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1 SPEECH OF JANET RENO
2
3 ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
4
5 before
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7 39TH ANNUAL CONVENTION
8 SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
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COBO HALL
DETROIT, MICHIGAN
MONDAY, AUGUST 12, 1996

25 COURT REPORTER: Mary Jeanne Henn (CSR-2940)

2
1 Detroit, Michigan
2 Monday, August 12, 1996
3 Approximately 1:06 p.m.

4 Thank you, Doctor Lowery. I can't tell
5 you what an honor it is to be here with you
6 today, to be introduced by you and to be here
7 with the Southern Christian Leadership
8 Conference. You, Reverend Abernathy, your
9 colleagues, have been the true heroes in the
10 civil rights struggle and the longstanding
11 inspiration to me and to countless Americans
12 throughout this nation. The SCLC has been
13 synonymous for decades with the fight for racial
14 justice, and your critical eye and your vigorous
15 and effective advocacy continue today to keep our

16 eye on the prize in the ever crucial search for
17 freedom and equality. Your record, the record of
18 so many people who labor in their communities of
19 fostering education, promoting voter
20 registration, working to end youth violence and
21 developing leaders for the future is one of which
22 you can all be proud.

23 I am so very proud to be with you
24 today, but as we look at our accomplishments of
25 the past, there is in this nation a troubling

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1 rift towards the politics of intolerance and a
2 tendency to resort to arguments that pit one
3 group against another. We must stand against
4 such division.

5 I know the value of tolerance, I know
6 the value of diversity, because I was born and
7 raised and served most of my public life in
8 Miami. When the many different cultures of that
9 city's residents came together to solve their
10 problems, the problems got solved. When the many
11 different people of that community came together
12 to recognize the greatness of each other's
13 background, that community was blended into an
14 immeasurable richness; but when that community's
15 groups railed against each other and criticized,
16 we all hurt.

17 Now as Attorney General when I go to
18 communities and see neighbors that are isolated
19 from each other, I do not see strength. When I
20 go to communities and see neighbors reaching
21 across ethnic and social boundaries coming
22 together to discuss the issues of crime, of
23 improving the education of their children, of
24 strengthening the local economy, I see a
25 healthier, stronger, better community. We must

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1 teach all of our people to rejoice in the
2 magnificent diversity of this nation. We must
3 learn to appreciate each other's perspectives and
4 invest in each other's struggles.

5 In our own generation, we have seen
6 remarkable progress in our efforts to bridge the

7 gap between the ideals of equality, opportunity
8 and fair play enshrined in our founding documents
9 and the harsher realities of daily experience for
10 so many citizens.

11 Our national journey has taken us from
12 segregated classrooms to integrated ones,
13 from Jim Crow laws to civil rights laws for
14 women, minorities and persons with disabilities,
15 from literacy tests for voting to the largest
16 contingent of blacks and Hispanics ever in the
17 United States Congress; but 40 years after Brown
18 versus Board of Education, racial prejudice and
19 the corrosive effects of discrimination are still
20 with us. We cannot say that we have completed
21 our journey when even today blacks and Hispanics,
22 and in many cases women, still have a harder time
23 getting a job or renting an apartment or
24 obtaining a loan or getting into college.

25 We have not completed our journey when
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1 the unemployment rate for black males is still
2 twice as high as it is for white males. Even
3 college educated black and Hispanic men and women
4 of every race and ethnic background are paid less
5 than comparably educated, comparably trained
6 white men. These problems are doubly difficult
7 for the one-fifth of all black and Hispanic men
8 and women who also have physical or mental
9 disabilities.

10 We have not completed our journey when
11 violent hate crimes are at an all time high in
12 this nation. Yes, we have changed our laws but
13 we have not always changed our ways. Old habits
14 die hard, attitudes evolve slowly, so we must
15 renew our efforts to prevent the spread of hate.
16 We must renew our efforts to open the door of
17 opportunity so that every individual can share in
18 and fully contribute to America's strength and
19 bounty.

20 The reality of continuing
21 discrimination was at the core of the President's
22 decision to continue to support affirmative
23 action. Last July the President made clear that

24 as a nation we will not abandon our commitment to
25 equal opportunity, but he also made clear that we
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1 need to refine the tool of affirmative action so
2 that it can be used fairly and effectively to
3 help our society achieve its goal of
4 integration. He directed that we mend, not end
5 affirmative action.

6 At the same time the Supreme Court
7 ruled in the Adarand case that when the Federal
8 Government uses affirmative action it has to do
9 so in a fair and careful way, but in writing for
10 the Court, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor
11 recognized, and I quote her language: An unhappy
12 persistence of both the practice and the
13 lingering effects of racial discrimination
14 against minority groups. Justice O'Connor in
15 that opinion agreed that the Constitution and the
16 Government has an obligation to address it.

17 In light of the Adarand decision, we in
18 the Department of Justice are hard at work trying
19 to make certain that federal programs in place
20 are fair and flexible, that there are no quotas,
21 that there are no preferences for the
22 unqualified, that the programs end when their
23 objectives have been achieved. When affirmative
24 action is done right, it insures equal
25 opportunity; when affirmative action is done

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1 right, it corrects for the effects of a history
2 of discrimination; and when affirmative action is
3 done right, it fosters diversity. A member of
4 the Florida Board of Regents wrote once, as she
5 observed the effects of affirmative action in our
6 state, the developing talent fuels all aspects of
7 a democratic society, and that's what affirmative
8 action is all about.

9 I remember the helping hands given to
10 me as a youngster when I first got my first
11 summer job. I remember the helping hands that
12 have been given to me along the way. We are all in
13 this nation, the beneficiary of affirmative action
14 on the part of others to give us opportunity.

15 Because of our efforts to eliminate
16 discrimination and to provide for equal
17 opportunity to all, our nation's workplaces, our
18 schools, our councils of government are all much
19 more diverse than they ever were. Yet we now
20 face a new challenge.

21 For over 20 years our laws have
22 recognized the value of diversity. In the Bakke
23 case, Justice Powell's controlling opinion for
24 the Supreme Court held that colleges can take
25 race into account as one factor in the admissions

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1 process to promote diversity and to enrich the
2 academic experience of all students; but earlier
3 this year a Federal Appeals Court in Texas said
4 that Bakke was no longer good law. The court
5 said that diversity was no longer a justification
6 for affirmative action in education. This is the
7 Hopwood case. We disagree strongly with that
8 decision. Last month the Supreme Court declined
9 to take the case on procedural grounds, so the
10 issue is still an open one. We continue to
11 believe that if the setting in which you learn
12 looks more like the world in which you will live,
13 your education is stronger, and we will continue
14 to fight for that principle.

15 This is a sober time in civil rights.
16 We have made progress but we have much, much more
17 to do. The Department of Justice is committed to
18 doing our part, to protect the opportunity that
19 every American deserves by fully and fairly
20 enforcing our civil rights laws without fear or
21 favor. I would like to address some particular
22 initiatives.

23 Doctor Lowery has talked about the
24 topic much on everyone's mind today, one that
25 tests the true meaning of tolerance, the rash of

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1 arsons and desecrations in black churches and
2 other houses of worship. These fires have
3 brought hurt and pain. Any sort of desecration
4 or destruction of any place of worship is among
5 the most despicable of all crimes, reaching to

6 the most deeply felt of all American tenants,
7 freedom of religion; but the desecration
8 and destruction, particularly by fire, of an
9 African-American church resonates especially
10 deeply in this country, harkening back to a bleak
11 period in our nation's history. The church is
12 the heart and the soul of so many communities,
13 and the black church has historically played a
14 pivotal role in the organizing efforts of the
15 civil rights movement. It is for these and many
16 reasons that the President has made it a top
17 priority to prosecute those responsible for these
18 arsons, to prevent future damage to houses of
19 worship and to help communities and congregations
20 in their efforts to rebuild as well as to bring
21 communities closer together.

22 There is something wonderful about how
23 people will come together in tragedy, and to
24 drive with the President of the United States
25 down a little dirt road in South Carolina past

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1 what was left of a church which was just a vacant
2 lot with a beautiful old oak tree which had half
3 covered the church standing there, to drive to
4 the scene of the new church and to see that
5 community come together, black and white, was a
6 scene that I will not forget.

7 It is so important that as we rebuild,
8 we reach out across racial and ethnic lines to
9 rebuild the harmony of this nation and our
10 community. Under the direction of the National
11 Church Arson Task Force we have deployed over 200
12 ATF and FBI investigators around the country to
13 investigate these arsons, one of the largest
14 federal criminal investigations of its kind.

15 Doctor Lowery has described Duval
16 Patrick and James Johnson. I don't know Mr.
17 Johnson as well as I know Duval Patrick. Duval
18 Patrick is one of the gentlest, finest, most
19 intelligent people I have ever met, but I also
20 told a newspaper reporter that asked me once,
21 underneath that gentleness is some of the
22 toughest steel I know. He and Mr. Johnson

23 brought together the FBI, the ATF, Justice
24 Department, prosecutors, the United States
25 Attorneys and community relations services and

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1 United States Marshals to forge a coordinated
2 plan for investigating and prosecuting these
3 crimes, and we are working very closely with
4 state and local officials.

5 Our response to these fires has been
6 decisive and determined. We have responded to
7 over 200 suspicious fires since January 1995, and
8 our efforts are paying off with more arrests made
9 more quickly. In the past three months we have
10 made arrests in connection with over 40 fires in
11 houses of worship. These arrests have been made
12 in Alabama, Florida, Missouri, North Carolina,
13 Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee,
14 Virginia, Washington State and West Virginia, and
15 again it has been an example of state and local
16 officials who care as much working together with
17 federal officials in a partnership to deal with
18 this travesty.

19 Last month the President signed into
20 law the 1996 Church Arson Prevention Act. This
21 law will make it easier for the Department of
22 Justice to prosecute these crimes and will
23 increase the penalties for civil rights
24 violations. I commend Doctor Lowery and the SCLC
25 for your records in bringing this issue to public

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1 attention and for your help in getting this bill
2 enacted into law, and Congressman Conyers helped
3 lead the way in congress for that passage.

4 We do not claim that these fires are
5 part of a single racist conspiracy. Our
6 instructions to the investigators and prosecutors
7 are to follow every lead to its logical end and
8 follow the evidence wherever it may go, but given
9 the number of African-American churches burned in
10 the south in the last year and a half, it would
11 be irresponsible not to pursue and investigate
12 the possibility of racial motivations for these
13 fires.

14 On the other side, SCLC and others have
15 rightly raised the point that our law enforcement
16 effort cannot be effective if there is a lack of
17 trust between the investigators and the
18 communities in which these churches are located.
19 In this regard we are working to reach out to the
20 community and to establish effective
21 communication with the affected congregations.
22 Duval Patrick and Jim Johnson have traveled to
23 the south, meeting with clergy and community
24 leaders, attending town hall meetings and working
25 with the investigators. The President, Secretary

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1 Rubin and I each met with ministers from these
2 churches in June to discuss the situation, and
3 I so appreciated Doctor Lowery's involvement.

4 I have directed that each United States
5 Attorney form a local task force to bring
6 together prosecutors with the community to
7 discuss what can be done to force against it and
8 to prevent these tragedies. Those local task
9 forces serve as a contact point for the churches
10 and for the community. We are also working hand
11 in hand with local communities to try to prevent
12 these arsons. The Federal Emergency Management
13 Agency is working with the National Church Arson
14 Task Force spearheading an effort to involve
15 local communities in appropriate prevention
16 efforts.

17 The outrage at these fires has been
18 universal and they have generated a heartening
19 response from our communities, solidarity among
20 followers of many faiths, donations of money and
21 in-kind support and countless volunteers to help
22 the prevention and rebuilding efforts, and it
23 will take all this and more, for the only way to
24 tackle this problem is for compassion and
25 understanding to overcome bigotry and hate. That

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1 struggle must be waged and won in every community
2 and in every heart.

3 The example of the National Church
4 Arson Task Force is an example of the kind of

5 partnership between law enforcement and local
6 communities that we need to continue. Here in
7 Detroit and around the nation I am watching the
8 local police come together through community
9 policing with neighborhoods. Police officers
10 reaching out to young people, building trust,
11 going to neighbors, going to residents,
12 consulting with them, identifying the problems
13 and developing priorities and listening to the
14 people. I see trust building between police
15 officers who care about their communities, the
16 thousands of police officers, and citizens. I
17 have seen young men come to the Department of
18 Justice to tell the President of the United
19 States that it is their community police officer
20 who has gotten them out of trouble and gotten
21 them off on the right foot, but there is still
22 much to do.

23 Recognizing that the vast majority of
24 the 600,000 law enforcement officers in this
25 nation are honest, hard working and law abiding
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1 and fair as they put their lives on the line each
2 day in the pursuit of justice, yet police chiefs
3 and rank and file officers alike tell me that to
4 maintain the confidence of the community we must
5 take decisive action against those officers who
6 abuse their power and deny citizens their
7 Constitutional rights by use of excessive force
8 or harassment. The Department of Justice plays a
9 crucial role here through the use of criminal
10 prosecutions and criminal sanctions and we have
11 used that authority when the evidence and the law
12 provides for it.

13 In 1994 under the leadership of then
14 House Judiciary Chair John Conyers congress also
15 authorized the Justice Department to investigate
16 and remedy police departments which engage in a
17 pattern or practice of discriminatory conduct.
18 We have developed a comprehensive initiative to
19 address this problem. The initiative involves
20 both deterrents and effective training and
21 prevention. We will continue to work with those

22 jurisdictions which are working to improve their
23 departments. We are also evaluating the
24 information from a number of jurisdictions and we
25 will investigate departments where discriminatory
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1 patterns emerge. These investigations and work
2 with our state and local authorities in
3 developing adequate training programs are
4 designed with one goal in mind, to insure the
5 integrity of law enforcement and to insure those
6 who enforce the law are not above the law.

7 Another priority for the Department of
8 Justice in the civil rights field is the area of
9 fair lending. Home ownership has a profound
10 significance in this country and is still at the
11 center of the American dream. Yet many Americans
12 are kept from that dream when they are denied
13 home mortgage financing on account of their race
14 or national origin. The studies over the last
15 several years have laid to rest the fact that
16 disparities might be explained in the industry by
17 differences in credit worthiness. Black and
18 Hispanic applicants for loans are being denied
19 financing, however, at a much greater rate than
20 white applicants with virtually the identical
21 qualifications. Some banks have simply not done
22 business in minority neighborhoods while others
23 charge higher rates or add extra charges to their
24 loans in minority areas.

25 Our effort to address this problem has
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1 been a combination of litigation against banks
2 whose practices evidence discrimination and
3 working with the banking industry to reform their
4 practices. We have brought cases against lending
5 institutions for discrimination in underwriting
6 loans, we have challenged lenders for redlining
7 and other discriminatory practices in marketing
8 financial services and we have challenged lenders
9 for the discriminatory pricing of loans. We have
10 also challenged insurance companies for failing
11 to offer homeowners insurance to minority
12 neighborhoods to the same extent and on the same

13 terms as insurance was offered to predominantly
14 white areas.

15 The lesson to be learned, however, is
16 that we're telling banks we're not asking you to
17 make a bad loan, but here is some business for
18 you that you have overlooked, and we are working
19 with them to train them in practices and
20 procedures that can insure no discrimination and
21 further business for them. The results of these
22 efforts have been remarkable in a very short
23 period of time, for we have in part due to our
24 work expanded the availability of loans to
25 minorities.

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1 From 1993 to 1994 home mortgage loans
2 to African-Americans increased by 56 percent, the
3 number of mortgage loans made to Hispanics
4 increased by 43 percent and the number of loans
5 made to Native Americans increased by 27
6 percent. That means that 89,000 more
7 African-American, Hispanic and Native American
8 families purchased homes than in the previous
9 year. Statistics just released for 1995 show
10 this trend continuing. We are going to continue
11 to make sure that there is no discrimination in
12 lending and that all Americans can pursue their
13 dream.

14 Voting rights is another area at
15 a crossroads. Voting rights have always been at
16 the heart of the civil rights struggle. We must
17 continue that effort to enforce these laws as
18 vigorously as possible. We face a challenge.

19 In the midst of the debate, or perhaps
20 out of it, the Supreme Court issued decisions on
21 voting rights that have called into question the
22 whole effort to create districts designed to
23 provide minorities a greater opportunity to
24 participate in the political arena. In cases out
25 of Georgia, Texas and North Carolina, the Supreme

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1 Court has thrown out so-called majority/minority
2 congressional districts that provided new
3 opportunities for black and Hispanic voters to

4 elect candidates of their choice. The Department
5 of Justice defended those districts. We argued
6 that these districts did not result from an
7 improper consideration of race and that the
8 justifications for the districts were compelling
9 under the Constitution. The Court disagreed.

10 Even so, these decisions do not mean
11 the end of minority representation as we know
12 it. They certainly do not mean that states can
13 abandon their obligation under the Voting Rights
14 Act and Constitution to insure fair
15 representation and to provide minority voters
16 with an equal opportunity to elect candidates of
17 their choice, and they do not mean that the
18 Justice Department will cede its responsibility
19 to enforce the Voting Rights Act with vigor and
20 with tenacity. They do mean, however, that
21 states must pay more attention when drawing
22 districts to certain so-called traditional
23 districting principles, compact, community
24 interests, respect for political boundaries,
25 especially when drawing minority districts.

1 Even with these decisions, the
2 Administration will continue our efforts to
3 achieve equal voting opportunities for all
4 Americans, including minorities who live in
5 states with a history of voting discrimination.
6 The Department will continue to join with state
7 and local jurisdictions in defending districts
8 that we believe meet Constitutional standards.

9 I would now like to speak for a moment
10 to the young people in this audience and then to
11 the adults. It is so encouraging for
12 Doctor Lowery and I for you to include so many young
13 people here today as an example of what should be
14 done around the nation. Our young people are our
15 future. They are so strong, they want so much to
16 participate, they want to make a difference, they
17 want to contribute to this nation, and to see the
18 young people here today wanting to be involved,
19 wanting to hear what is going on, is exciting for
20 me. On three occasions, however, in the last six

21 months I have had young people ask me why do
22 people call us villains, why do they say we're
23 causing more and more trouble.

24 I think our young people are just some
25 of the most wonderful, wonderful people in this
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1 country and we've got to tell them so again and
2 again. A very few young people cause problems
3 for this world, but a very, very vast majority of
4 young people are contributing through community
5 service programs that are making a difference,
6 through helping elderly people, through
7 participating in their family, through helping
8 teachers, through studying hard, through making a
9 difference, and don't forget to give them a pat
10 on the back.

11 Now to the adults, and to the young
12 people, because you too can help. There are
13 children all over this nation who are still left
14 out and left back who will never become doctors
15 or lawyers or police officers or Doctor Lowerys
16 or much else, whose latent idealism will never be
17 free to grow into compassion and action because
18 there was no teacher, no friend, no public
19 citizen like you who by action or example quietly
20 inspired them or showed them how to look up, not
21 down, who helped them to see their state and
22 their own and their neighborhood dreams, who
23 touched the life in some private but powerful way
24 and gave them a reason to hope and to live and to
25 thrive. We must give all the children of America

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1 a future, give them the hope and the dream that
2 every one of us is entitled to.

3 The SCLC has done so much and with your
4 work in youth violence and your mentoring
5 programs you are setting an example for so many
6 others. There are some people that tell me it is
7 a little bit too overwhelming, but I was able to
8 announce last week that for the first time in a
9 decade both the violent crime arrest rate for
10 juveniles and the murder arrest rate for
11 juveniles was down, and the murder arrest rate is

12 down significantly.

13 This should not give us a cause for
14 patting ourselves on the back, because the number
15 of young people in this nation is going to
16 increase dramatically in these next 15 years.
17 It's not a cause for us to claim victory, it's a
18 cause for us to say look, this may be working,
19 let's insure that it's not a blip on the screen.

20 Let us renew our efforts, let us go to
21 our communities and recognize that a mentoring
22 program for an eight-year-old won't make
23 a difference, we've got to organize our
24 communities so that strong and healthy parents
25 are involved in raising their children so that we

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1 make sure our children have proper preventative
2 medical care. Something is wrong with a nation
3 that says to a person 70 years of age that he or she can
4 increase his or her life expectancy by three years with
5 this operation which we will pay for, and says to
6 the child of a working poor person, sorry, you
7 can't get preventative medical care because you
8 don't have health insurance but you don't have
9 enough money to pay for it.

10 Let's make sure all our children have
11 appropriate educare, good constructive child care
12 during the most formative time in a child's
13 life. Let's honor the teachers of America who do
14 so much to prepare our children for the
15 technology of tomorrow. Let us provide afternoon
16 and evening programs, let us teach our children
17 how to solve conflicts without knives and guns
18 and fists. Let us train our children for jobs
19 that can enable them to earn a living wage and
20 let's get them placed in those jobs.

21 Let us give our children a future, and
22 remember the last words from the book of
23 Malachi: Behold, I shall send you the prophet
24 Elijah before the coming of the great and
25 dreadful day of the Lord, and he shall return the

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1 heart of the father to the children and the
2 children's hearts to their fathers.

3 (The speech was concluded at 1:28 p.m.)

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