet Reno.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very, very much. I am honored to share this day with you. And it is so wonderful to look out to see so many who have worked so hard to obtain their diploma today.

I especially want to say hello to my fellow chemistry majors. In 1960, I earned my Chemistry Degree from Cornell University. So to you parents who worry that your graduating sons and daughters still lack a clear career goal, I suggest give them a little more time. You never know what might happen.

Since my graduation in 1960, so many things in America have changed for the better. In 1960, the Iron Curtain divided the world between freedom and dictatorship. Just two weeks ago, I walked the streets of Budapest, alongside the free people of Hungary, and I talked with western Europeans and eastern Europeans alike about our common fight against crime.

In 1960, even after the Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation, much of America was still divided into two nations, black and white. But in the civil rights efforts that soon followed, our nation kept the promises

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the founding fathers made, and finally made equality the law of the land.

In 1960, when I graduated from college, people told me a woman couldn't go to law school. And when I graduated from law school, people told me, "Law firms won't hire you." Thirty years later, no one has ever told me I couldn't be Attorney General.

You are graduating into an amazing era. In 1960, nobody had ever heard of the Internet. No one had been to the moon. The CAT scan was not invented until 1973. But even though our world is more safe, our country is more just, and new technologies are changing our lives, nobody would say that we are a nation without serious, serious challenges.

Many of these challenges seem so stubborn and unyielding, such as violent crime, homelessness, and poverty. Others seem complex and inscrutable, like the international economy and the spread of AIDS. And others seem overwhelming, like the fear of terrorism and environmental catastrophe. But America is a nation of optimists and problem-solvers. Each generation looks to its children to keep our society moving and to make life

23 better. After the parties and the vacations and the
24 graduate degrees yet to come, America will look to you
25 for help. For no matter where you go, and what you do,

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1 you can make a difference.

2 That's what I would like to talk about today.
3 For in these last thirty years, too many people of good
4 will have looked at these very hard problems and started
5 throwing up their hands and turning away. They are
6 getting caught up in the three deadly sins of our public
7 life: extremism, cynicism, and defeatism.

8 The first great threat to our optimistic
9 spirit is extremism. For it blinds us to the tough,
10 tough choices we all confront when we wrestle with the
11 difficult problems of today.

12 The historian Arthur Schlesinger once observed that America's
13 progress and freedom were fueled by what he called the "vital center"
14 in American politics. He meant a place where men and
15 women of reason and good will could meet, regardless of
16 their political party affiliation, a place to hash out
17 their differences and debate the problems of the day. A
18 lively debate, to be sure, sometimes even unruly. But
19 one carried out on common terms with respect for the
20 other person.

21 The vital center has always been a place where
22 people might be divided in their approach to solving a
23 problem, but where they were united as Americans in
24 their determination to act reasonably and to see the
25 virtue in other points of view. In short, the politics

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1 of the vital center means using democracy as a process
2 of working together, to find solutions that attack
3 problems with progress, slow sometimes, terribly slow,
4 and exhausting, to be sure. But always in the American
5 tradition of reforms that are not perfect, but taken one
6 step forward, one important step forward.

7 Today I fear many Americans are forgetting
8 about the vital center. Too often, in today's politics,
9 on all sides, people are confronting tough problems, and
10 retreating to extremes and simple solutions, instead of
11 embracing the complexity that problem-solving always
12 demands, and that democracy requires.

13 You may not like everything that government does; I know I
14 don't. But the alternative is not to throw up your hands or turn to
15 violence. What we must do is to sit down together as
16 reasonable people and make our government do what is
17 right, and stop doing what may be wrong-headed or
18 wasteful.

19 Extremism wants to spread, when the race is
20 really a marathon. Extremism wants to escape the

21 complexity of democracy, and the staggering diversity of
22 human nature, but it never can. Extremism argues that
23 problems are easy to solve, but if they were, we would
24 have licked them a long, long time ago.

25 As Attorney General, I deal with problems that frustrated

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1 previous Attorney Generals for years, such as crime, terrorism,
2 and domestic violence. There is no vaccination for
3 crime, as there is for polio. The only thing we have is
4 hard work, seven days a week. Parents raising children
5 right, police walking the beat every single night, and
6 prosecutors putting criminals behind bars, one by one.

7 We're not a bumper sticker away from solving
8 terrorism. We have to be eternally vigilant, close our
9 borders to those who threaten us, and work slowly and
10 patiently for peace in the lands where foreign
11 terrorists come from. Just as we must fight the hatred
12 and the paranoia that fuels domestic terrorism.

13 There is no sound byte that can make domestic
14 violence go away. You have to stop abusers, one by one,
15 and let them know that there is never an excuse for
16 hitting someone you love. We have to build shelters one
17 at a time to give victims a safe place away from the
18 abuse, and we have to help victims rebuild their lives
19 slowly and steadily.

20 The vital center knows that problems are
21 complicated, and that answers are rarely simple. I hope
22 that in your lives you will choose the course of
23 leadership, not partisanship. Think twice when someone
24 has a simple answer. Remember that so many of our
25 problems took decades to get where they are. That no

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1 amount of sloganeering can fix them overnight.

2 And don't ever forget to listen. For I have learned so much
3 when I have listened to the people with whom I have
4 disagreed. Sometimes I have changed my mind, and
5 sometimes I have changed theirs.

6 The second great threat to our nation's
7 optimistic spirit is cynicism. Maybe you have faced it
8 already. The cynic knows so much about what is wrong,
9 and why it can't be fixed. He can tell you which
10 baseball players strike out the most, and why planes and
11 stock markets crash. She can tell you which public
12 figures were caught doing something wrong, why the
13 current peace negotiations are doomed, and why so many
14 marriages end in divorce. It may be a beautiful South
15 Carolina day, but the cynic knows it's going to rain
16 again someday.

17 Of course, cynicism never happens by itself.
18 It always builds on genuine problems and disasters.

19 Watergate and other scandals convinced millions of
20 Americans that government was permanently broken, and
21 that everyone in public life was some sort of alien from
22 ordinary American life, that they might as well have
23 landed in a spaceship.

24 In fact, you can look at any of our institutions, and you can find
25 a scandal, and cynics told you so. Sports heroes, police officers, business

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1 leaders, doctors, ministers, teachers and politicians;
2 everyone can point to people in all walks of life who
3 have fallen below society's standards.

4 We can use a funny line to dismiss politicians
5 or teachers or Wall Street bankers, but that's the easy
6 way out. And after we do, what's different? Nothing,
7 except that fewer people are willing to work to make our
8 government better, care for the helpless amongst us, or
9 build a business that puts its customers' needs first.
10 At the very least, if you're finding yourself falling
11 prey to cynicism, consider it's cousin, skepticism.

12 At least the skeptic has an open mind. The
13 skeptic sees all the same problems, and asks all the
14 same questions, but is willing to let the answer be good
15 or bad. If you're a recovering cynic, and you have made
16 it back to skepticism, why not just take the final step,
17 and become an idealist in the best American tradition?

18 And I don't mean for a minute that you should
19 be naive. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. talked
20 about the need for all of us to have a tough mind and a
21 tender heart. I can tell you that no one can come to
22 Washington and ever hope to do well, if they don't start
23 the morning by asking tough questions, and end the day
24 getting real answers. But this nation was founded by
25 idealists with tough minds, and with tender hearts, and

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1 they formed a government designed to check the worst in
2 human nature, just as they risked their lives to found a
3 country that cherished freedom and liberty over
4 oppression. They took the hard way, and they made a
5 difference.

6 A month ago, as the sun was setting, before it
7 rose again on Easter morning, I was in Dover, Delaware,
8 listening to President Clinton honor Commerce Secretary
9 Ron Brown, and 32 other Americans who died in the plane
10 crash in Bosnia. They were young and old, men and
11 women, government workers and business leaders, but they
12 were all there because they believed they could help a
13 ravaged country heal from civil war. These 33 lives,
14 said the President, show us the best of America. They
15 are a stern rebuke to the cynicism that is all too
16 familiar these days. He talked about how family after

17 family told him how their loved ones were proud of their
18 work, and believed in what they were doing, and believed
19 they could make a difference.

20 Finally, I want to talk to you about the
21 brother of extremism and cynicism: defeatism. Not
22 everyone faces hopelessness, but no one is far away from
23 someone who does. It may be across town, where family
24 can't afford to pay the rent, or take the child to the
25 doctor, because they don't have a job. It may be in the

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1 next classroom, where a student is convinced that he
2 will never succeed, that no one cares, and that street
3 crime will be the only way out of a hard life. It might
4 be next door, where a wife or child faces terror every
5 night, at the hands of an abusive spouse or parent.

6 You may never find yourself at the bottom of
7 life's pit, and if you do, I pray that you have the
8 energy and the courage to get up and out. But you may
9 know someone who has fallen, someone who doesn't even
10 want to try, because they are sure it won't make a
11 difference if they do.

12 Defeatism isn't always dramatic. When more
13 people stay at home on Election Day, it means that they
14 don't see how voting can make their lives any better.
15 When good people hear the screams outside or next door,
16 and shut their windows, they have given up hope that
17 they can work with the police and the community to make
18 our streets safer.

19 And worst of all, what about the children who
20 never learn to hope? Their bright faces have fallen by
21 age 12. Perhaps they are ignored or abused. Maybe they
22 can find their first real family in a gang. But what if
23 there is a police officer who spends time with that
24 child, to get him off on the right path? What if a
25 neighbor or counselor takes the time to make a

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1 difference? What if defeatism is met head-on by the
2 apostles of the American dream, people who know in their
3 hearts that we can all do better?

4 One of your greatest challenges in this world
5 will be to learn how to deal with extremis, cynicism,
6 and defeatism. But the more I travel around America,
7 the more I see we can. I see what the alternative to
8 these evils are. It's right in front of our face, if we
9 will just lift up our eyes and see it.

10 Nobody can choose the problems they face, but everybody has
11 the power to choose how they will respond to them, and the
12 Americans past and the Americans present are
13 filled with, people who have faced up to their choice,
14 and who have chosen the path of action, and who have chosen

15 to stand for what is right and good in the world.

16 Ten minutes east of here is the W. A. Perry
17 Middle School. Eight years ago, like a lot of schools,
18 it faced so many tough problems, like teen pregnancy,
19 drugs and violence. And a woman named Mary Solomon made
20 a choice. She's not a politician, or a generous
21 millionaire, or a road scholar. She could have just let
22 the problem be, and closed her doors, and even moved
23 somewhere else.

24 But Mary Solomon made her choice, and took a
25 stand. She organized forty of her neighbors. None of

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1 them had children in the school, but all of them
2 remembered better days. They formed the Perry Middle
3 School Task Force. Together, they got the school board
4 to fix up the school. Then they heard there was no
5 money in the budget for a nurse, so they got grant money
6 to pay for one. They identified more resources to fight
7 drugs, got the city police to work with students, and
8 worked with social workers to turn things around.

9 Mary Solomon and the Perry Middle School Task
10 Force made a choice. And they made a difference. Teen
11 pregnancies fell nearly ninety percent. Students had
12 more extracurricular activities to keep them on the
13 right path. A whole school of young people is being
14 taught to reject extremism, cynicism, and defeatism in
15 their life. Mary Solomon is here today with us, and I'd
16 like her to stand and be recognized for taking the stand
17 she has. (Pause).

18 In my own hometown in August of 1992, I
19 watched the people of Miami respond to Hurricane Andrew,
20 as you watched people respond to Hurricane Hugo. In the
21 first two or three days, the world seems to fall apart
22 from you. There was no cohesion, there was no
23 community, there was no society. People looked stunned
24 and adrift. But then people came together. They
25 started directing traffic on their own, and delivering

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1 materials, and bringing water, and
2 reaching out and caring and helping. And that community
3 is stronger and better for it today.

4 And then, almost a year ago, on the Sunday
5 that followed the terrible tragedy in Oklahoma City, I
6 went to a memorial service in that town, and watched the
7 people of that city come together, to speak out against
8 the violence that had spawned that blast, to work with
9 law enforcement to hold those who had done it
10 accountable, and to reach out to the survivors, to help
11 them begin to heal.

12 I have been Attorney General now for three

13 years. My faith in the American people, and their
14 ability to deal with adversity, has never been so
15 strong. I have never been so sure that we can prevail
16 against the causes of wrong in this world. I know we
17 can defeat extremism, and reclaim the vital center. I
18 know we can defeat cynicism, and seek what is good
19 amidst all that is bad. I know we can defeat defeatism,
20 and teach those who have fallen to get up and hope
21 again.

22 It won't be easy, and it will take a lot more
23 than any speech can ever do, but I come here today
24 because you are the future of this country. I know you
25 have the energy. I know you have the commitment. I

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1 know you can make the choice to stand for what is right
2 and good in this world. If you choose public service,
3 you will be choosing one of the most rewarding and
4 fulfilling careers our society can offer. But whether
5 you are running a business, or teaching a class,
6 prosecuting criminals, or raising a family, you can make
7 a difference.

8 In another springtime, 33 years ago, the
9 Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in a Birmingham
10 jail, exhausted from years of seeking justice for all.
11 He was dispirited, and now even some of his fellow
12 ministers were saying he should back off and wait for
13 progress to happen on its own. He must have struggled
14 to keep cynicism out of his every thought, and sitting
15 in that jail cell day after day, with progress coming
16 slowly or not at all, he had to wonder why any man had a
17 right to hope.

18 But Reverend King made his choice. He began
19 writing until his words filled the margins of a
20 secondhand newspaper. The power of his choice flowed
21 out of then pen, and into the conscience of America.

22 Today, as you prepare to make your choices in
23 life, I would like to close with a few of those words
24 from Dr. King's letter from that Birmingham jail:

25 "We must come to see that human progress never

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1 rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes
2 through the tireless efforts and persistent work of
3 men, willing to be co-workers with God, and without
4 this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the
5 forces of social stagnation. We must use time
6 creatively, and forever realize that the time is
7 always right to do right."

8 I hope and pray that you will make your choice the
9 choice of standing for what is right and good in this
10 world. Thank you, congratulations, good luck, and God

11 bless you.
 12 (End of verbatim keynote address.)
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CERTIFICATE OF REPORTER

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA) ss:
 COUNTY OF RICHLAND)

I, Leslie S. Toole, the officer before whom the foregoing proceedings were recorded, do hereby certify that the foregoing proceedings were taken by me to the best of my ability and thereafter reduced to typewriting under my direction; and that the foregoing pages constitute a true, accurate, and complete transcription of said proceedings.

LESLIE S. TOOLE, CSR
 Notary Public in and for
 State of South Carolina

My commission expires February 12, 2001.