



# Department of Justice

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OPENING REMARKS

BY

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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT THE

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

TRIBUTE TO

ATTORNEY GENERAL  
WILLIAM FRENCH SMITH

WASHINGTON, DC  
FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 1991  
GREAT HALL,  
MAIN JUSTICE BUILDING

We gather in this Great Hall this morning to pay tribute to the seventy-fourth Attorney General, William French Smith, who personified both integrity and dedication to the rule of law. I cannot help but recall how -- on another morning, September 22, 1989 -- Bill Smith joined us as we observed the 200th Anniversary of this Office of the Attorney General. Even among that august assembly of former Attorneys General -- representing four decades at Justice -- he stood out both for his long tenure and his subdued but remarkable success. Bill then spoke of the decade of the Eighties. Many of us here today remember the wry way he opened his remarks -- with the observation that "life at Justice is best described as one damn thing after another."

Perhaps a better way to describe his own tenure here is simply as one quiet achievement after another. Though a man of some personal reserve, Bill Smith was an energetic and innovative Attorney General. He early recognized the menace that violent crime represents to our society and immediately made combating crime a high priority for the Department. Two months after taking office, he appointed a special task force, chaired by former Attorney General Griffin Bell, to study how the federal government could best help fight violent crime.

What Bill Smith's commitment to anti-crime action generated were strong approaches that have since become institutions throughout our 94 United States Attorneys' offices. Our Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDEFT) originated

with him. So too did the Law Enforcement Coordinating Committees (LECCs). And he early recognized -- from the criminal web of drug-trafficking -- that we had to take international action against the drug lords and money launderers and other entrepreneurs of worldwide crime. These were the important legacies left us by William French Smith, and I am proud to carry them forward today as part of our growing departmental strength against the ravages of an international drug war abroad and domestic violence here at home.

Bill Smith took up this office on January 23, 1981, three days after President Ronald Reagan was inaugurated. In his own words, he saw an opportunity for legal change in that moment:

"The election of President Reagan signaled a fundamental change in outlook of those entrusted with the responsibilities of government. It carried with it a particular challenge for this Department, dedicated as it is to the rule of law and the fair and impartial enforcement of the law."

His emphasis on the rule of law -- and its fair and impartial enforcement -- found him articulating a new and different vision for law enforcement by this Department. Some of it provoked debate. Bill did not hesitate to defend vigorously

President Reagan's courses of action on immigration, the air traffic controllers' strike, or more controversial positions on civil rights. Yet Bill Smith never sought the spotlight, and he more quietly advocated a strict adherence to the rule of law that remains a solid credo for all of us who work for justice today.

It was typical of him that when he had completed his work here, he returned to his beloved California. You will hear more of that side of him from friends here today. I will only say he had well earned his return west. His tenure as Attorney General was longer than any other Attorney General since Herbert Brownell.

Sir Francis Bacon, an Attorney General in King James' England, had this to say about those who uphold the rule of law: ". . . Solomon's throne was supported by Lions on both sides; let them be Lions, but yet Lions under the throne." Those who have had the honor of knowing or working with William French Smith remember that he had something of the lion about him. The dignity, the individuality, the regal demeanor, above all, the courage to confront the criminal activities he recognized as a threat to our society.

On his departure from the Justice Department in 1985, he said that one of his principal satisfactions was the passage of

the Comprehensive Crime Bill of 1984. As we gather today, another such bill, the President's Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1991, is on the agenda of the 102nd Congress. We can best honor Bill Smith's crusade and accomplishments in the effort to contain crime by doing all in our power to see this vital legislation through to passage.

Jean, members of the family, friends and associates of William French Smith, we are honored you have joined us today at the Department of Justice to honor this good man and his solid record of accomplishment.