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SPEECH OF
ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
PITTSBURGH, PA
MAY 24, 1997

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1 ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you so
2 much, Dean. I am very proud to be at Pitt Law
3 School today. One of the lawyers that has worked
4 with me for most of the last 18 years, is a
5 graduate of this law school. He is one of the best
6 trial lawyers who served in the State Attorney's
7 and he's been one of my wisest counselors of the
8 Department of Justice. Your United States Attorney
9 for the Western District of Pennsylvania is another

10 product of this law school. You're a great law
11 school with a great future as you leave it.

12 But from this extraordinary institution,
13 you will take memories, you will take friendships,
14 you will take learning, you will take new
15 perspectives that are going to be with you for the
16 rest of your life. What are you going to do with
17 them? What are you going to do with the law?

18 In these four years as Attorney General,
19 I have looked back and reached back to my law
20 school days time and again for the approach I take
21 in analyzing a legal problem, for the judgment I
22 exercise in resolving that problem, for the
23 understanding that I developed from professors and
24 friends and colleagues. You will be touched by
25 your professors for a long time to come, I expect.

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1 My dean asked me and the 15 other women
2 to come to dinner one night at his house. He
3 wanted to know what we were going to do with our
4 law school education. But during these 37 years
5 that have followed, he has encouraged me up until
6 the time of his death with a note. Even upon my
7 graduation, he would see me and know exactly what I
8 was doing and encourage me even more in public
9 service or whatever aspiration I had at the time.
10 And when the President was considering my
11 nomination, he was there saying it would be a good
12 idea. One of the most wonderful opportunities I
13 had after becoming Attorney General was to say, are
14 you satisfied with what I did with my legal
15 education?

16 What will you do? First of all, I hope
17 you will love the law as much as I have. It is a
18 great profession and I love lawyers. I just don't
19 like greedy, indifferent, selfish lawyers. And
20 there are not that many of them. But draw strength
21 and wisdom from this institution and go forth. Go
22 forth and enjoy what you do. I promised when I
23 graduated from law school never to do anything I
24 didn't enjoy doing. There have been a couple of
25 days I could have done without in the ensuing

1 years. But the law provides such an extraordinary
2 variety, provides so many challenges. It provides
3 a view of life, its joys, its tragedies, its
4 sorrows. It can never be matched anyplace else.
5 And the law provides an extraordinary opportunity
6 to serve others.

7 And so as you go forth, use the law to
8 solve other peoples' problems, whether it be the
9 person making \$35,000 a year who can't work through
10 the complicated Social Security problems facing an
11 elderly parent or a lady who's living in poverty
12 and can't get her landlord to fix the kitchen
13 that's falling in from the ceiling above. Too
14 often lawyers do battle and they make the momentary
15 deal. But they don't solve their clients
16 problems.

17 One example I cite is the arena of the
18 criminal courtroom. Too often the prosecutor feels
19 like they have won their battle when they get the
20 conviction and see the person sentenced to an
21 appropriate prison sentence. But the battle has
22 not been won because there are not adequate prison
23 cells to house that person for the length of time
24 the Judge has sentenced them. There are not
25 adequate drug treatment programs or rehabilitation

1 programs to bring that person back to the community
2 with the chance of success upon release from
3 prison. It is a revolving door and prosecutors
4 have far more to do than just get the conviction.

5 Prosecutors have a duty to see that the
6 community focuses on this issue, that they've got
7 to speak out for fair, firm punishment that fits
8 the crime but they have got to speak out for after
9 care and follow-up. It makes no sense to convict
10 somebody, to see them go to jail and then to return
11 them to the apartment over the open air drug market
12 where they got into trouble in the first place. As
13 lawyers, we've got to do more than just do battle.

14 And the public defender so often feels

15 like they've won the battle when they get their
16 client off on a motion to dismiss or a motion to
17 suppress, knowing full well that that client
18 suffers from a crack addiction that is a worse
19 prison than anything we could send them to. And
20 yet too often, the public defender does nothing.
21 We have got to make sure that we focus on what
22 causes the crime.

23 I would look at presentence
24 investigations and see four points along the way
25 with a 17-year-old that I had adjudicated guilty of

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1 armed robbery. Four points along the way where we
2 could have intervened and made a difference in that
3 child's life but we waited. I went to our public
4 hospital to try to figure out what to do about
5 crack involved infants and their mothers. And the
6 doctors taught me that the first three years of
7 life are the most formative, that that's when the
8 child learns the concept of reward and punishment
9 and develops a conscience. And I thought to
10 myself, what good are all the prisons going to be
11 18 years from now if we don't teach a child what's
12 right, what's wrong and help them develop a
13 conscience.

14 And so lawyers across this country should
15 be not only dedicated to doing battle, but both in
16 their practice and in public and community service,
17 to making sure that every child in America has
18 appropriate preventative medical care, that the
19 children of America have appropriate care and
20 education in those formative years of zero to five,
21 that the children of America have educational
22 opportunities that can match the challenges of the
23 21st century.

24 Now, I can't tell you if we're going to
25 be great litigators to put down your pleadings, lay

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1 down your motions and your law books and leave your
2 practice behind. But I can tell you, that unless
3 all of us, both in our private practice and in our

4 public service, in our work with city councils,
5 state legislatures and Congress, unless we address
6 the issue of the law serving children, we are not
7 going to have a work force with the skills that can
8 maintain this nation as a first-rate nation. We
9 will not have medical institutions with sufficient
10 resources to cope with the terrible problems caused
11 by failure to provide care upfront. We can do it
12 if we utilize the law as a problem solver.

13 And the same situation exists in the
14 civil arena. There are too many lawyers that want
15 to win, sometimes at all costs. What are the
16 costs? The cost is that four years later the
17 problem is still hanging around because everybody
18 wants to litigate and the problem hasn't been
19 solved. The cost is dollars spent in cost of the
20 trial that eat up the recovery so that the litigant
21 has little, if anything, left over, while the
22 lawyer gets their contingent fee. And the cost is
23 the trauma of the litigation. The litigation that
24 just is branded on some litigants' minds that they
25 have gone through the processes of the system.

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1 Remember your client. I think Abraham
2 Lincoln said it best, discourage litigation.
3 Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you
4 can. Point out to them how the nominal winner is
5 often a real loser in fees and expenses and in
6 waste of time. As a peacemaker, the lawyer has a
7 superior opportunity of being a good person. There
8 will be business enough.

9 How do you do it? How do you solve the
10 problems? Well, first off, you have got to be a
11 good litigator because the best negotiator is the
12 one who is not afraid to go to trial. You have got
13 to learn how to value a case in good dollar terms
14 with the best interest of your client most at
15 issue. You've got to learn how to negotiate.

16 And in learning how to negotiate and to
17 resolve disputes, you can do so much to problem
18 solve. I've seen litigators force environmental
19 litigation to final conclusion only to get a

20 confused result from a jury. I have seen
21 litigators stop and negotiate and come up with a
22 structure that serves the interest of the
23 community, the litigants, and all involved because
24 they sat down together and solved a problem.

25 Take what you learn in dispute resolution

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1 and translate it to the community. Do, for
2 example, as young lawyers in San Antonio, Texas,
3 have done and work with school children to teach
4 them how to resolve conflicts without knives and
5 guns and fists. Solve problems not just in your
6 practice but in your community.

7 But one of the major problems that
8 America faces and that each of us faces as lawyers
9 is that too many Americans do not have access to a
10 lawyer and do not have access to justice. Each
11 year we graduate more lawyers and yet there is a
12 tremendous and growing segment for our population
13 who cannot afford the legal assistance they need.
14 It is estimated that 60 percent of the poor and the
15 working poor in this country do not have access to
16 the legal system.

17 We create such great expectations of
18 constitutional rights, of civil rights and yet we
19 deliver too few of these rights in reality. As a
20 consequence, for too many Americans, the law is
21 worth little more than the paper it's written on.
22 And these people become alienated and bitter and
23 undermine our democracy. All of us have a
24 responsibility to solve the problem. We must begin
25 to work together as a profession to make the law

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1 real for all Americans.

2 I have been so impressed with what I have
3 heard and read about the opportunities here at Pitt
4 for public service and for pro bono service. Take
5 that with you as you leave here and use it. When
6 you go to a law firm, what is your pro bono
7 practice, ask them. Do you permit it? Do you
8 encourage it? And if they don't, look someplace

9 else. We must all give back to our community if we
10 are to solve our problems.

11 How do we make the law real? We've got
12 to simplify the law. Maybe even go a step beyond
13 what the Dean said and make the law simple so that
14 we don't have to translate and explain all of the
15 time. Make the law understandable in small, old
16 words that people can appreciate. Give people the
17 tools of the law so that they can be
18 self-sufficient. Support legal services programs.
19 This has been one of the great institutions in this
20 country. It is now in peril, but it has made the
21 law real in too many situations and reinforced the
22 foundations of our democracy.

23 But at some point, I urge you all to
24 consider public service. I don't think you have to
25 do it all your career. But at some point, it is an

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1 experience worth having. I have been in private
2 practice in a small law firm of two and in a major
3 Miami firm and I have been in public service.
4 Nothing can compare to public service.

5 An example, I went with the President of
6 the United States to South Carolina for the
7 dedication of a new church to replace a church that
8 had been the victim of a church arson. After the
9 ceremony, I walked off the platform and a woman
10 burst through the lines of the crowd and came up to
11 me and give me a big hug and said, Janet, I haven't
12 seen you since you got child support for my
13 children in Miami. And she says, and I want you to
14 see the two you got child support for. And she
15 pointed up to two grown young men who were standing
16 there and they smiled down at me. And that
17 experience and so many similar experiences can
18 never match whatever money is made in private
19 practice and will always exceed the material
20 rewards you get out of the practice of law.

21 Now, you may say, well, I've seen you on
22 television and sometimes it doesn't look like much
23 fun. Yes, you get cussed at and fussed at and
24 figuratively beat around the head. But to use the

25 law to try to make the Constitution real, to sit

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1 there in a Senate oversight hearing and think,
2 this is what it's all about, these are the checks
3 and balances, this is how you've got to work
4 through these issues, it's an experience that every
5 lawyer should have in some form or another.

6 But as we are attacking our problems, we
7 have also got to do all that we can to heal the
8 divisions caused by intolerance and bigotry, to
9 heal the youth who is angry, to welcome the
10 immigrant, to cross the racial divide. We need to
11 speak out against prejudice and hatred everywhere
12 we see it. Haters are cowards and when they are
13 confronted, they usually back down. But too often
14 we let them become entrenched before we speak out
15 because we are too busy, we don't want to get
16 involved, it's not our problem. Hate and the
17 turmoil it causes is everybody's problem.

18 In our generation, we have seen
19 remarkable progress in our efforts to bridge the
20 gap between our ideals of freedom, equality and
21 justice and the harsher realities of our daily
22 experience. But we cannot say that we have
23 completed our work when today African-Americans and
24 Hispanics and, in many cases, women still have a
25 harder time renting an apartment, getting a job or

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1 obtaining a loan. We have not completed our
2 journey when the unemployment rate for
3 African-American males is still twice as high as it
4 is for white males. We have not completed our
5 journey when people are denied housing because of
6 their race or ethnic background. Worst of all,
7 reports of violent hate crimes against minorities,
8 Jews and gays and lesbians are disturbingly high.
9 If some of the church fires are any indication,
10 hate itself has become more brazen.

11 Old habits die hard, attitudes evolve
12 slowly. We must do more, much, much more, to open
13 the doors of opportunity so that every American,

14 every American can contribute to America's
15 magnificent bounty. But sometimes problems don't
16 get solved. Lawyers must be ever willing, ever
17 vigilant and always prepared to use the law as a
18 mighty shield against hatred and bigotry and
19 wrong.

20 For as long as I live, I will remember
21 the case of James Joseph Richardson, a man who had
22 been prosecuted, convicted and sentenced to death
23 for the poisoning death of his seven children 21
24 years before in another small county in Florida.
25 He had always maintained his innocence and the

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1 Governor of Florida asked me to be a special
2 prosecutor and to go to that other county and
3 reinvestigate the case. After a lengthy
4 investigation, we concluded that the evidence was
5 insufficient to have charged him initially, it was
6 clearly insufficient now and that he should go
7 free. For as long as I live, I will always
8 remember looking over my shoulder at a man who
9 walked out of a courthouse a free man for the first
10 time in 21 years. Never stop doing your part to
11 make sure that there is justice for all.

12 But as you solve problems and as you use
13 the law as a shield and as a protector, remember
14 what is closest to home. I remember my afternoons
15 and evenings. My mother taught us to play
16 baseball, to appreciate Beethoven's symphonies, to
17 bake cakes. She taught us how to play fair, she
18 punished us and she loved us with all her heart.
19 There is no child care in the world that will ever
20 be a substitute for what that lady was in our life.

21 You're going out into a world of billable
22 hours and money considerations and time
23 considerations. I urge you to go out and make a
24 world for you and for your generation that puts
25 your children and family first in what you do every

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1 day, in your workplace and in your life. There is
2 nothing more rewarding than raising children. I've

3 never been married and I don't have any of my own.
4 But in 1984 a friend died, leaving me as the legal
5 guardian of her 15-year-old twins, a boy and a
6 girl. And the girl was in love. I've learned an
7 awful lot about raising children in the ensuing
8 years.

9 It takes love, hard work and an awful lot
10 of luck. But when I put that young lady on the
11 plane to college and three years later went to see
12 her graduate cum laude, and on each occasion she
13 threw her arms around my neck and said, thank you,
14 I couldn't have done it without you, that is as
15 rewarding as any professional achievement I have
16 ever had.

17 You can do it. You can solve your
18 clients' problems. You can protect those for
19 victims of injustice. You can make this world a
20 better place. And you can do it if we work
21 together right by putting your family first.
22 Godspeed to you all and I hope the law will be as
23 rewarding to you as it has been for me.

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