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COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS OF  
ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO  
AT BOSTON COLLEGE

Monday, May 19, 1997

Boston College  
Conte Forum  
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

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(10:35 a.m.)  
ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank  
you, Father Neenan, Father Lahey, thank you for  
inviting me here today, your eminence, honored  
guests, and mostly to the graduates. I  
congratulate you, each one of you, for what you  
have accomplished at this very great  
university. I'm very, very honored to share  
this time with you and with your families.

10 I have had an opportunity to  
11 meet students this morning who impressed me  
12 with their realism, but touched me by their  
13 idealism. They represent what this great  
14 university is all about: service and reaching  
15 across lines to come together to serve all of  
16 human kind.

17 From this wonderful institution  
18 you will draw strength and wisdom,  
19 understanding and faith that will be with you  
20 all the days of your life. Lessons learned  
21 here will guide you in success and failure and  
22 joy and sorrow. You need them, for the world  
23 will change before your very eyes.

24 I think back to this day 37  
25 years ago when I graduated from college. I

3

1 never dreamed I would see all that I have seen  
2 and done all that I have done.

3 The challenges you and the  
4 world will face will test all that you have  
5 learned here. But there will be wonderful  
6 opportunities to put to work the great  
7 knowledge that you have gained here and the  
8 great understanding.

9 Now having talked with some of  
10 your colleagues this morning, this may not be  
11 so. But in case some of you may turn from the  
12 challenges of these next years saying, I'm just  
13 going to throw up my hands; the problems of the  
14 world are too complicated; it's too big; no one  
15 person can make a difference; I'm not even  
16 going to try; I'm not even going to get  
17 involved -- let me just tell you this: Each  
18 one of us can make a difference.

19 For four years now I have  
20 traveled across this country and seen senior  
21 partners in a law firm who tutor a young child  
22 at risk. I've seen senior citizens work in a  
23 parent patrol to ensure the safety of their  
24 neighborhood. I've seen a homemaker with seven  
25 children still volunteer for duties outside the

1 home. Every one of us can make a difference.  
2 How do we do it? We don't let  
3 the bigness of the world overwhelm us. We take  
4 it one step at a time. Say what you believe is  
5 right and then stick with it. If you know  
6 you're right, don't let polls or criticism turn  
7 you away. When you lose or when you err, know  
8 that that happens, pick yourself up, dust  
9 yourself off and move ahead. Don't be afraid  
10 to try.

11 I learned a valuable lesson. I  
12 ran for office in 1972. I tried to do and say  
13 what I believed to be right. I lost the  
14 election. But as someone told me, just keep on  
15 doing and saying what you believe to be right.  
16 If you wake up the next morning, you'll feel  
17 good about yourself. But if you pussy foot,  
18 equivocate, and talk out of both sides of your  
19 mouth and say what you think is popular, you'll  
20 wake up the next morning feeling miserable.

21 Well, I didn't feel very good  
22 the next morning because I had lost the  
23 election, but then somebody put a biography of  
24 Abraham Lincoln on my bedside table. It was  
25 wonderful to learn that Lincoln lost his first

1 election. It helps to know how to lose and to  
2 know it's not the end of the world.

3 Learn to do things the right  
4 way and learn never to be intimidated by the  
5 complexity of it.

6 When I was eight years old, we  
7 lived in a little wooden house. We had four  
8 children in the family a year apart. We were  
9 outgrowing the house. My father did not have  
10 money enough to hire a contractor to build the  
11 house.

12 One day mother announced she  
13 was going to build a house. And we said, What  
14 do you know about building a house? She said,  
15 I'm going to learn. She went to the brick  
16 mason. She went to the electrician. She went

17 to the plumber. She talked to them about how  
18 to build a house.

19 She came home and over the next  
20 two years she dug the foundation with her own  
21 hands with a pick and shovel, laid the block,  
22 put in the wiring and plumbing. My father  
23 would help her with the beams when he came home  
24 from work at night.

25 She and I lived in that house

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1 just before she died, just before I came to  
2 Washington. And that house was a symbol to me  
3 that you can do anything you really want to if  
4 you work hard enough at it and if it's the  
5 right thing to do.

6 But that house taught me  
7 another lesson. In August of 1992, Hurricane  
8 Andrew hit our neighborhood. About three  
9 o'clock in the morning, winds began to howl, an  
10 unearthly noise unlike anything I've ever  
11 heard. Trees began to crack around the house.

12 My mother got out. She was very  
13 old and frail. She sat in her chair, folded  
14 her hands, and she was totally unafraid, for  
15 she knew how she had build that house. She  
16 build it the right way. She put in good  
17 materials. She didn't cut corners.

18 When we went out after the  
19 hurricane had passed, all the surrounding area  
20 looked like a World War I battlefield, but the  
21 house had only lost a shingle and some screens.

22 Build your life the right way  
23 and don't be intimidated by the complexity, but  
24 don't forget to laugh at yourself and don't  
25 forget to have fun.

7

1 I made a promise to myself the  
2 day I graduated from law school that I would  
3 never do anything that I didn't enjoy doing.  
4 There have been some days that I can perhaps do  
5 without, but most mornings I wake up with an  
6 eagerness to go to work, to do the best I can.

7 I hope the same for you.

8 What advice can I give you? I  
9 think the Jesuits give the best advice in their  
10 commitment to serve others. Figure out what  
11 you can do for the rest of your life to serve  
12 others.

13 It may be the bank president  
14 who runs the most user-friendly, thoughtful,  
15 confident banking service available for the  
16 people he serves, but that bank president can  
17 also tutor a child at risk.

18 It may be an insurance salesman  
19 who remembers a coach of his little league team  
20 and goes out and coaches three days a week to  
21 make sure that kids have opportunities.

22 It may be an 84-year-old man,  
23 such as one I met, who stood up one day and  
24 said, Do you know what I do three mornings a  
25 week for three hours each morning? And I said,

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1 No, sir. And he said, You know how old I am?  
2 I said, No. He said, I'm 84 and I volunteer as  
3 a teacher's aide in the first grade class. And  
4 the teacher stood up and she said, He  
5 volunteers for my class. The gifted kids can't  
6 wait for their time with him because he  
7 broadens their horizons far beyond what I can  
8 do. And the kids with learning disabilities  
9 think he has the patience of Job.

10 Whether you're eight or 84,  
11 every single one of us can make a difference.  
12 You can do work in your church. You can  
13 develop pro bono programs in your law firm. As  
14 you go looking for jobs, find out just what  
15 they do to permit public service, community  
16 service, and participate.

17 But then there is public  
18 service: service to your country, service to  
19 the state, service to the cities. Some people  
20 say, Well, government doesn't work very well;  
21 it seems too contentious.

22 These last four years have been  
23 the most wonderful opportunity that anybody

24 could have to serve. Yes, it is true that you  
25 get cussed at, fussed at, and figuratively

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1 beaten around the ears very regularly. But  
2 there is nothing more rewarding than public  
3 service.

4 Last year I went with the  
5 President to South Carolina to dedicate a new  
6 church that had been built in the place of a  
7 church that had been burned in the rash of  
8 church arsons. It was a moving moment. But as  
9 we finished, a lady broke through the lines,  
10 ran up to me and gave me a big hug and said,  
11 Janet, I haven't seen you since Miami when you  
12 were state attorney and you used to get my  
13 child support. And she said, And these are the  
14 two guys you got me child support for. And two  
15 grown, young men smiled down at me. You  
16 remember those moments as long as you remember  
17 anything.

18 You remember the victim coming  
19 up to you ten years later and saying, You  
20 prosecuted my case. You helped me. You helped  
21 make me whole again. There is nothing more  
22 rewarding than public service.

23 And even the man who stopped me  
24 and said, Thank you. And I said, For what? He  
25 said, For arresting me and getting me into drug

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1 treatment. He said, You believed in me, and  
2 you got me into treatment. I've been clean for  
3 two years. I've got my family back. I've got  
4 a job back. That's what public service is all  
5 about.

6 Sometimes you will fail. But  
7 if you move ahead, figuring out how you can use  
8 the law and government to serve the people in  
9 this great democracy, you may not make much  
10 money, but the rewards are far greater than any  
11 dollar can ever provide you.

12 As you deal in the concept of  
13 service, I urge you to focus on community.

14 Even if you go to Washington, never forget the  
15 community in which you live or from where you  
16 came, because too many communities of this  
17 nation have become afraid and unraveled.

18 It is up to all of us to  
19 re-weave the fabric of community around our  
20 children, around the elderly, around neighbors  
21 who for too long have not talked with each  
22 other. We need to bring new skills to this,  
23 problem-solving skills.

24 Instead of wringing our hands  
25 and saying, We can't do anything about crime in

11

1 this community, we've got to reach out and  
2 figure out how we work together to solve the  
3 problem of crime.

4 We've got to learn how to  
5 communicate with each other and listen to each  
6 other. We must make sure that we don't let  
7 disagreement on one issue close the doors to  
8 good dialogue on all the other issues that  
9 beset us.

10 And we need to learn how to  
11 resolve our conflicts without harsh words and  
12 help our children resolve their conflicts  
13 without knives and guns and fists.

14 Most importantly to the idea of  
15 community and re-weaving the fabric of  
16 community around our families and our  
17 neighborhoods comes the idea of professions  
18 working together.

19 I had an incredible seven  
20 minutes about an hour ago talking to the dean  
21 of the nursing school and the educational  
22 school and the college of arts and sciences.

23 What this great university has  
24 done in terms of getting professions to come  
25 together to address mutual problems together

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1 serves as an example for all of this country.  
2 And as you leave here, take the Boston College  
3 example with you.

4                                   When you return to your  
5       community or go on a new assignment or to a new  
6       community, find the nurses, find the  
7       universities, find the police, find the  
8       teachers who are working together and reinforce  
9       what they do. It can make such an incredible  
10      difference. And as you do that, you can work  
11      together in problem solving.

12                                  One of the biggest problems is  
13      people don't want to get involved in their  
14      communities because they don't want to come  
15      outside. They don't trust people because they  
16      don't feel safe. But working with community  
17      policing, community probation, you can make a  
18      safer community.

19                                  Public health specialists can  
20      come together with prosecutors and public  
21      defenders and police officers in addressing the  
22      problem how we treat drug abuse, how we deal  
23      with the problem of domestic violence, how we  
24      provide for prevention programs that work.

25                                  We must address the problem of

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1      violence in the home together. For too long  
2      this nation swept that problem under the rug.  
3      But unless we end violence in the home, we will  
4      never end it in the streets and in the schools.

5                                  Another community problem may  
6      exist in schools. You may come to a community  
7      and the teachers will say, Our class sizes are  
8      too huge. We don't have enough computers. We  
9      don't have enough teachers who know how to use  
10     computers. Whatever we're going to do will  
11     cost money.

12                                  Galvanize your business, work  
13     together lobbying the legislature, work with  
14     the city council and the school board, but  
15     never give up trying to give our youngsters an  
16     opportunity to grow.

17                                  As you build community, if you  
18     don't like what's happening in city hall, don't  
19     say, Those are just the politicians. Go down  
20     there and do something about it. Go down there

21 and contribute and make a difference.

22 But as you focus on community,  
23 the number one issue I think you must address  
24 in America is how people put children, all of  
25 the children of America first in our lives.

14

1 We see the problem of youth  
2 violence and youth victims. We see drug abuse  
3 rising with our children. We see the problem  
4 of drop-outs.

5 And I, as a prosecutor in Miami,  
6 had an investigation of a 17 year old that I  
7 had adjudicated guilty of armed robbery and see  
8 four points along the way in that child's life  
9 were we could have intervened and made a  
10 difference and kept him away from crime.

11 We've got to make an investment  
12 early on, because the doctors who took me to  
13 the public hospital in Miami to try to figure  
14 out what to do about crack involved infants and  
15 their mothers, they taught me that the first  
16 three years of life was the most important.  
17 This was the time you learned the concept of  
18 reward and punishment and developed a  
19 conscience. Fifty percent of all learned human  
20 response was learned in the first year of life.

21 Well, you may think, That's not  
22 my problem. But unless we make an investment  
23 beginning at the beginning, we will never be  
24 able to build enough presence 18 years from now  
25 if a child does not understand what punishment

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1 means or has a conscience.

2 Unless we make an investment in  
3 children now, the greatest nursing and medical  
4 institutions in the world will be brought to  
5 their knees because we failed to provide this  
6 kind of care up-front.

7 Unless we make an investment in  
8 children at zero to three, the educational  
9 institutions of this land will be spending  
10 money on costly remedial programs that they

11 could be spending on preparing our students for  
12 the 21st century.

13 All of us, every American,  
14 whether out of common humanity or in their  
15 self-interest has an interest in making sure  
16 that every child in America has preventive  
17 medical care; that every child in America has  
18 safe, constructive child care from zero to  
19 five; that every child in America has an  
20 education to prepare them for the 21st century;  
21 and every child in America has supervision and  
22 care during those afternoon and evening hours  
23 that are so critical and so important; and that  
24 every child in America has somebody who can  
25 mentor them, look up to them, and take care of

16

1 them.

2 But as you proceed with  
3 service, do not forget those most dear to you,  
4 closest to you: Your own children.

5 I remember my afternoons and  
6 evenings after school when my mother wasn't  
7 building the house. If she were building the  
8 house, she took us with her and we helped. If  
9 she wasn't, she taught us to play baseball.  
10 She punished us and she loved us with all her  
11 heart and soul. And there is no child care in  
12 the world that could ever be a substitute for  
13 what that lady was in our life.

14 Your challenge and my challenge  
15 is to somehow or another put children, all of  
16 the children of America, first in the work  
17 place, so that we can have time to spend with  
18 our children, so that we have time to read to  
19 them at night, so that we have time to  
20 participate with them in school activities.

21 How do we do it? We use the  
22 wonders of modern technology to ensure that  
23 time, through telecommuting, through altered  
24 shifts, with parents' shifts dovetailed school  
25 shifts.

17



18                   The scientists have sometimes  
19           got to think about dollars, too. Instead of  
20           just building one machine a year that gets  
21           better and better each year so that the other  
22           one becomes obsolete, we have got to figure out  
23           how to use all our machines in a cost effective  
24           way.

25                   But as we address these issues,

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1           as we come together to serve, we have something  
2           else to do. We have to do all that we can to  
3           heal the divisions caused by intolerance and  
4           bigotry, to heal the youth who is angry, to  
5           welcome the immigrants, and to control the  
6           racial divide. We need to speak out against  
7           prejudice and hate everywhere we find it.

8                   Haters are cowards. And when  
9           confronted, they usually back down. But too  
10          often we let them become entrenched before we  
11          speak out because we're too busy, we don't want  
12          to get involved, it's not our problem. Hate  
13          and the turmoil it causes is everybody's  
14          problem in America. We must do more to reach  
15          out to each other before hate and bigotry can  
16          begin to come between us.

17                   Too often we live in our  
18          insular worlds with each other enforcing our  
19          own voluntary racial separation. We pass each  
20          other on the streets or in the shopping mall,  
21          but we don't connect as individuals.

22                   With this separation we risk a  
23          lack of understanding of the views and the  
24          perspectives of others. We risk not learning  
25          of the wonderful racial, ethnic, and cultural

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1           traditions that have made this nation so  
2           strong. We must build on the great diversity  
3           of this wonderful land.

4                   There is another threat to  
5           tolerance and understanding in this country,  
6           and this is the growing development of  
7           anti-immigrant sentiments. There is a tendency

8 to find in new arrivals a new opportunity for  
9 scapegoating.

10 One of my first childhood  
11 memories is of my father describing his arrival  
12 to the United States from Denmark when he was  
13 only twelve. He spoke only in Danish, not one  
14 word of English. People teased him about his  
15 funny clothes and funny language. He never  
16 forgot that. But four years later, he was the  
17 editor of the high school newspaper, writing  
18 beautiful English. And he went on to become a  
19 reporter for the Miami Herald for 43 years. He  
20 always made clear to me that this nation had  
21 done so much for him and his children and that  
22 we must always honor this nation's tradition as  
23 a nation of immigrants.

24 We cannot let demagoguery carry  
25 the day. While immigration is a complex and

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1 compelling area of public policy, we must not  
2 let the public debate be ruled by divisiveness  
3 and fear.

4 Our immigration policy is not  
5 about fear from those from other countries. It  
6 is not about the color of someone's skin or the  
7 native tongue or cultural tradition or  
8 accumulated wealth of others. It is about  
9 upholding the rule of all in a fair, respectful  
10 way.

11 America is an ever changing  
12 place. We must continue to be a society that  
13 celebrates her differences while embracing our  
14 unique ethnic identity.

15 We cannot permit the  
16 narrow-minded to deny that we are a  
17 multi-cultural society, as we have always been.

18 Every person is diminished when  
19 any one of us on account of color or accent or  
20 where we were born experiences anything less  
21 than the full measure of his or her dignity and  
22 privilege as a human being.

23 So, as you leave this great  
24 university today, I wish you Godspeed. I wish

25 for you that you take the commitment of the

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1 Jesuits to service with you all the days of  
2 your life. I hope you will leave here resolved  
3 to use what you have learned here in the right  
4 way, to make a difference in this world, to  
5 serve and to protect all of the people, and to  
6 never ever give up trying to secure peace,  
7 liberty, and justice for all. May God go with  
8 you.

9 (Applause)

10 (Whereupon, at 10:48 a.m., the  
11 speech concluded)

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