



R E M A R K S O F H O N . J A N E T R E N O

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

NATIONAL POLITICAL CONGRESS

OF BLACK WOMEN, INC.

Tuesday, September 16, 1997

Ho tell Washington

515 15th Street, North West,

Washington, D. C.

Pro ceedings

(2:10 p.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you, Dr. Tucker, and thank you a!! for that warm welcome. I am very pleased to be here with you today for my first contact with you from when I came to Washington till now. You are an organization of action and you fo!!ow through.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You have made me fee! so welcome. So many of your members who are so courageous -- peop!e !ike Dr. DorothyHeightand E!eanor Ho!mes Norton and you, Dr. Tucker, who have brought us a!! together here today and who have led the effort to promote positive images rather than violent negative ones in today's music scene.

You all have blazed a trail for so many, and have made a difference for thousands and thousands of Americans, and I thank you.

I want to pay special note to a remarkable lady. I am so proud of our Secretary of Labor, Alexis Herman.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You heard her yesterday. She demonstrated in that UPS strike a tireless energy and patience and an ability to look at a conflict between two sides seemingly so far apart on fundamental issues and find that place where they can both agree on their common goals. And what touched me so deeply was when she got so many laudatory comments in the press. There were so many people in this city, a city that can sometimes be cynical, who were so happy for such a wonderful lady and thought it was so well deserved.

And in my department I rely so much on the wise counsel and the great expertise of Loretta Argrett, our Assistant Attorney General for the Tax Division, who is one of the most effective, fine public servants I have ever met.

Your organization, as I look at it, has done so much to bring African-American women of achievement to the attention of the administration and to improve our government by including them. You have done so much to mentor young women and to motivate them and encourage them to participate in the political process, and you bring a crucial perspective to the table when we debate the important issues and problems of society.

I would like to speak to you today about diversity and excellence. Some critics charge that diversity detracts from some abstract notion of quality or merit. That's simply not true. We know that diversity is one of this nation's greatest and most wonderful assets. In education, diversity adds to the experience of learning, and it provides a diverse talent pool that enriches all walks of American life.

In the workplace, it contributes to our economic strength and businesses' bottom line. In law enforcement, diversity has enabled our nation's police departments to begin to better relate to and to earn the trust of all the communities that they protect. And in our councils of government minority representatives have brought great talent, new voices, and new perspectives to the table and improved the responsiveness of government to the needs of our communities.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I know the value of diversity and tolerance because I was born and raised in Miami, a city where the different cultures of its residents have come together to provide an immeasurable richness. Miami's strength is also America's strength, but Miami's challenges are America's challenges.

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

In our own generation we have seen remarkable progress in our efforts to bridge the gap between our ideals of freedom, equality and justice and the harsher reality of our daily experience. We have gone from Jim Crow laws to civil rights laws for minorities, women, and persons with disabilities, from literacy tests for voting to minority representation at every level of government, including the halls of Congress.

But we cannot say we have finished our journey today when African-Americans and Hispanics still have a harder time renting an apartment, getting a job, or obtaining a loan. We have not completed our journey when the unemployment for African-American males is still twice as high as it is for white males. Even college-educated African-American, Hispanic and Asian American men and women of every race and ethnic background are paid less than comparably-educated and comparably-trained white men.

Old habits die hard. Attitudes change slowly. We must do more, much more, to open the doors of opportunity so that every American can share in and fully contribute to our nation's bounty. And in today's global marketplace America needs to tap the inherent potential in every single one of our citizens. To do that, we must make education, good education, equally accessible to all.

As a nation, we have made great strides in broadening opportunities in higher education. Just since 1990, the number of Hispanics enrolled in colleges and universities has increased by 35 percent, Asian-American enrollment by 35 percent, and, since 1990, African-American enrollment in higher education has increased by 16 percent. The number of minorities graduating from colleges and universities is also rising, and we all benefit.

Greater integration has meant a better education for all of the students involved. For education depends on dialogue, not just between student and teacher but between the student and his or her classmates.

Think back. Late night in the dormitory, you all remember the argument you had

with the upperclassman about some complicated issue of government better than many of the lessons that you learned in that government classroom. Education depends on exposure to different perspectives, exposures which are both enlightening and stimulating. It encourages students to question and challenge themselves and to challenge others. Students develop a mutual respect and learn to communicate across cultural barriers and to negotiate their differences.

The president of Harvard University, Neal Rudenstein, said it well: In our world, it is not enough for us and our students to acknowledge that other people with other modes of thought and feeling and action exist somewhere, unseen, unheard, unvisited and unknown. Little, if anything, can substitute for continued association with others who are different from ourselves and who challenge us, even as we challenge them.

For more than 20 years, our laws have recognized the important value of diversity in education. Last year, however, a Federal appeals court in Texas ruled that this 20 years of law is no longer good law. This is the Hopwood case, which ruled that the value advanced by diversity could not justify affirmative action in education. In California, the University of California system has now eliminated any affirmative action or consideration of race and ethnicity in admissions, and Proposition 209 has extended the damaging effect to governmental programs throughout the State.

We believe those decisions are wrong.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We continue to believe that if the setting in which students learn looks more like the world in which they will live their education will be stronger. The students benefitting from affirmative action are contributing and doing so well at school. They graduate. They pass the bar or the boards, and they become wonderful doctors, lawyers and members of the community.

In the State Attorney's office and now at the Department of Justice, I am a firsthand beneficiary of a diverse work force. Minority lawyers have consistently performed at the very highest levels as prosecutors, civil advocates, and advisors, and in many cases have gone on to become some of our finest judges. And just this past month I stood proudly as the Deputy Attorney General of the United States, Eric Holder, was sworn in.

(Applause.)

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ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: They have helped bring a strength and understanding, a credibility to those crucial institutions that would simply be lacking without them.

Let me give you just one example of a broader view of merit and the benefits of diversity in education. A study of the University of California Medical School graduates examined where doctors practiced after graduating. The study first noted that in California minority communities were four times as likely as others to have a shortage of doctors, even taking into account the income level of the community. It also found that a much higher percentage of minority graduates than white graduates practiced in areas that were underserved by the medical profession.

Thus, the nation can improve its medical care by ensuring diversity in medical schools, and it can save ourselves a lot of heartache, a lot of dollars, by providing that medical care up front in primary care rather than waiting for conditions to worsen and for children to be hospitalized and cases to become difficult and complex.

Let us use common sense as we talk about diversity as well.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: But we may be turning in the opposite direction. I am concerned that the gains in integrating our institutions of higher education are at risk. In the wake of Hopwood, minority law school applications to the University of Texas plummeted. In years past, more minority law students graduated from the University of Texas law school than any other. This year only 11 African-Americans were accepted, compared to 65 last year. None of this year's accepted students chose to enroll. The number of Hispanic students accepted at the law school was half what it was last year.

In California, after the decision by the University of California regents and after Proposition 209, UCLA law school accepted only 21 African-American students this year, 80 percent fewer than last year. Hispanic admissions fell 30 percent. The drop in Black and Hispanic admissions at UC-Berkeley was even more dramatic.

The United States Government and the United States Department of Justice are very concerned about these unwelcome developments. We have said so repeatedly, and will continue to do so. We have supported the constitutionality of educational diversity in the Hopwood case itself, and we will continue to look for

opportunities to overturn that decision and persuade other jurisdictions not to follow it.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have argued that Proposition 209 is unconstitutional because minorities should have the same opportunities that other groups enjoy to persuade their government to help within the Constitution, because it denies that equal chance at political participation. We continue to believe that Proposition 209 is unwise and unconstitutional.

We have strongly supported the lawfulness of considering diversity in employment decisions as recently as our Supreme Court ruling in the Piscataway case just last month. I can assure you that we will continue to use our legal resources and our best legal judgment to be a strong and credible force for fairness, for diversity, and for excellence.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Abraham Lincoln said that a house divided cannot stand, and that a nation divided cannot stand. We can't have a divided nation, part given access to the finest educational opportunities and part denied that access.

Because that boy or girl who is the first in the family to go to college will likely become a parent whose son or daughter will reap the benefit handed down from one generation to another, let's look at common sense, let's look at the future when we talk about diversity in this nation.

But sometimes I think that the affirmative action debate has got to be focused in another area with equal focus, equal intensity. Affirmative action in higher education is so extraordinarily important, but it is not enough, and for some it is too late. We need to take strong action in our nation's preschool programs and in our secondary and elementary schools so that all of our children have the opportunity to learn, to become competitive in the work forces of tomorrow, and to grow in a positive and healthy and safe environment.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We must reemphasize quality in education as well as racial integration as goals of the post-Brown struggle. A place in an integrated classroom is worth having only if it provides our children with a true opportunity

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to excel. That opportunity is going to depend on several time-tested principles -- high expectations, early attention, and equal opportunity.

Expectations are key. We must -- we must have high expectations for our children so that they will begin to have high expectations for themselves. The great educator and Morehouse President Benjamin Mays once said: The tragedy in life does lie in not reaching your goals; the tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It is not a disgrace to reach for the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin.

Our goal, our effort should not be about avoiding failure but avoiding low aim. Just last week the American Federation of Teachers released a distressing report about social promotion, the phenomenon of passing students on to the next grade even though they are failing in key subjects. As President Clinton has made clear, moving children through the system without giving them the real tools they need does them no favors.

We need to identify those kids having trouble and work with them more diligently before they fail. Think of what can happen if we galvanize this nation, if every one of us had a school or one student for whom we were mentor or sponsor. What a difference we could possibly make in the life of every child in America.

The attention of teachers and parents is a second key. Teachers who can give children personal attention do make a difference. I remember the names of every single one of my teachers -- the ones that were mean to me but taught me well --

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: -- and the ones that loved me and expected a lot from me but gave me the right push.

And what means as much or more is a solid family structure. It is noteworthy that a recent study of thousands of teenagers over several years concluded that one of the greatest factors correlated with whether a child abstains from drugs and alcohol and stays out of trouble is the belief by that child that he is loved by his family.

We also need to broaden our after-school programs and evening programs. The most violent hour of the day for juvenile offenders begins at 3:00 p.m., after school but before parents come home from work. Half of all the violent crime committed by juveniles occurs between 2:00 in the afternoon and 8:00 in the evening.

These statistics cry out for a simple solution. If we are simply pouring our young people out of our school buildings and onto the streets where they are becoming a problem or where they are being hurt, how about using the school buildings and keeping them open later?

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are not talking about new construction. The buildings are already there. We are talking about a safe haven where a young person can go with friends to participate in sports, continue learning on the computer, do his homework, talk with a teacher, because there is too much danger and pressure on the streets to be safe.

What good is all the greatness in higher education going to mean to a youngster shot down on our streets?

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let us join together to make sure that in the years to come every child in America has appropriate supervision and programs available for them in the afternoons and in the evenings.

We should also do more to address the inequality among the schools in our communities. It is unfortunately true that because of economic inequality predominantly minority schools often receive much inferior resources than predominantly white schools. We need to find ways to develop and finance city school systems that will keep families, both black and white, in the public schools and keep their children exposed on a daily basis to quality education that prepares them for the future.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I know that every proposed solution comes with a price tag, but the only way to be cost-effective is to get it right the first time. No amount of money we spend building prisons 18 years from now will be enough to make up for the problems we neglect today.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I try to visit a school here in the District on the average of once a week. Sometimes I fail, but sometimes I am at schools twice

and three times a week. It is so exciting to see what youngsters are doing. I can tell you that practically every child comes to the early grades at school with an interest in learning, with a bright twinkle in his or her eye. But sometimes by the sixth grade you see them slipping away.

We need to keep that desire to learn burning bright, and the earlier we reach these kids the most success we have. Indeed, we need to go back even further for, as some of you have heard, it is not K through 12; it is zero to five where it makes all the difference.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Where the child learns the concept of reward and punishment and develops a conscience, understands the difference between right and wrong, where 50 percent of all learned human response is learned in the first three years of life. What good are the best elementary schools going to be ten years from now if that child does not have the foundation of learning in these early years.

Let us make sure that our children, all our children, have quality not child care but edu-care, understanding how important those first years are in education.

Now these are daunting challenges, but 40 years ago those children and their parents in Topeka, Kansas, and Little Rock, Alaska, in Clarendon County, South Carolina, had the strength and the courage to face down an intractable establishment hell-bent on segregation. But I am not ready to say that today's challenges are beyond our grasp, and neither should you.

And as we address our problems we have to do all that we can to heal the divisions caused by bigotry and intolerance, to heal the youth who is angry, to welcome the immigrant across the racial divide. We need to speak out against prejudice and hatred wherever we find it.

Our task is to help build a sense of community by reaching out to others. As the President has urged, we must talk openly about race relations in this country. We must talk with respect. We must listen with a listening ear and get rid of the angry rhetoric that has so marked this issue in so many instances.

Last month I spoke to the National Association of Police Organizations. These are line officers. I told the representatives of our nation's law enforcement officers directly that they had to face the issue of racism and reach out to the communities in which they patrol. I have that same responsibility. We all have

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this responsibility, to reject racial isolationism, and reach out across this wonderful nation to understand each other.

One of them stood up and said, but what do you do after you've tried to calm an angry disturbance for two hours and people are threatening you and then you arrest somebody and then they criticize you? I say sit down and talk it out -- talk it out so that you can understand each other, not with angry shouting on either side, but in a calmer time where we can begin to understand what caused the problem in the first place and resolve our understandings so that it doesn't happen again.

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Our challenge is to seek out our common interests, our common ground, and to remind ourselves of our common dreams, because it is too easy to see the differences that divide us that we forget the humanity that unites us.

We cannot forget that the needs of the black community, the Hispanic and Asian-American community are the same as those in the white community. Everyone wants a healthy start for their children, a stable, crime-free neighborhood, quality education, supportive families, and decent work opportunities. There is much to do, but with the strength of this organization, with the commitment that you have, and as we join together with so many other people in this nation who care, we have the commitment, we have the energy, and we have the faith that will see us through to our goals of making sure our children grow up safe and educated and free to pursue the dreams of this nation.

Thank you.

(Standing ovation.)

(Whereupon, at 2:35 p.m., the Attorney General's remarks concluded.)