



Department of Justice

For Immediate Release
8:30 A.M. EDT
Friday, September 22, 1989

Remarks by

The Honorable Dick Thornburgh
Attorney General of the United States

at

Ceremonies
Commemorating the Bicentennial
of the Office of
The United States Attorney General

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Good morning. And welcome, at this early hour, to our bicentennial birthday celebration. We today commemorate officially the 200th Anniversary of the establishment of the Office of the Attorney General.

Under our Constitution, we frequently remind ourselves, we are a government of laws, not men. But back in 1789, Congress, in its wisdom, passed the Judiciary Act that assigned one man -- the Attorney General -- to tell the government what the law is. Since then, seventy-five Attorneys General have grappled with that daunting assignment. Edmund Randolph, the first Attorney General, had to do it all alone. Congress wouldn't even hire him a law clerk. You will hear more of such troubles today. Two centuries later, I can only say how grateful and extremely fortunate we are to have the professional help of an exceptional group of excellent people, some 75,000-strong throughout this Department and its various components.

Our legal scope today has so widened that nobody could do this job, or even part of it, alone. But for the Attorney General, part of the original assignment remains unchanged. I am still required to give my advice and opinion on questions of law to one man in particular. And we are greatly honored this morning that he has chosen to join us here.

We have been counsel to his office for two hundred years, so I feel comfortable in introducing him as someone with the deepest commitment to justice under the rule of law -- our longest-standing, most loyal, and best client -- the President of the United States.

(Presidential Remarks)

Thank you, Mr. President.

You remind us of the hard times had by those early Attorneys General, but what else could you expect from the job description? The language of the Judiciary Act is very terse about emolument, and downright quaint when it comes to job qualifications. The Attorney General is to be "a meet man, learned in the law." I have some idea what learning in the law is, but what was, or is, or could be, some would ask, "a meet man"?

You could look it up, as they say. When I did, I found that "meet" is an old-fashioned word for "fit, suitable." A meet man is a fit man, a suitable man, the appropriate man. And I believe that has rung true for Attorneys General down through the ages.

However learned he may be in the law, he must also fit his times and suit his day, if he is truly to do justice. He must prove himself the appropriate man to uphold the law at his moment in history.

It is that aspect of the office that we choose to commemorate today. We have with us, on the platform, Attorneys General representing the four most recent decades of our continuing legal history at the Department of Justice. They are all learned in the law, but they are also, if you will, meet men. They each fit their times, suited the demands of their decade -- the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s -- and acted appropriately in pursuit of justice under the rule of law. That makes for a fine legal record. Together they represent half a century at Justice, and embrace half a century of justice done.

So let us start with the earliest Attorney General present, appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. A Nebraskan turned New Yorker, he served during the early 50s, from January 21, 1953 to November 8, 1957. I recall the political campaign in 1952 centered around the three C's -- Crime, Communism, and Corruption -- and they all three ended up as legal concerns at Justice during the days of Attorney General Herbert Brownell: Jr.

(Remarks by Mr. Brownell)

Thank you, Herb Brownell.

Mr. Brownell's Deputy Attorney General was appointed to fill his place at Justice on November 8, 1957. Another New Yorker, Brownell's successor served through the later 50s, and into the 60s, until the end of President Eisenhower's second term. Faced with the first school integration crisis at Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, President Eisenhower sought advice and opinion on his legal recourses from Attorney General William Pierce Rogers.

(Remarks by Mr. Rogers)

Thank you, Bill Rogers.

When Robert Kennedy resigned as Attorney General in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed his Deputy Attorney General to the office on February 11, 1965. The 60s were then at their most turbulent, and both men at Justice had been through many confrontations over civil rights throughout the South, including the integration of the University of Mississippi. Before he resigned on October 6, 1966, to move to the State Department, investigation into the murder of three civil rights workers fell to Attorney General Nicholas deBelleville Katzenbach.

(Remarks by Mr. Katzenbach)

Thank you, Nick Katzenbach.

President Jimmy Carter appointed a fellow Georgian, a distinguished former federal judge, to head up Justice on January 26, 1976. He served until August 15, 1979, a period of relative legal calm but much international economic disruption. The brunt of the late 70s fell to Attorney General Griffin Boyette Bell.

(Remarks by Mr. Bell)

Thank you, Griffin Bell.

The 80s saw the arrival of the Californians in Washington, and President Ronald Reagan appointed one of his closest advisers to be Attorney General on January 23, 1981. At Justice, he legally monitored the early turnabouts of this decade, serving into President Reagan's second term, longer than any Attorney General since Herb Brownell. Many changes in the public philosophy of the law came about under Attorney General William French Smith.

(Remarks by Mr. Smith)

Thank you, Bill Smith.

That leaves me with the brief for the 90s.

How can we carry forward our commitment to justice -- in all its consequences -- through the future workings of the Department? Let me try to sketch in a court calendar for the 90s, marking down what directions we will strive to pursue.

We will, of course, pursue the war on drugs through the National Drug Control Strategy, which integrates all basic anti-drug initiatives and agencies, including the FBI, the DEA, and other law-enforcement agencies within Justice.

We will continue our fight against white-collar crime in all its evasive guises, from insider trading in the securities markets to fraud in the bankrupt S & L's.

We will continue to serve as a stout advocate for the protection of the environment, the enforcement of the civil rights of all our citizens, and the maintenance of a competitive environment for American business.

In all these endeavors, we will be undertaking a more international approach to law enforcement, reflecting the shrinking nature of the world we inhabit.

Narco-terrorism has become the scourge of two hemispheres, with the Southern as illicit seller, our own Northern as indulgent purchaser. Business fraud must today be pursued, not just across state lines, but across international boundaries. In the global marketplace, a "rule of reason" must assure that we do not hinder our ability to engage foreign competitors in worldwide markets. Protecting the environment from such depredations as global warming calls for a legal defense of the planet itself. Crimes of violence now extend to international terrorism, as lately, not just back alleys, but the high, blue altitudes have become the haunt of the assassin.

To meet these new worldwide challenges, we must stretch our capabilities. We are already assembling our troops, here at Main Justice and under our United States Attorneys across the country, to bring all our talents together, so that we may function as a modern, integrated, international organization.

We are, in the final analysis, after all, the government's law firm -- the biggest in the world. We serve the public interest, and must strive to serve it well.

While it will always be true that those who join us do so at some financial sacrifice, and often remain at ever greater sacrifice, you know, as I do, that there is much reward in that sacrifice -- the intangible reward of association with this law firm, its time-honored traditions, its commitment to professional excellence and its outstanding, two-centuries-old reputation.

I sometimes ask myself, if I were the government -- or for that matter, any government -- would I ever want to hire any other law firm?

You can imagine my answer. Where else would I find a firm with such a high success rate in litigation? We win ninety per cent of our civil cases. Where else would I go for the best legal protection for my assets? Every year, the government is sued for hundreds of millions of dollars, and we have parted at most with meager-meager money in court awards. If I wanted to enforce any right that the Constitution makes manifest -- from voting rights to housing rights to rights for those with disabilities -- what other firm has our depth of legal experience in the civil rights arena? If I suddenly needed an investigation done, could I do better than our Federal Bureau of Investigation? If I were facing big drug problems -- the way this government is -- who could match the brave record of our Drug Enforcement Administration?

If I were facing border problems, who has more experience than our Immigration and Naturalization Service? Availability of legal services? Not only are we a presence in Washington, but we have 94 branch offices all across the country. And what terrific record-keeping, everything from legal files to fingerprints. And the list goes on.

And you know what is really impressive? The U.S. Government gets all these services from one firm.

You should be very proud to be a member of that firm. I know I am proud of all the great work you are doing to help preserve our outstanding legal reputation acquired over two centuries. And I am most proud of the spirit in which this firm -- the Department of Justice -- has done its work, handled every case. There is no swerving from the professionalism and impartiality, which is our pride at Justice. I am reminded of that pride whenever I see those words, engraved in the rotunda outside my office: "The United States wins its point whenever justice is done its citizens in the courts."

As Attorney General, that is how I always represent us to our chief client. I'll have to ask the President when I next visit his office, but for the foreseeable future, I hope and expect he will keep this law firm on. . . .