



The Remarks of Attorney General Janet Reno

at the

National Law Enforcement

Officers Memorial

Candlelight Vigil

May 13, 1999

P R O C E E D I N G S

Thank you for the privilege of being here this evening, for I draw such strength and courage and spirit from all of you and from those you honor here tonight. Once again I am touched by the support of the law enforcement community. We are gathered here tonight to recognize the heroism and the valor demonstrated by the individuals whose names will be read shortly and forever inscribed in the walls of this monument.

This is truly a wonderful ceremony, and I sometimes in an early morning come back through here and walk slowly, reading the names, remembering how much we honor them and remembering how much we must do in their honor.

The lives led by the individuals of our law enforcement community are not easy. Sacrifices must be made on a daily basis that the general public simply does not understand. Could you imagine a computer programmer, an investment broker, or even an attorney who went to work with the thought that he or she may be killed in the course of a

day's work? This is unthinkable. Yet every day the brave men and women of law enforcement put on their uniforms and report for duty with the knowledge that someday, perhaps this day, they may have to pay the ultimate price.

We are here tonight because too many of these wonderful officers have come to know this painful reality. Last year the nation as a whole received a powerful wake-up call about the sacrifices that our law enforcement officers make on behalf of the nation, when an armed intruder violated the sanctity of our nation's capital, the center of our democracy, and a symbol of freedom for the entire world. Two valiant officers were there to withstand the attack. They sacrificed their lives in the line of duty to protect their fellow Americans and to preserve our democracy. We will never forget them.

If any good could ever come from this terrible tragedy, perhaps it will be to remind America that law enforcement officers at every level and in every community across this nation take these risks every single day. They put their lives on the line for the very same freedom. They have sworn to sacrifice anything, everything and they have paid with their lives.

The brave men and women being honored tonight demonstrate that in protecting you and me, they indeed protect the American way of life. The hard work and the personal sacrifices of everyone in the law enforcement community, as Craig pointed out, are having a substantial impact on crime in America. Crime rates have fallen for over six consecutive years, and rates of violent crime and homicide are the lowest that they have been in three decades.

Americans tend to become complacent when crime goes down. They tend to forget about the police officers who made it possible, and then we watch crime go up. Let us honor the people we revere tonight, by saying: We will not become complacent; we will continue our efforts and together ultimately eliminate the culture of violence in this nation.

However, declining crime rates and better statistics offer little solace to those who are here to remember a loved one, or to the residents of Littleton, Colorado, who have suffered so greatly in recent weeks. To you, crime in America is real and tragic and horrible. And while we know that there will always be crime, we must continue to press forward and do everything we can to deal with it.

We must continue to do all that we can to protect our families and children from dangerous criminals. And as always, it will be you, our nation's law enforcement officers, who will be on the very front lines. I salute you, and I thank each and every one of you for the work that you do for all of us. I salute, too, and very specially, the family members and the survivors. You are my heroes and heroines, too. You make such a difference, and you give me such strength, and such courage, and such motivation to try harder.

But there are steps that we can take to protect our nation and our officers. We must take guns out of the hands of criminals. Guns took the lives of 75 of the 156 officers killed in 1998. Is there any doubt that restrictions to guns could have saved the lives of at least one of these people? Many people ask what can be done to stop gun violence. As with any problem, there are different factors, and we should redress them all.

But first we should start doing what is reasonable. This is the standard by which law enforcement often judges between what is right and wrong. Therefore, let us do what is reasonable, what common sense requires us to do when it comes to restricting access to guns. If making it slightly more inconvenient for a law-abiding citizen to obtain a gun for hunting or recreation is what needs to be done to save lives, isn't that reasonable? If filling out additional paperwork or waiting for a background check to be completed is needed to save someone's life, isn't that reasonable?

There is little doubt in my mind that every American is willing to take these reasonable steps to save lives. It is a small price to pay. I hope that all of us can come together in common understanding, without political

rhetoric, and do the right thing, the reasonable thing, the common-sense thing with respect to guns in the hands of people who don't belong to have them. Let's get them out of those hands.

We must also reach out to our children. We need to reach out to them with love and respect, and we must hold them accountable in a loving and caring way. Let us together teach them the value of human life and the consequences of violence. Teach them that there is a difference between television and real life. Teach them the difference between right and wrong, and make them feel and let them know that there are people who care about them all through the community. Do not let them be consumed by hate and intolerance. Make them feel they have a place to turn. By doing this we can reduce the chances of having another tragedy like the one in Littleton.

And do you know who is best, oftentimes, at reaching out to children? That police officer who is also willing to put her or his life on the line; the police officer who is the mentor; the police officer who builds trust and understanding amongst children in the neighborhood.

Law enforcement officers should have a primary role in educating our children. All of you can be role models, and you can have a tremendous impact on the lives of our youth. I have watched you in action. I have seen five police officer trainees dealing with five young people in a school at risk. They have been assigned to be their mentors. At first, the young people distrust them, and then suddenly, they begin to listen. And because of those trainees they begin to understand, and trust, and tolerance, and concern and care are built together, as the trainee talks to the young person.

Or in Boston, or in Chicago, in so many places across this nation I have seen the police officer hold out his hand and make the difference for us all.

We have got to make sure that we have this type of communication not just with our children but with all of

those who would sometimes question law enforcement. Let us reach out our hands and say: We are here to serve. We are here to make sure this community can be safe. Join with us, not against us, and join with us in understanding, and tolerance, and care.

There is so much to do, but in these past six years I have had a chance to see law enforcement in action in communities. In small counties, in distant places across this nation, I have watched America join round them and honor them. When you come to Washington, you don't know what to expect. I can tell you now that after six years I have a greater faith and trust in this nation, a greater pride in its people, a greater commitment to serving them than ever before. And at the heart and soul of this nation are the people who uphold its laws, and who sometimes gives their lives in that process.

The police officers of America have given it so much, and this nation is its beneficiary. Let us honor them tonight, and let us return to our homes committed to carrying forward their work in building a community that will no longer tolerate violence as we have known it. God bless you.