



FORTY-SECOND COMMENCEMENT

WHEELING JESUIT UNIVERSITY

ALMA GRACE McDONOUGH CENTER

WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS OF:

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

Saturday, May 13, 2000

(Whereupon, the within proceedings were convened as follows):

HONORABLE JANET RENO: Thank you, Dr. Hawk. Thank you, Father. Thank you for this great honor from this very wonderful university. My first exposure to the university was Father Acker. I spent a morning with him, and I came away an admirer. Then I discovered that the Director of the Bureau of Prisons, with whom I work regularly, is a graduate. She is one of the finest, most effective public servants who runs one of the best agencies in government. Wheeling Jesuit, I thank you.

(Applause.)

To the students, I say: I hope the next 40 years will be as fun, as satisfying, as fulfilling, and as interesting as it has been for me since I graduated in 1960. But I know from my experience that you will draw strength, and wisdom,

knowledge, understanding, and faith from this very special institution. These values will be with you all the days of your life, and lessons learned here will guide you through a world that changes before your eyes. Friends gained here will be with you in times of trial for the rest of your life.

How do you navigate life? How do you deal with the issues? One thing I would like to suggest to you today is re-examine where you stand with two important institutions. Don't take them for granted; think about them and cherish them.

I refer, first, to the family. I remember my growing up, my afternoons after school, and into the summertime. My mother worked in the home, and she cared for us with all her heart and soul. She taught us to play baseball, to bake cakes, to appreciate Beethoven's symphonies. She punished us, and she loved us with all her heart. There is no child care in the world that would ever need a substitute for what that lady was in our life.

As you graduate and as you go forth from these wonderful halls, think about your family and put your family first; cherish them. Figure out, if you have children, how you can spend quality time with your children because they will grow up before you know it.

As you seek employment, find out what the employer's family practices are in terms of Biblical beliefs, in terms of opportunities to attend your child's educational programs, in terms of having really quality time with children.

I think that for too often in these last 30 years America has forgotten and neglected its children. I've watched dedicated young lawyers, law enforcement officials struggle to make hours meet to have enough time to do their job, to smell the roses, and to spend with their families; make sure that you have the time and that you cherish that time.

Secondly, don't take your democracy for granted. Don't take the freedoms of this nation for granted. One of the very

special privileges of my service as Attorney General has been the opportunity to meet with my counterparts who represent you and merged democracies in Eastern Europe. You can sense their pride, their excitement, their joy at this endeavor that they are undertaking, but you also learn of the frustration and the very difficult challenges that they face and that they sometimes do not overcome.

I have had the chance to meet with colleagues from old established democracies who are fighting the evils of sloth and lethargy and corruption that threaten to undo what they hold dear. And I had visited a country, an established democracy, one who is now coming out from the tyranny that swept that democracy away. I come away from all these occasions in awe of how fragile our freedom is, and how beautiful, how splendid the institution of democracy is; we must cherish, we cannot take it for granted, and we must give it our best.

How will you do this? I had a chance to meet with students before the commencement began. I was so impressed with the variety of interests, the commitment, the wonderful questions that I got from these students. Let us resolve to put the energy, the intellect, the innovation, and the love of our country to work, both now and in the future, to protect and defend and make ever stronger the freedom, the democracy that we hold dear.

What needs to be done? First of all, we must enforce the rule of law and do it fairly, making it accessible to all people; and, therein, lies a challenge. For too many people in this country, they have no access to justice or to the law because they can't afford it. We have got to bring the people to the level where everyone has access to justice and that justice means the same to all people.

But we must recognize that even though the rule of law gives this freedom, we sometimes ignore them. We stand silently by as people speak with hatred. Seek out this hate wherever you go, because haters are usually cowards; and when confronted, they back down. When they are not opposed, they continue on; and, like Hitler, come into power, even in my lifetime, with an evil that cannot be described. And

when I ask people, "How did you let that happen?" They say, "We just stood by." Speak out against hate.

But that is not enough. If you don't like the actions of your public officials, don't mumble and gripe about it. Do something about it. Get involved with the political process. Run for office yourself. Speak out on issues that you care about. But don't stand by and take our democracy for granted. We have seen results of what happens when that occurs around the world.

But this is not enough. Our nation is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people must be built upon something more than majority rule, something more than the rule of law. It must be built on a strong foundation of mutual understanding, tolerance, and appreciation for the wonderful diversity of this nation.

Without these values sacred to our nation, we'll feel increasingly alienated. Let it out and ignore, they will seek destructive, sometimes violent ways to make your voices heard, ways that do not contribute to the civil discourse by which people solve their problems and generate new concepts that strengthen our democracy.

To achieve understanding and tolerance, we the people, the politicians, and the press must speak in positive, constructive, and honest ways about the issues and the challenges that we face instead of constantly criticizing, harping, and tearing people down and tearing communities apart by creating division. We must emphasize problem solving and peacemaking; not vindictiveness and spite in our language, in our actions, and in the way we relate to each other.

We must focus on the people in our society who have been left out. The best way to do that is to build a community, to reweave the fabric of community around children and families at risk.

Too many of our children go without child care in the afternoon. Although the experts say that zero to three is

the most formative time in a person's life, the time of first learned concepts of the Lord, and punishment, and development of conscious.

Let us make sure that not just some, but all the children of America have the child care and the edu-care in those three first very formative years that can give them a foundation upon which to grow.

What good are all the prisons going to be 15, 20 years from now if a child doesn't learn the concept of the Lord, and what punishment means as they grow up?

What good are the institutions of learning going to be to these children if they don't learn the basic foundation of human response and human action?

Let us go on beyond that and make sure that every single one of our children has a quality education.

Something is wrong with a nation that pays its teachers what it does and pays its football players in the six-digit figures.

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(Applause.)

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Let us do more to make our children free of violence. Crime is down eight years in a row in this country, but let us not become complacent. Let us learn what people at Wheeling Jesuit are learning, that if we use values correctly, if we provide a balanced approach to crime fighting, including prevention, and punishment, and active care, and support, if we aim at the evil of domestic violence recognizing that if we end violence in the home then we can begin to end it on the streets and in the communities of America.

If we approach the problem of crime, not with partisan political rhetoric, but with good common sense and

respectful discussion, we can once and for all end the culture of violence in this nation. Violence, as we know it, does not have to be.

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(Applause.)

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One group that we must reach out to is a powerful wonderful group with much to offer. Recently I helped build or rebuild an old home in St. Louis. I was with young African-American men, some of whom had been in prison, and some who were trying to avoid going to prison. At first they looked at me like, "What do you think she's doing here? She doesn't know anything about holding a hammer." When the television cameras left, they thought I might be a little more serious, but when I finally ended up driving three-penny nails without bending them, they thought I was really serious.

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(Laughter.)

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And they started talking; they wanted so to contribute; they wanted so to develop positive opportunity for their future; they had great wisdom and good thought.

We have got to learn to respect and to talk to each other. They've got to feel like they can talk to us and we talk to them with understanding.

When I talk to young people and ask them what can be done to keep them from getting into trouble, they say somebody to talk to, somebody who understands how hard it is to grow up in difficult circumstances, and somebody who can give me a pat on the back when I deserve it. We can do so much if we reach out and, with respect and understanding, build

bridges to people that we have not talked to before.

Finally, as we build a community, we must recognize that when tension rises and threatens our society, and anger sweeps a community, we must take steps not to let it go further.

I come from Miami, a community I love, a community which has been hurt. And some have felt betrayed, others in the community have felt differently; but there is division there. It is very important for us all to take the lessons learned -- that is being learned there -- and listen carefully to each other, and talk carefully and with respect to each other; not pushing areas that we disagree in under the rug, but listening, and discussing, and building understanding. This university represents that.

The feeling that I have had here today is the feeling that I sense across America of people who care so much about their families, their community, their nation, who want to make sure that we live in peace and with understanding.

To the students, you have a great foundation to build on. I wish you God's speed and the peace, next 40 years, may be as wonderful for you as they have for me.

Thank you very much.

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(Applause.)

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CONCLUSION