



# Department of Justice

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REMARKS

BY

THE HONORABLE DICK THORNBURGH  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

TO THE  
ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE OF B'NAI B'RITH  
THE WHITE HOUSE

TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 1989

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here this morning and to be able to talk with you briefly about our efforts at the Department of Justice both in a broad sense and in areas of specific interest to you.

Yesterday, I had the honor of welcoming to the Justice Department participants in the National Council of Jewish Women's Washington Institute, where I took the opportunity to raise an issue which I would also like to share with you before I talk about the Department's work as it relates more specifically to the ADL.

The issue, as I'm sure you will not be surprised to hear, is that of illegal drug use in America. Which I raise in the context of our meeting this morning because, as with the National Council yesterday, I want to ask for your help -- as leaders, as activists, and as respected members of our society who have known success in waging and winning difficult battles. To ask for your help in winning not just the battle of the streets that we see played out every night on the evening news. But in winning the battle on the field of values.

We are in a struggle for the soul of the next generation, in which we will only prevail when drugs go out of fashion. And the only way to make that happen is to communicate -- through our words, our actions, and our accomplishments; as individuals and

groups, as a society and as a government -- to communicate that drug use -- by anyone -- is unacceptable and that drug trafficking is intolerable. Not as just a matter of law, but as a matter of values.

We have to start in as many ways and in as many places as possible to change Americans' attitudes, at every level of society, towards drugs and drug use. And I can think of no better group of individuals to help in bringing about this change than each of you, who can stand up in your communities and not only be heard but be heeded by your neighbors.

So I do ask for your help, as you have given it so often in the past, in making America a better, safer, saner nation which strives to become an ever-greater society by fighting those who would destroy us through greed, self-interest, and hatred.

There is a certain amount of irony in my raising the drug issue with all of you, in that there are those who despair over the dimensions of the drug problem and over that fact that solutions are only to be found in the long-term. And who, as a result throw up their hands and walk away from it. Which is exactly what the Jewish community could have done more than 75 years ago when confronting the problem of anti-Semitism.

But instead, Jewish leaders made a decision and a commitment. A decision to fight the discrimination and the hatred. And a commitment to keep on fighting for as long as it took to end the prejudice and the violence and, as with our challenge to illegal drug use, to wage war on the field of values in order to put anti-semitism out fashion and out of business.

That has been a commitment well-kept and a battle well-waged. And a challenge from which you have not shrunk despite the fact that the victory sought has still not been completely realized.

And as you continue to rise to that challenge, it is the honor of this Administration and the Justice Department to stand with you.

As your fight against anti-Semitism is not a new struggle for you, neither is it for the Department, nor for me personally. As governor of Pennsylvania, beyond efforts to prevent acts of ethnic violence and to bring to justice those who would commit such acts, I also signed legislation, in 1982, making acts of ethnic intimidation a criminal offense.

And I am proud to say that in 1987, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division brought a record number of civil rights

suits, and achieved the successful prosecution in more than 75 percent of those suits, including cases against leaders of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Patriot Party, as well as against the murderers of Denver radio personality Alan Berg.

But as I also said yesterday, just when we feel we may have won out against age-old challenges, new challenges move to the fore to threaten our freedoms and our lives, and old challenges re-emerge, or, as in the case of many of the matters faced by the ADL, old challenges, under new guises continue to frustrate our progress.

That, to an extent, is what we are seeing with the hate groups and the young and violent. They are the Nazis of the past, and the Klansmen of the past. They are the same small men and women who through paranoid fears, warped sensibilities and irrational conclusions play out their sick fantasies in hateful and deadly ways.

But their sameness with their predecessors in no way makes them less frightening or disturbing. And in no way gives us cause to shrug off their demented acts or mind set. In fact, it is because of their kinship with the violent bigotry of the past, that we know that simply ignoring them will not make the problem disappear.

That is why the ADL's work is so important -- to the Jewish community and to the nation. Because without your vigilance we run the risk of reaching the easy conclusion that these people are simply kooks who really don't matter in the greater scheme of things.

And while that may be true -- in that their numbers are relatively small and their acts relatively isolated -- we, as a nation, cannot afford to run the risk that by taking no action these people will just go away.

Instead, our action must be swift and sure. We must severely punish wrongdoers in order that they know our values as a nation and our commitment to those values, and so as to set an example for that minority, no matter how small, who would consider following a similar course, as well as to sound an alarm for to that vast majority of good and decent Americans, that says: be alert, and be aware because these "kooks" of today aspire to be tomorrow's tyrants.

To that end, I am happy to be able to say that since June of last year, there has been a federal law on the books which provides for criminal penalties for damage to religious property and for obstruction of persons in the free exercise of religious

beliefs. Which will be used whenever possible to mete out the type of punishment of which I just spoke.

And I am also glad to be able to say that just last week, the Justice Department sent a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee expressing our support for the concept of Senate Bill S. 419 -- the "Hate Crimes Statistics Act."

We did raise concerns over some of the technical problems involved in collecting this important data, but I can tell you here, as is stated in the letter, that: Prosecution of hate crimes has long been a high priority within the Department of Justice and, that, as we continue the vigorous enforcement of existing statutes that prohibit criminal activity motivated by prejudice, we also support the objectives of S. 419.

Those, briefly, are the issues which I know are of special importance to all of you and to the ADL, and I look forward to working with you in meeting the challenges which they present.

But before I take my leave, I would like to raise an issue which concerns some of the broader challenges that touch upon the work of the ADL and all of our efforts to eliminate discrimination, violence, and racial and religious hatred...the issue being, the case of Salman Rushdie and the consequences

which we have felt here in America as a result of this severe form of intolerance. It, frankly, is very disturbing.

Freedoms which we had long thought secure and inviolable -- our freedoms of the press, and of expression -- have suddenly been jeopardized by acts of intimidation and terror; which has left us angry and bewildered.

But as for this administration and this Justice Department, I can assure you that our anger outweighs our bewilderment. This is America, and while we will protect the right of every person within our borders to exercise the broadest freedom ever known to mankind -- particularly in matters of faith and religion -- we will not now, nor will we ever, allow those pursuits to infringe upon the same rights as enjoyed by others. Period.

Which is a principle that we must carry abroad as well, to combat terrorism around the world. We will not be safe until the world is safe. And the world will not be safe until terrorists are stopped and brought to justice.

Those are the challenges we face, old and new, and which we must face together. Great challenges, with great goals that will not be reached over night, or even over the next year.

But it is the greatness of the challenge which makes for the greatness of the goal, and regardless of the length of the struggle we must never lose hope for its achievement.

I thank you for the chance to be with you today and for the great help and service you provide to us and to this nation in the past, and for all that I know you will do in the future.