

JANET RENO

ADDRESS TO THE IMMIGRATION &
NATURALIZATION COMMISSIONERS CONFERENCE

Tuesday, October 27, 1998

Renaissance Hotel

Denver, Colorado

MS. RENO: I'm really very selfish. I come to these meetings because I draw strength and I draw inspiration from you. In this past year there have been so many, but three families have been special to me. I go back to Washington after I meet somebody like Ms. Kirpnick, Roberto Rodriguez, the Williamses, the Salinases, more dedicated than ever to try to make sure that the Department of Justice does its duty and does its duty the right way.

I come to these meetings and I see somebody who solved a problem and has a smile on their face and they are so excited they don't know what to do about it. And it's a lasting solution and it's working and they are telling me how wonderful their Secretary is and what a difference she made and they couldn't have done it without her and she was the reason it happened, and there is an enthusiasm in this room and last night that is just infectious.

So I come because I'm selfish, because I come back feeling so much better about what we are doing.

Your work is so incredibly important, for it goes to the very foundation of this nation. How we began as a nation of immigrants, continue that tradition, while at the same time, how do we enforce our laws. Not in a mean and vitriolic way, but in a way that is firm and fair, according to due process and with understanding and compassion.

At the same time, you have extraordinary burdens because the smuggling has increased and alien smuggling has increased, your law enforcement responsibilities, in addition to immigration responsibilities, become all the greater, whether it be on the border or some major urban area where you are cooperating with local police. You are at the heart of this nation's foundation, and you do such an incredible job.

I have seen so many of you in action, solving the problems, developing a new system, hiring an extraordinary number of people, and Doris is right, I didn't think it could be done. You proved me wrong. And you're going to prove me wrong now on some (unintelligible word).

We've got the resources, we have developed the vision, and then you have taken it and run with it. There have been ups and downs, and we have made some mistakes along the way, but

when I look at what you have done in these five and a half years that had a peso crisis, new laws as complicated as any set of words that I have ever seen a human being write, when I have seen what you had to do in dealing with drug smuggling and the problems and the violence it brings with it, you have done an incredible job.

I would like to pay special tribute to what I -- a person I think is probably one of the unsung heroines of government. I can still remember Ms. Meissner looking at me like, I don't know whether I want to work for her or not, she doesn't know anything about immigration. And if you have ever had Doris Meissner look at you in a skeptical sort of way, you understand how I felt.

But I have been there. I have been there in congressional hearings when we have both been beat around the ears, figuratively and almost literally. I have been there in difficult situations. I have been with her at funerals. There is no other public servant I know who has her tenacity, her dedication, her willingness to come back and not give up and forge ahead and make a difference and have the vision and have the commitment to go and get the job done, and we are all in her debt.

Now she will still look at me biweekly and I'll say, "We can do this."

But just think of what we have done. We've gotten resources to the border patrol. All of you have participated in that. We have developed a tough, competent strategy along the border. We have begun to focus on work site enforcement in a really comprehensive way. We are developing reliable, high-tech systems to verify that employees are legally authorized to work. We have replaced an antiquated asylum system that was an invitation to abuse with due process that protects those with legitimate claims while discouraging fraudulent applications, and we have started trying to do everything possible to make sure that service in the name of the Agency really means service, and that those who are entitled to be here and entitled to benefits get them in a timely and thoughtful way.

No amount of resources or strategic planning, however, would allow us to achieve these results if it weren't for you. The pride, the integrity, the innovation, the can-do attitude on the part of so many is just inspiring to me. I have seen it in your workplaces. I have seen it here. I have seen it reflected in the awards this morning. And I am just very, very, very proud to serve with you.

One of the best examples I know, and I would like to focus just on one for a moment, comes from the examinations division at headquarters, which was put under extreme time pressure last December when the President ordered it to develop a deferred enforced departure program for thousands of Haitian nationals who had been living in limbo since being paroled into the United States. This joint effort with general counsel was led by Ron Chirlin, who at the time was undergoing treatment for cancer.

Undaunted by his ongoing chemotherapy, Ron put in long hours, including around the holiday season, to ensure that the deadline was met, and most importantly, that the program was implemented in the best way possible. The energy and the enthusiasm he brought to this task belied his deteriorating health, the seriousness of which many of his colleagues didn't realize until he passed away this summer.

The program that Ron and his team developed has been highly successful. While the quality of their effort is reflected by the fact that the program generated no complaints, I know that for Ron, who was genuinely concerned about those he served, that for him the best measure of success is that it had been widely praised as being user-friendly.

Ron Chirlin loved this agency. He cared deeply about its mission, and in his memory let us set a new standard for user-friendly. I don't really like that term. It sounds too impersonal. Let's describe it in a new way. A new way for this conference, a new way for the Immigration & Naturalization Service in the coming year, a new way, period.

For the person that's sitting across from you applying for benefits, for the person that you detained on the border or a mile into the United States, for the person you deport, and in Ron Chirlin's memory, let us ask: If this were a member of our family, how would we want them to be treated? If this were our son, if this were our mother, if this were our best friend, how would we want the Immigration & Naturalization Service to treat them, whether they be in detention, whether they be a correspondent, whether they be somebody trying to gain access to government records, how do we want them to be treated?

From now on let's put it in those human terms. And let us make the Immigration & Naturalization Service the agency that answers that question in the best, finest, most human terms possible.

How do we go about approaching our problems? I would like to share with you a process that I have developed in my mind for addressing the issues that the Immigration & Naturalization Service faces.

First of all, define the problem. Sometimes at the biweekly meetings the problems come running across and take different forms, and then they appear the next week in another form. Get the facts straight first. Find the problem, find out what people have complained about in the past, get it all together. If it's an enforcement problem, let's get the data.

We have the opportunity now with automation to pull together information concerning crimes that is really staggering. We can develop databases that will help us to solve violent crime in the community, identify drug organizations that are run by illegal aliens, do so much to make a difference. But let us define the problem.

Then, consult. And the first people we should consult with are our people who are in the field on the front line dealing with the

problems in the first place.

Some of you know that my favorite question when I go out to the field is, if you were the Attorney General of the United States, what would you do to improve your situation here and to improve the support of the Immigration & Naturalization Service?

And, ladies and gentlemen, I have gotten some of the best, finest, most innovative, creative, thoughtful answers from the field. People want to be invested in the process. They want to participate. They want to make a difference. They want somebody to listen to them. And it is so important that you hear from the field.

Talk to the people you serve. Get community advocates together. It's far better to hear from them up front than to hear from them in the Miami Herald tomorrow or the El Paso paper or the Los Angeles paper or to have the Attorney General calling the Commissioner to find out why this happened because I have just gotten a letter. Hear from them up front.

And, yes, they do complain. But if you show them you are really interested, that you really want to hear from them, they are going to suddenly get into -- they change gears midway through screaming at you, and they calm down and start talking and say, we can do this and maybe you can do this, and it makes such a difference. Consult with the people we serve.

Talk to experts. Experts aren't so bad some of the time. They can make a difference. Consult with state and local authorities on law enforcement issues. And then develop a plan, develop the process, develop the strategy, but develop it in conjunction with those who have helped to formulate the plan.

Draft clear instructions. Make sure that the people who draft the instructions know how to write clearly, a wonderful, wonderful talent. And if you think I'm picking on the Immigration & Naturalization Service, I have decided that the Department of Justice needs lessons in how to write in clear and nonlegal terms that people can understand.

As Winston Churchill said, "We must talk in small, old words. They can be so eloquent."

Don't send instructions out to the field that are this high. The field doesn't have time to read them. Put them in easily understood, clear terms that the field can quickly grasp.

Then implement, and don't implement it saying, "This is what the Attorney General wanted us to do," blah, blah, blah. Say, "This is what we developed together, and look, here are some of your ideas reflected in this plan. And this is how we can do it. And you have been so important in this process. You have made such a difference. And with your help and your support we can really make a difference." Motivate them, inspire them.

I sometimes hear that there are people that are stuck in a rut in the Immigration & Naturalization Service, but every time I turn around, a new person has emerged with enthusiasm because somebody in this room or one of your colleagues reached out and motivated them and told them that they could make a difference, showed them that they were making a difference, and they indeed did.

Review it for compliance. You're going to find that there are some problems where people aren't complying, they are not doing it as they are supposed to be doing it. Give them some further instruction, find out why your instruction wasn't effective, change it, make the appropriate

adjustments, and then, if it seems to be working generally, but there are some people that are not doing the job, hold them accountable in a firm, fair, and respectful way. But most of all, don't forget to commend the person who has done it right. And don't forget to thank them.

Every night when I leave, I have a secretary who has been there with me until about 7:30 at night, 7:30 or 8. I was reminded again of how important it is to say thank you. I thanked her, as I did every night, and she said, "Ms. Reno, you are one of the first people that ever thanked me as you left each day, and I want you to know that it's made all the difference."

I was astounded. Don't forget to thank the people who may have thought you didn't the day before, but it can make a difference. And to all of you I say a very, very special thank you.

One of the next issues that I think we've got to focus on is how we can work together with other agencies, federal agencies, state and local groups, NGOs. The increasingly

sophisticated nature of criminal activity demands an aggressive response that requires coordination and cooperation. It's no longer an option, it's an obligation. And I am very, very proud of how INS has been at the forefront of these efforts.

There is a natural inclination to compete. There are a number of agencies, including some of the Justice Department, that compete upon some occasions. We've got enough to go around. Nobody need compete for the business. And as far as I am concerned, I don't want anybody competing for turf or for credit. I want people competing to see how they can work together to get the job done. And you have done more than I think most agencies in this regard.

We see this in the border coordination initiative that we launched last month with the U.S. Customs Service. I am confident that by expanding and strengthening the close relationship already developed with Customs, we will be able to attain a goal of creating a seamless process at and between the border ports of entry from Brownsville to San Diego.

And coordination is also the guiding principle behind the border safety initiative launched in June, which is aimed at educating the public about the dangers associated with illegal crossings and assisting those who do not heed the warnings.

Unfortunately, when record heat gripped the southwest this summer, it was those who died after choosing to ignore our warnings who dominated the headlines.

But there is no question in my mind that many more people were spared the same fate, thanks to your efforts. Developed in concert with Mexican officials, the border safety initiative underscores a critical point about cooperation. To be effective, it must cross our borders. The illegal activities we are trying to stop are increasingly transnational in nature. They don't begin at the borders, and neither should our cooperative enforcement efforts.

With 39 overseas officers, INS is setting the pace among federal

agencies for international cooperation. Through Global Reach and other operations, the Office of International Affairs is building a comprehensive enforcement network by strengthening both coordination with our host nation partners and their capacities to detect and to deter illegal activities.

Since last October they have opened 13 new offices and have trained more than 5,700 foreign law enforcement, immigration, and airline officials in fraudulent document identification and antismuggling techniques. It is paying off.

So ask yourself the question, how can I work with other agencies? Is there some agency, some local police department, some sheriff's office, some agency that I don't know about that I can work with to make my work even more effective and more productive?

Increased coordination is also a key element of our new interior enforcement strategy aimed at improving our capabilities to enforce immigration law at work sites, to disrupt smuggling rings, and to remove criminal and other illegal aliens.

While strengthening borders will prevent significant numbers of illegal aliens from entering the country, work site enforcement is the primary means of reducing the power of the job magnet to draw illegal aliens to the United States. That is why I have committed the broader resources of the Department of Justice to support these efforts.

But being caught is not enough, as we look at what we've got to do. Apprehensions are virtually meaningless, unless we follow up with successful prosecution.

The U.S. Attorneys have been asked to increase their support of INS enforcement operations. If you have problems with that regard, let me know. I don't rattle cages, I just try to make sure that we match efforts. Such efforts require careful planning, identification of targets, and the development of priorities is very important.

Work with the United States Attorney and other federal agencies to identify the crime problem in the community. It may be a gang of illegal aliens, it may be a drug organization of illegal aliens, it may be one person who is suspected of three murders that we don't

have evidence sufficient to arrest them, but we need him out of there to protect human life.

Understand the priorities and move ahead, implementing them carefully along the way. We can't do it all, but we can do so much if we use facts and build strategy that gets to the ultimate goal.

One thing I would ask you, with respect to workplace enforcement, plan carefully. What can be more effective? Going after the unscrupulous employer who is the magnet or going after workers? If you get one worker and send him home, there is going to be another one the next day.

And just as a hint, take all the complaints that you have received concerning workplace enforcement, look at what they all are, and see what we can do to avoid them. What are you going to do with the pregnant lady? What are you going to do with the lady that has kids in day care? How are you going to work it out? We know the litany of complaints, real or imagined, and we can, by carefully planning it, address these problems in the first place.

But strengthened enforcement is not going to work unless we have a place to put the

people when we detain them. Over the past three years the people in detention and deportation have worked tirelessly with other federal, state, and local officials to more than double INS detention capacity. One of the results of their efforts is the opening of a 450-bed detention facility in Buffalo.

But simply expanding the number of beds is insufficient. Corrections is one of the hardest, hardest human functions there is. It is against everyone's grain to have to incarcerate and detain somebody behind bars. The person detained doesn't like it one bit. It is a time of tension, it is a time of anger, it is a time of rage. A good corrections official is little lower than the angels.

Somehow or another we can adhere to our responsibilities to detain people and do it in a humane, respectful way that recognizes everyone's civil rights, and yet recognizes our employees and the difficult, difficult job they have under very difficult circumstances. This should be one of our priorities.

But that's enforcement. We can do much more in service and in administrative support. You have made great strides in this area. One service area where you have really done a remarkable job is naturalization.

But we still have a very long way to go. The application backlog is too large and the wait is too long. The work to date has been focused on securing the integrity and quality of the citizenship process, and all indications, including a recent audit of the process by KPMG-Peat Marwick are that these efforts are moving in the right direction.

With strict new controls in place to guarantee integrity and quality, we need to address the massive application backlog. And we want to make the entire process more efficient, and we want you to think, if that were my mother applying for naturalization, afraid that she was going to lose other benefits, if she was going to be destitute and at sea in a strange land, if that were my mother, how would I want her to be treated? Just remember Ron Chirlin and ask that question. And then let us strive together to make sure we answer in the right way.

But we can't keep people happy if we don't answer their mail. In January there were 5,267 pieces of controlled correspondence awaiting replies, some for as long as two years. Even an archbishop. At the same time I continue to receive about 2,000 pieces of new correspondence per month, a volume of mail that is greater than the volume received by the Department of Labor, Agriculture, and most other cabinet-level agencies, and the answers are no simple answers. They require construction of those difficult laws, they require great research in trying to find the files. It is extremely difficult to answer some of that correspondence. But you have done a tremendous job, and the backlog has been cut by 73 percent, and I salute you.

FOIA is another sample. The whole essence of a Democratic government is openness in government, nothing to hide except truly State information that deserves to be classified.

Yet we also recognize the right of privacy. You have tremendous FOIA requests, but you are doing a wonderful job and you are ahead of schedule in responding to those FOIA requests.

You ask why it's important. Unless government is responsive, unless government is open, people will not have confidence in it.

Just a few other points, because they are so critical. Administrative support is critical to this agency. Sound financial management and full accountability over the resources provided by Congress are absolutely critical if the public, the taxpayers are to have confidence in the system.

I want to stress to you some very elementary things, because I have the same habit. I say, let Colgate do it, let the Justice management division do it, let somebody do it, but don't let me mess around with numbers. But if I sit down and do my numbers right, up front, it saves people a lot of problems.

You can't expect the financial divisions to address these issues. You are the one that incurs a bill or pays a bill. Get your paperwork in order up front, and it's going to save you lots of grief down the road.

And as we are trying to struggle to get uncriticized financial statements, don't depend on the finance division to solve the problems. You are going to have to go back and dig and find the financial support and reconcile the information if we're going to come out of this anytime soon with a good financial statement that auditors approve.

It's a big pain in the neck, but it is very important for the credibility of this agency.

We have acknowledged the tremendous effort that has been done in filling new positions, but that is not enough. We have got to focus on the training that goes with it, and you have done a wonderful job on that training. We've got to provide continuing training, and we've got to make sure that we do it in an organized way.

Commissioner Meissner has estimated to me that about 50 percent of the border patrol has three years' experience or less. Those agents with three years of experience or less are doing one wonderful job for this country. They are bright and creative and really extraordinary agents.

But those agents who are more experienced than others who have been involved in law enforcement remember what it was like when they

started out. And they remember some veteran with ten years' experience who told them how to do the job and to do it the right way. The field training officer was a critical person in their lives. We have got to make sure that these young agents, young investigators, young inspectors have that experience behind them. It's going to require extra effort on everybody's part, but it is so important. We've got to make sure that they have the tools to do the job and that they are kept safe in every way possible.

We've got so much to do, but what has been so extraordinary about the way you have done it, each time a new challenge comes up, each time a new law is passed, each time we find a new problem that is historical but has got to be corrected, you don't flinch, you don't back down, you just pull yourself up to your full height and say, "Okay, now, how are we going to do it?" And sometimes we do it and we don't do it quite right, but then we come back and do it again.

Listening this morning, talking with people last night, looking at what comes across my desk, you do an incredible job of serving this nation and the greatest example of public service that I have seen in Washington. You do it with spirit, with dedication. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

(The proceedings were concluded at 1:40 p.m. the 27th day of October, 1998.)

REPORTER'S CERTIFICATE

STATE OF COLORADO)

) ss.

CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER)

I, CAROL WHITE, Registered Professional Reporter and Notary Public, State of Colorado, do hereby certify that the said speech was taken in machine shorthand by me at the time and place aforesaid and was thereafter reduced to typewritten form, that the foregoing is a true transcription of the proceedings.

I further certify that I am not employed by, related to, nor of counsel for any of the parties herein.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have affixed my signature and seal this 28th day of October, 1998.

My Commission expires August 11, 2002.

Carol White

Registered Professional Reporter