



Department of Justice

ADDRESS

BY

DICK THORNBURGH
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

AT A

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE CEREMONY

HONORING

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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We come together today to honor the man who had a dream, and to recall the charge that his dream has laid upon us. In August of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a great gathering of his peers--both black and white--in front of Lincoln Memorial. He stood and asked for fulfillment of what Abraham Lincoln before him had promised, that "this Nation, under God. . .have a new birth of freedom." Dr. King spoke out--the inspired pleader to a nation that had delayed too long--for an immediate rebirth of that freedom, and this time the nation heard him. We took up his dream, and made it the law of the land.

Having done so, we have become--particularly those of us here at Justice--the defenders of that dream. As one such defender, I want to restate, on this occasion, our strong commitment to vigorous enforcement of our nation's civil rights laws in the effort to ensure the removal of barriers to equal opportunity on behalf of all Americans.

Today that has become a far more challenging role to pursue. Civil rights--which Dr. King first demanded as the overdue legacy from the Emancipation Proclamation--now embrace a far greater multiplicity of human aspirations. For three decades, women have been justly seeking more than suffrage in the political arena. Some even served bravely during recent action in Panama. Presently, persons with disabilities aspire to achieve their rightful place in mainstream society, a movement in which I take some personal concern and pride.

There will ever be an availing plea for all those unjustly deprived of their inalienable rights. Legally, we must constantly seek what is just, what is fair across all of human variety. Nothing has become more of a judicial challenge than to establish the level playing field, with the even starting line, in all endeavors. Struggling to achieve that equity--in grappling with legislative complexities and refining court decisions--we may sometimes seem to lose sight of what Dr. King so passionately dreamed.

But there is one danger that brings us--always, and abruptly--to the absolute defense of the dream.

That happens whenever the worst of our nightmares re-emerges--that nightmare of violence inspired by race hatred that took the life of Dr. Martin Luther King himself. Then there can be no doubt, no hesitancy about our concern here--only the law brought to bear, with vigor and certainty, upon the threat of violence.

That nightmare, I am saddened to say, is with us again. And it has again jolted awake our national conscience.

Over the recent holiday season, four deadly parcels were delivered through the holiday mail from some pit of virulent, racist delusion. In Birmingham, Alabama, a distinguished federal judge opened one of them in his kitchen--mistakenly, it appears, thinking it was from a friend falsely listed as the return addressee--and was killed by a nail bomb. In Savannah, Georgia, another similar package exploded in the office of a noted black lawyer, who later died of his wounds. Two other package bombs were--thank God--found and disarmed at the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, Georgia, and at the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Jacksonville, Florida. The self-identified perpetrators of these Yuletide bombings later sent a letter to an Atlanta television station, boasting of their murderous record--and of their diabolical equation for violence.

For every black-on-white sexual crime in Alabama, Florida, or Georgia, they wrote in their letter, they would "assassinate one federal judge, one attorney and one officer of the NAACP." They would do such justice, calling themselves "Americans for a Competent Federal Judicial System."

These are fearsome distortions, redolent indeed of our worst nightmares, and they deepen our shock. In the 60s, racial violence by the Ku Klux Klan had a terrifying brutality. The

Birmingham bomber, mistiming his explosive in 1963, destroyed a black church and killed four innocent little girls in Sunday school. But in the 80s, these assassins appear to lay claim to a false religion themselves, even to a false sense of justice. They expand the focus of their murderous attacks from race, to the courts, to the media, even to the rule of law itself. They conspire, in effect, against all society behind a mad pretense of religious truth and judicial rectitude.

The FBI has not yet identified any suspects in these Yuletide bombings, but the pattern of violent, ideologically "just" revolution is already too familiar. We have seen it in such groups as The Order, White Aryan Resistance (WAR), Posse Comitatus, or the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord. Their nightmare symbolism disguises a single, emotional ugliness: race hatred spun out into a bloody web of reticulate violence. They gun down a Denver talk show host, state troopers, federal marshals, even judges, in their war against so-called "race criminals."

They are hate groups. And the hate on which they pride and fuel themselves is a moral sickness. And their acts are crimes.

During my public life, I have regarded it as a pre-eminent responsibility to speak out against such crimes--against any and

all acts of racial, religious, and ethnic violence, and the intimidation that they seek to foster. In 1982, as Pennsylvania's governor, I signed our state's first ethnic intimidation act which made this brand of bigotry a criminal offense. During my previous tenure here at Justice--and now as Attorney General--I have made it a first priority that the full force of law be brought to bear upon all hate crimes.

But we face a mounting threat. Some 230 hate groups in the United States have multiplied racial violence eight-fold over the 80s. Not only with the brute horror of pipe bombs, but with bitterness of heart, poisoned minds, and petty, bully-boy tyrannies. And the offenders are not only these hardened conspirators, but, unhappily, include our still malleable young. There is growing racial tension, even enmity, on our college campuses, along with rising street violence in our cities by young, "skin-head" gangs against their racial "enemies."

In Dallas, Texas, for example, an indictment has been returned charging five youths from a group called the "Confederate Hammerskins," with conspiring to violate the civil rights of Jewish, Black and Hispanic individuals in that community. The indictment illustrates the action plan of this kind of hatred. It includes allegations that the defendants vandalized a synagogue in a Jewish community center, that they

planned to vandalize Jewish-owned businesses on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, and that on numerous occasions they chased and assaulted Black and Hispanic individuals at a local Dallas park.

These hate crimes, I can today report, are being addressed vigorously by the FBI and by our United States Attorneys as an assault upon decency and community sanctity. During 1989, we more than doubled the number of indictments--41 against 62 defendants--twice as many as have ever before been brought in a single year. Our prosecutorial determination won convictions in virtually every one of those cases, and that escalates the deterrent effect of the law upon potential racial and ethnic violence.

Our continuing course will be to investigate, indict and punish those who unleash their bigotry and intolerance in cowardly acts of anonymous vandalism, open abuse, or conspiratorial violence. We will also seek passage of the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, now before the Congress, so that we can gain a better grip on the full dimensions of the rampant violence attending hate crimes.

Let us be clear. Whatever the dimensions, there are simply no bounds within which these acts will be tolerated. In themselves, they are wrong, but too often, as we have seen

recently, they lead to far worse. Justice in this nation is based, in my view, on the goodness of the vast majority of Americans. We can count on that goodness for deep and abiding support, across the reach of our citizenry. But it is up to us here at the Department of Justice to assume a special responsibility--to pursue prosecutions vigorously, so as to bring these hate groups and their conspirators and assassins before the law.

We must halt this nightmare before its distortions of justice bring any greater grief--before its dementia causes any further violence, such as martyred Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In all good conscience, that is how we can best defend--and honor--his dream.