



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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REMARKS OF THE HONORABLE JANET RENO,
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES,
AT CEREMONIES COMMEMORATING THE
FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Auditorium

Johns Hopkins University

School of Hygiene and Public

Health

619 North Wolfe Street

Baltimore, Maryland

Thursday, April 2, 1998

P R O C E E D I N G S

(5:13 p.m.)

GENERAL RENO: Thank you, doctor. Under my impression, it was the attorney who did general work for the crown, so I am an adjective, while I think you all are still generals.

(Laughter.)

I can't tell you how privileged I am to be here with you today to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 50 years ago, at the close of one of the darkest chapters in the world's history, the United Nations set forth this declaration by setting forth core rights and freedoms that people everywhere could enjoy.

This document is remarkable in that it reflects so much of our Bill of Rights, but it goes beyond, reflecting a truly visionary consensus on what the world should become as it struggled to overcome the ravages of World War Two. It talked about the right to life and liberty, but it also talked about the right to security of person. It talked about the fact that no one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

We cherish these principles and so many more that are contained in that remarkable document, and in communities around the world where we are trying to make them real.

The Declaration recognizes, however, that it's not so much the paper it's written on, but that these rights depend on social and international order. I believe this order must be firmly anchored in our community, in our hearts, in our homes, in our schools. Eleanor Roosevelt said it best: "Human rights must begin in small places close to home, so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person, where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity, without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere."

I have had the honor and the great privilege of working as a prosecutor, trying to make these rights real, for 15 years in Dade County. There I saw first-hand what happened to people, to families, and to communities when the social order that we depend on was shattered by violence. I saw the degrading treatment of family violence. I saw violence wreck turmoil in the community. It reduces lives to chaos and it breaks down our sense of trust and our sense of community. It places in jeopardy the very rights and freedoms we celebrate here today. Violence sometimes makes the law seem little more than the paper that it's written on.

I would look at a 16 year old whom I had just prosecuted for an armed robbery, look at the pre-sentence investigation, and see four places along the way where I could have intervened to have made a difference in that child's life.

We went back to dropout prevention and started in the middle school. But, we quickly learned too late that the child who had already dropped a grade or two levels behind, was

already acting out to attract attention to himself. So we started with an early neighborhood intervention program.

At that point something hit Miami, an epidemic that we didn't understand, an epidemic that came to be called crack. The doctors took me to our public hospital, Jackson Memorial, to try to determine what to do about crack-involved infants and their mothers. They taught me so much. They taught me, and I came to Washington as an Attorney General that said, if we are ever going to lick the problem of violence we've got to start in zero to three, when the child learns the concept of reward and punishment and develops a conscience, where 50 percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year of life. And I realized we had to build from there.

But then, Dr. Koop, I discovered, had great allies that I didn't know existed. He made our entire nation sit up and take notice nationally when he declared violence in America to be a public health emergency. Suddenly people started looking at me as if I weren't crazy.

After all, until then crime had been something that prosecutors, not doctors or public health officials, were supposed to deal with. Dr. Koop was absolutely right.

I believe in partnerships. I believe that the criminal justice system and the public health system must come together. And it was so rewarding in the first months that I came to Washington to find the Center for Disease Control right there with me, with facts and figures that I needed to support what I was talking about.

I believe that we all do our best and most creative work when we begin to shed our hidebound identities as lawyers or doctors, where we stop going down our own particular little pig trail and start exploring the whole realm of human existence, and start drawing on the best of what each of us, prosecutors, public health professionals, doctors, victims' advocates, and others have to offer.

Dr. Koop helped frame a new dialogue on addressing violence in this country. The First Lady, Hillary Clinton, did the same when she declared in 1994 that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights. These simple words launched the issue of domestic violence into global focus -- a far cry from the purely private matter many people thought it was in 1978, when I started out as a prosecutor.

Because of those who are committed to public health, we have come to understand that unless we interrupt the cycle of violence at an early age, unless we intervene with that child who witnesses violence, we will never stop violence in the streets and in the homes.

This day reminds us that violence is simply not a problem for one discipline, for one group of people; it is a problem we must all fight. And at the Department of Justice we're

trying to look at the building blocks. You know them better than I do. You all have educated me every step of the way, and most of you don't know it. But you have educated me to understand that we will never build our way through prisons out of violence. We will never build our way through prisons out of youth killing youth. We will never build our way out of the degrading treatment of women and children through domestic violence.

Yes, we have to have accountability. We must have punishment that is fair and firm and fits the crime. But we must understand that as a child is raised and punished he, if he is a well-raised child, will know that after the punishment comes love and after-care and support, and we have got to provide it.

But we have got to start before the crime starts, and we have got to make sure that every child in America, if the human rights we celebrate today shall make a difference, that every child in America has proper prenatal care before coming into this world, that every child in America has proper preventative medical care.

There is something wrong with a nation that says to a 70 year old person, you can have an operation that extends your life expectancy by three years whether you can afford it or not, but says to the child of a working poor person, sorry, you can't get preventative medical care and you can't get help because your family doesn't have the insurance and doesn't have the money to afford it.

Somehow or another, we have got to link the disciplines that we all represent today and bring them together, to make sure that if those first three years are so formative that every child in America has appropriate educare, not child care, not warehousing while the parents are at work, but educare, in those formative years.

We've got to do something else. We've got to bring teachers back as one of the great and central figures in a child's life and make sure that this nation starts compensating teachers at least in some measure it compensates football players who get paid in the six-digit figures.

(Applause.)

These men and women, their colleagues, you in this room, public health professionals around the world, have taught me that you've got to look beyond. If that child walks out of the school at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon and both parents are working or they're raised by a single parent, we've got to provide constructive programs for those children that can challenge them.

We've got to interrupt the cycle of violence by bringing these children into a peaceful family that knows how to resolve its conflicts without knives and guns and fists. We've got to make sure that every teacher in America has been taught conflict resolution to get their

teaching degree, and that every police officer is taught conflict resolution and how to teach children how to resolve conflicts at the basic law enforcement academy.

We've got to recognize that sometimes a job is the best social service you can provide a person, and that it makes no sense to send somebody out with a degree in English when they've got to have a skill that can enable them to earn a living wage.

Let us prepare people for the future. But let us go beyond and understand that this world is changing before our eyes and that sometimes we feel like it's not the doctors and it's not the lawyers that have taken over, but it's the cybergeniuses of the world. Let us make sure that as we approach this next century that people not only learn to cope with violence, but learn that this cypertechnology that we created will not master us, we will master it.

You have taught me so much. You have been so instrumental in my thinking. I am just very proud to be here today and proud to acknowledge the great, great work that public health has done, through the centuries in fact, and certainly in your time, in bringing true meaning to human rights in this country. We have much to do and far to go, but you have taken us so far, and I salute you and am proud to be with you.

(Applause and, at 5:25 p.m., end of remarks.)