



REMARKS OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

1999 TULANE LAW SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

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CERTIFIED COURT REPORTER

Thank you very much, Dean. You, the University, the law school, and the students do me a great honor by asking me to be here today. I have enjoyed this day for I've had a chance to meet with some of the students who are graduating. I am so impressed with your realism but more touched and impressed with your idealism.

You radiate a sense of purpose, a sense of joy in the law, and it's contagious. I go back to Washington motivated even more so to pursue the law in every way that I can for the benefit of this country. You shared your hopes and dreams for a career in the law.

Family and friends you should be so proud of them. They are a great group of lawyers who will contribute significantly to the legal profession of this nation in the years to come.

After 36 years, I still love the law. Before I came to Washington in private practice working for the legislature as a partner in a large firm and as a chief prosecutor, I found the law more interesting, more challenging, more

rewarding, more just plain fun than I ever imagined that it would be when I stood in your shoes 36 years ago. I wish the same for you.

The part of the law that I love most however is public service. Quite frankly, I have grave difficulty for charging people for protecting their rights. For public service I have the opportunity to use the law the right way, to serve the American people, to try to solve problems, to make this nation safer, to protect its resources, and it has been the most wonderful and rewarding experience that anybody could have.

Yes, there are downsides. As Attorney General you get cussed at, fussed at, and figuratively beaten around the ears. You wonder why you're doing this. Then someone calls or writes a letter and tells you what you have done to make a difference, and it is so important.

It is not the experience of attorney general that I sometimes remember as much as I do the woman in South Carolina who waited as we dedicated a church built to replace one razed by arson, and she suddenly, as we were through, burst through the rope lines right in front of the President and came up to me and gave me a big hug and said, Janet, you got me child support in Miami. Then she said these are the two you got me child support for. I looked up at two of the most wonderful grown men I've seen in a long time. It is moments like that that make the law so wonderful for all the days of your life.

Or the man that stopped me on the escalator in a building in Downtown Miami and said, Miss Reno, I want to thank you for arresting me. I said, sir, I know I didn't arrest you. No, I don't mean that, but your prosecutor prosecuted my case, but they gave me an opportunity to get into drug treatment, and they referred me to a treatment program. I just cannot thank you enough because I'd lost my family, I'd lost my job. I got my job back. I've been drug free for two years. I got my family back. Thank you. The law is a wonderful tool for helping others.

What will be your course? What will be the path that you take? This is a great University and a law school that you should be so proud of. It has a tradition of service that is so important. Whether you pursue public service, and I encourage you to do that for at least part of your legal career, or whether you become a senior partner in the finest law firm in America, you can still serve and you can still make a difference.

What do you do? What do you face, and how do you deal with it? Well, you might tell me, what have I got to be challenged by. It's one of the periods of greatest prosperity in this nation's history. Crime is down seven years in a row. There is more opportunity for minorities than ever before. Technology is providing unparalleled opportunities in communication and education.

Yes, you are going into a world of unparalleled opportunity. But if you look carefully, if you listen, you will see the warnings and you will see the caution, the caution of Columbine, of heritage, national economies that are being brought to their knees, a black man in Jasper dragged and killed just because he was black, children in America living in poverty, foreign workers being hired to fill positions here because we don't have sufficient skilled workers to fill the jobs, and grown men sitting on the sidelines because they've been in the criminal justice and can't get a job and can't revert back into the main stream of life.

Listen. Look. And whatever course you can be complacent, go off to your law firms, make lots of money, but will your nation and will your life be as strong and as positive as if you got involved? If you get involved, if you use the skills you have obtained here at this wonderful law school, you can be a force in ending the culture of violence in this nation. You can be a force that is developing a more dependable economy. You can be a force in providing equal opportunity in the true sense for all America's children. You can be a force for insuring that every American, regardless of the amount of money they make, have access to law and to justice. You can stare down the bigot, speak out at the hater, and make a difference in this nation.

How do you do it? One of the things I think is important is in developing new skills that lawyers generally don't have, but I suspect from talking to your faculty today and talking to you that you have a more abundance than most graduates. But take the skills of problem solving and peace making which you have acquired at Tulane and enhance them, improve on them, and use them with every skill at your command.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. When we deal with an angry young man who's been arrested for possession of drugs, the prosecutor too often thinks that she has won a victory when she gets that person convicted, only to ignore the fact that there are not enough prison cells to house the person for the length of time that the judge is sentencing them and there are not enough treatment programs to do something about the problem that got the person into the jail in the first place.

The public defender, on the other hand, thinks he won the case when he gets his client off on a motion to dismiss, ignoring the fact that he has done nothing to get him treatment to check the crack addiction that is a worse prison than the prison he might otherwise go to.

Why not solve the problem? Why not bring peace? The prosecutor and the public defender who come together in the future as problem solvers to figure out what we do together to get that person off of the addiction and into recovery and into a secure job and into the future are going to be the leaders of the next century.

The persons who come together to teach that angry young man how to resolve conflict without knives and guns and fists and how to become a productive, peaceful contributor to the community are going to lead this nation. I suspect that there will be many of you who are amongst those leaders.

How are you a problem solver? How do you become a problem solver? Lawyers think a lot of themselves as advocates, as defenders, as deal makers, but not enough think of

themselves as peace makers and problem solvers.

First of all, you've got to learn to speak with small, old words like Winston Churchill suggested, words that can convey meaning to all Americans, not just those who took law from these wonderful professors. You've got to be able to speak and persuade and convey, convey trust, convey confidence, instill confidence in your client, instill confidence in the opponent that you're trying to reach "yes" with. Know what you're talking about.

Now, my friend Jenny said that she wanted somebody to teach her legal analysis. Let me take one minute to try and do so. Look at the whole problem not just the problem that's before you in the motion. Look at all the facts. If there's something that says in your head, maybe public health would be a pretty good idea to pursue. Go find a public health specialist who knows something about youth violence and get them involved in figuring out how to deal with the problem and then just sit there and look at it. If it doesn't all click quite yet, wiggle a little bit and relax or go have a glass of wine. Then you'll find as you think about it, as you drive down the street, as you do other chores, that it slowly comes together and there is a solution to the problem. It may not be the solution of how you win that motion, but it will be the solution to how you save that kid's life and keep him out of the road of the addiction and alienation from society.

Look at the big picture. Look at the lasting picture. Involve disciplines. Do everything you can to learn how, no matter what area of the law you are in, how to negotiate and how to use other dispute resolution techniques, anything that can get to "yes".

I shared with you my basic way to approach dispute resolution. Most disputes can be resolved easily. Two people arguing over an orange. They're both mad as a hatter at the other. It's my orange. No, it's my orange. Finally, one says, take it, I don't care anymore. The person goes off and squeezes juice. All the other one wanted the orange for was the rind for the cake that they were baking. If we talk out the problem, we come to "yes" and to solutions and

to peace ever so much more often.

Don't forget to laugh at yourself in the process. Sometimes you think you are a know it all. If you can't laugh at yourself, find a brother or a sister who know how to. Don't give up.

For fifteen years I sometimes struggled thinking that nothing would work and nothing would turn crime around. You can see results. Results are not necessarily attributed to you, but results are attributed to a community and a nation that comes together and says, how do we solve this problem, how do we work together.

If you fail, if you mess up, if you err, pick yourself up, know that losing isn't the end of the world. Dust yourself off and move ahead. There is still too much to do to stand on the sidelines and bemoan a mistake.

Now, how do you use those skills to solve problems? Let's take crime. We've already seen the public defender and the prosecutor go at it interested in numbers. But the change has been prosecutors and public defenders that are suddenly looking at what can be done to prevent the problem, to intervene through drug courts, to provide for reentry programs that give young people the chance to come back to the community with a change of success.

Analyze the problem. To send somebody back from a jail to an apartment over the open-air drug market where they got in trouble in the first place, just doesn't make sense. The prosecutors and public defenders for years watched that happen. Speak out and start to change things. Speak out and correct it and solve the problems. Look at what's causing it. Why weren't there as many deaths 50 years ago. It's called guns. Start cutting through the political rhetoric that exists today and say, let's have common sense control of guns in this country so that they don't kill people.

Domestic violence: Twenty-one years ago people laughed at me when I said we had to develop a domestic intervention program. Look at the problem. The problem is that the child

who watches his father kill his mother comes to accept violence as a way of life. Use the law to speak out about the large picture. Work with the doctors to do something about it in the emergency room.

Let us not tolerate violence that perpetuates itself from one generation to another.

Speak out against the hate and bigotry that wracks this land on too many occasions. Haters are cowards, and they back down when confronted. I heard some eloquent lawyering so far this afternoon. Speak out. Don't stand on the sidelines. Don't say it's not my problem. Every American is diminished when hate occurs in this nation. Every American is diminished when our nation's tradition of emigration is impaired by somebody who alienates someone who has come to our shores. But most of all, look at the large, long, lasting picture and help lead the way in the next century to making sure we solve the ultimate problems.

How do we return our children to their families and the families to the children of America? How do we provide quality time with our children? How do we make sure that at least every child in America has appropriate health care, that at least every child in America has appropriate supervision in non-school hours, that every child in America has an education that will prepare them with the skills necessary to fill the jobs to maintain this nation as a first-rate nation?

There was an enthusiasm amongst the students I talked to today. There was an eagerness, a joy, not a joy of graduation but a joy of oh, boy, this is going to be fun. Let's see what we can do now.

I think you can do it. I think you can reach out and solve problems by crossing disciplines, analyzing the problem, and saying, how do we fix this. You can contribute to ending the culture of violence, of giving children opportunities, but don't get too busy doing it.

I hope you will leave this great law school and go out into

the world and start changing another culture. I hope you will start talking to the law firm and saying, if you want my grade point average and if you want my particular skill, what are you going to do to make your workplace a family-friendly workplace. What are you going to do to provide the opportunities to both father and mother to spend quality time with their children?

I remember my afternoons after school and in the evenings. My mother worked in the home. She taught us to appreciate Beethoven. She taught us to play baseball. She taught us to play fair. She punished us, and she loved us with all her heart and soul. There will be no child care ever that would ever be able to replace that lady.

If we can do all that lawyers have done, if this nation can send people to the moon, surely lawyers can lead the way in making sure that we have the opportunity for professional fulfillment while at the same time the opportunity to raise our children with love and care and supervision and have fun along the way and not worry about billable hours.

I hope that you, as you leave here and for the rest of your life and at least for the next 36 years, love and enjoy and revere in the law as much as I have.

Good luck to you all.