



**ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO SPEECH**

**AT JUSTICE DEPARTMENT POLICE**

**INTEGRITY CONFERENCE**

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ATTY GEN. RENO: Welcome to the Conference on Strengthening Police-Community Relations. I'm joined by my colleague in the Cabinet, Rodney Slater, the Secretary of the Department of Transportation, and I so appreciate your participation today.

And we have -- it was just wonderful to walk in here and to see so many different people who I have gotten to know over these past six years, who care so much about the enforcement of civil rights, about good, professional policing. And we have such a wonderful group of participants representing a remarkable spectrum of expertise, experience, and perspectives.

We are here today to strengthen the bonds of trust between law enforcement and the communities that they serve. We are here to expand on common ground and explore our differences, to identify and share best practices, and to develop recommendations for a plan of action. In short, we are here to solve problems and to build trust.

Over the past ten years, I have seen a remarkable change in our approach to policing, led by so many people in this room. I've seen a growing level of police professionalism and a national shift towards community policing that involves the citizens in the policing effort. These efforts have contributed to a decrease in the crime rates for the past seven years in virtually every category. In so many ways, the police are doing their jobs and doing it better. In many communities, police officers and citizens are working together to prevent crime. They are reaching out to young people and to the elderly, to build understanding and trust, all with the aim of making our neighborhoods safer places to live. But with a greater, more important result: police officers are often times the glue that begins to bring a community together.

At the same time, there are places where distrust and tensions are high on both sides. Even in some of the

communities that have benefitted from additional policing services, some residents do not feel that they are better off, especially in minority neighborhoods. Some are wondering whether our success in reducing crime comes at the cost of overly aggressive police officers who ignore the civil liberties of those they serve. For too many people in America, the trust that is so essential to effective policing does not exist because residents believe that police have used excessive force, or that law enforcement is biased, disrespectful and unfair.

Tensions between police and minority residents affect all aspects of the criminal justice system. When citizens do not trust their local police officer, they are less willing to report crime, and less willing to be witnesses in criminal cases. Jurors are less willing to accept as truthful the testimony of officers, and recruitment of police officers from minority communities becomes that much more difficult. Effective policing does not mean abusive policing. Effective policing does not ignore the constitutional rights and the civil liberties that police officers are sworn to uphold. Across the country, there are nearly 700,000 law enforcement officers, and the overwhelming majority are hard-working public servants who care deeply and who do a dangerous job justly, fairly, with excellence, and with honor. I support and salute these dedicated, caring officers.

But we as a society cannot tolerate officers who mistreat law abiding citizens, or who bring their own racial bias to the job of policing. Equal justice under the law must mean the same thing to minority communities as it means to the nation as a whole. And police officers cannot mistreat anybody in violation of the law.

Every person in this room shares these fundamental principles, and that is why we are here. If we are going to move forward in policing in the 21st century, we must address our problems squarely, straight-on, with candor, with directness, and find ways to break down the walls of suspicion that hinder trust.

We will not solve all our problems today at this

conference, but we can make considerable progress, judging by the people in this room. It is an effort that have started. Last December, the Department brought together a problem-solving group on law enforcement stops and searches, to develop training materials for law enforcement agencies. It is an effort that we will need to continue once this conference is over.

Today we face historic challenges and an historic opportunity. The challenge for law enforcement is to recognize that the problems of excessive force and racial profiling are real. Indeed, the perceptions of minority residents that law enforcement is biased is itself a problem that must prompt us to take steps to eliminate that perception. Police agencies must insist on accountability, and when police officers or police departments engage in misconduct, the blue wall of silence must be taken down.

Civil rights and community leaders face a similar challenge. You must recognize that police departments today are in almost every instance ready to do the right thing. Instead of assuming the worst of police, we must put ourselves in their shoes and understand how difficult it is to do the job of a police officer in America today. We need your constructive advocacy to help law enforcement do its job better.

We need more than that. We need the church leaders meeting regularly with police officers to develop a dialogue, not just in the moment of crisis or in the moment of concern in a community, but on an ongoing basis. We need civil rights leaders sitting down with police chiefs and line officers to build understanding. We need officers and young people to come together. We can do so much if we reach out.

The 12-city survey that we just released is instructive on just what the problem is. First, it showed that even in the African- American community, most people reported that they are satisfied with the police who serve their neighborhoods. But it also showed that the level of dissatisfaction of the police in the African-American community is approximately twice that of the white

community. This is an unacceptable gap and points to the work we have to do.

To help us more deeply empathize with each other's perspectives, we are very fortunate this morning to have a presentation called "Facing History and Ourselves." Billy Johnston and Jimmy Jones examined the influences that our past experiences play in how we approach current situations and issues. President Clinton will be joining us for a roundtable discussion. There is no one better able to help us move forward in a spirit of trust and reconciliation than the President. He brings to this forum a lifelong commitment to civil rights, and a true appreciation of the work of law enforcement, as well as remarkable skills for finding common ground among us all.

After the lunch break and the roundtable session, we will be divided into five break-out sessions. In these smaller groups we will roll up our sleeves and go to work discussing recommendations and best practices.

We will be discussing five pivotal topics: Use of Force Policies; Racial Profiling and Data Collection; Police Leadership and Management Techniques; Hiring and Recruitment; and Community Partnering.

I believe that improvements in these areas can come from several directions. First, we can improve our policies and practices. For example, changes in policies on high-speed chases and the use of chokeholds and other restraints have made a real difference in many departments in their efforts to reduce the number of incidents in which deadly force was used.

We need to continue to apply the lessons we have learned from our civil rights enforcement and our community relations work, our research and the input we get from the conference, we want to fashion recommendations and best practices that local, state and federal agencies can follow.

Secondly, a focus on training applies to each one of the

break-out topics. Our training must prepare officers for everyday encounters as well as violent confrontations. An officer's language and behavior during interactions with citizens often frame the reaction of citizens and their attitudes toward the police.

Third, we can use technology. For example, many civil rights and law enforcement leaders recommend that we place video cameras in police cars. In Knoxville, Tennessee, this strategy appears to have reduced complaints from citizens. In addition, today we will hear from a number of jurisdictions that have started using technology to collect data on traffic stops.

Today, I'm also announcing that beginning in July the Justice Department will survey Americans about their experiences with traffic stops in the latest version of the Police-Public Contact Survey.

Fourth, we need tools for effective evaluation. For example, we should make sure that we don't set up the wrong incentives for officers. Instead of evaluating officers only on the number of arrests or stops they make, or tickets they issue, we should be evaluating them on how well they are working with the community and addressing the crime problems in their neighborhoods. We will be discussing early warning systems. We will be examining what information to collect and how best to use the information.

In each of these sessions, we have very much to learn from each other, and much to teach each other. At the end of this conference, we will leave here with a better understanding of the concerns of others. But that is not enough. We need to leave here with a commitment -- a very firm commitment -- to put into place concrete steps that will reduce the potential for incidents of excessive force and racial profiling, and that we'll strengthen relations between the police and the community.

I pledge to do my part. I pledge to take what I learn from this conference and move forward. And over the next six months, we will compile the best policy and practice

recommendations that result, and our civil rights efforts, so we can distribute them widely to agencies across the country. I will be traveling to communities around the country to discuss these issues in a local context, and we will bring people together to assess the progress that we have made.

But this is not just about statistics. It is not just about technology. It is not just about practices and procedures. It is about people, with hopes and dreams and aspirations. It is about the wonderfully diverse people of American. And it is about how we reach out together and get the best from every one of us.

Behind a badge and a blue uniform, there is a 24-year-old officer, one year out of the academy, in a tight situation, by himself. He wants to do the right thing. He cares. He's scared. A church leader can move silently through the crowd and talk with him and say, "Here, this is the way we can do it." And a civil rights leader can be on the other shoulder, recognizing that behind that badge, behind that uniform, is a person who cares.

There is a 24-year-old, who all his teenage life wanted to be a lawyer. He got into the wrong crowd, he got into crack at 18. He got into jail for a robbery to sustain the crack habit. He is now 24- years-old. He never wants to go back to the hell of crack again. He still wants to be a lawyer, because he has seen the criminal justice in action and he thinks he can do more, and help people build understanding.

Police officers have got to look behind his record, and behind the angry look on his face, and see a person who cares, who wants to be involved, who wants to make a difference, and instead of coming up with an abrupt word, that police officer who comes over and stands by him and says, "Hey, how's it going? What can I do to help?" can make all the difference.

We can talk here today, but the answer lies in what we do and how we create a domino effect across this country so that we reach out to all -- to the immigrant, to the young,

to the old -- and bring America together. The people in this room, I think, are wonderfully position to do that. And I look forward to our effort in the next -- not years, but months -- to get something done.

Thank you all for participating today. I so very much appreciate the time and the effort that you have taken to come to do this important work.

END.