

REMARKS BY
HON. JANET RENO
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

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HARRY TRUMAN SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION

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1 outgrowing the little wooden house. One afternoon, my
2 mother announced that she was going to build a house, and
3 we looked at her stunned and said, What do you know about
4 building a house? And she says, I am going to learn.

5 And she went to the brick mason and to the
6 electrician and to the plumber and she learned how to
7 build a house. She dug the foundation with her own hands
8 with a pick and shovel. She laid the block. She put in
9 the wiring and the plumbing, and my father helped her with
10 the heavy work at night.

11 I have always liked plumbers better than
12 electricians because the electrical department would not
13 give her a permit because she was a woman. She had to
14 come home that night and coach my father on what to say,
15 and then go back the next day, hiding behind him and
16 coaching him again.

17 (Laughter.)

18 ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The plumbers gave her a
19 permit on her own.

20 My father would help her with the heavy work at
21 night when he got home from work. And she lived in that
22 house until she died in December. And every time I came
23 down the driveway at night with a difficult issue to solve
24 at the State attorney's office for the next day and saw
25 that house standing there, it was a reminder to me that

1 And I think about that house and the way it was
2 built as I approach what I do at the Department of
3 Justice.

4 Another lesson that was very important to me
5 that I learned along the way was somewhat later, after I
6 had gone to law school, had started practicing law, had
7 worked for the legislature, but had decided to come home
8 to run for the legislature. This was in 1972, and I
9 campaigned with a man who was running for mayor of Dade
10 County.

11 His name was John B. Orr, and he was the only
12 person in the Florida legislature in 1956 to vote for a
13 resolution supporting the ending of segregation in our
14 public schools. It was extraordinarily courageous in the
15 South in those days. He came home and he knew he was
16 coming home to overwhelming political defeat, but he was
17 willing to stand for what he believed in.

18 He made a comeback some 15 years later, first as
19 a prosecutor, and then he ran successfully for mayor of
20 Dade County. On the campaign trail, he said, I like what
21 you are saying. He said, Just keep on doing and saying
22 what you believe to be right. Do not equivocate. Do not
23 pussyfoot. Do not talk out of both sides of your mouth.
24 And you will wake up the next morning feeling good about
25 yourself.

1 ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It is nice to know that
2 losing is not the end of the world. And I urge you to
3 remember that as you pursue a career in public service, if
4 you get into elected office, it is not the end of the
5 world. And no office is so important that you should be
6 afraid to risk losing.

7 Six months ago, or six months ago and about
8 three days, I thought I was beginning a new term as State
9 attorney of Dade County. This has been an incredible six
10 months. Much, however, of what I learned in Dade County I
11 have tried to apply here.

12 I have, indeed, gone from an office of 900 to
13 95,000. I suddenly have far more than a prosecutor's
14 function; I also have the prisons, the police and
15 immigration. It is an incredible undertaking.

16 I am very impressed with the people in the
17 Department of Justice. They are dedicated lawyers. They
18 care deeply about government and about the success of
19 government, and about government being responsive. And
20 one of my duties in these days ahead is to motivate them,
21 to push the Department to do its very best, to explore new
22 ideas and new concepts, to remind them that business as
23 usual is not the name of the game, but business as it
24 should be done in response to the people is really the way
25 to go.

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1 problem. I would like to approach these issues from a
2 common sense, nonpartisan, non-headline-seeking point of
3 view, to see what truly works and what does not work.

4 It is very frustrating to me to see money spent
5 on interdiction when I have the feeling it does not work,
6 while at the same time, throughout America, in so many
7 different parts of our communities, there are people lined
8 up on a waiting list awaiting treatment for their drug
9 problem.

10 That is the type of inconsistency, to me, that
11 has to be questioned. We have to prod. We have to poke.
12 And get the answers. And try to make sense out of this.
13 It has been an interesting experience. People have said,
14 Now, Janet, Janet, go easy. Watch out. Watch out.

15 (Laughter.)

16 ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And I said, That is not
17 my nature. If something seems like it makes common sense,
18 let us talk about it. Let us get it out on the table. I
19 think that is what the American people are looking for.

20 Another experience I had from Dade County warned
21 me of what might was to come. I used to transfer cases
22 from my office to the U.S. Attorney's Office when I had a
23 three-time armed robber. Because I could get a 15-year
24 minimum mandatory in Federal prison, and I knew that he
25 would probably serve that time, or at least I thought he

1 to people about the need for incapacitating the truly
2 dangerous, the three-time armed robber, the major
3 trafficker, the major distributor, and making sure that
4 whether it be in State or Federal prisons, we have enough
5 prison cells to house the very dangerous criminals, the
6 very serious criminals, for the length of time the judges
7 are sentencing them.

8 But, then, what I want to talk to the American
9 people about is the need for providing alternatives; that
10 most of these people are coming back to the community
11 sooner, rather than later. It makes no sense to take a
12 person -- and I was a Federal prison the day before
13 yesterday where I was advised that approximately half of
14 the inmates were there because of being drug-involved. It
15 makes no sense to take them out of a Federal prison and
16 dump them back into the community without treatment, or
17 even to give them treatment in the Federal prison and dump
18 them back without jobs or without follow-up, without
19 support, without assistance, because they are going to be
20 doing it again.

21 What I would prefer to do is say, okay, you have
22 got a drug problem. You have got your choice. You can
23 serve a minimum amount of time, say, three months, just to
24 let you understand we mean business, and to let you know
25 what a prison is like. But, then, we will work with you

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1 They were too late. At 10, 11 and 12, the child had
2 already developed poor self-esteem, did not have any
3 confidence in themselves. They were beginning to act out
4 in other ways to attract attention when they had failed
5 academically.

6 So we started focusing on four- and
7 five-year-olds in head start programs. That was too late,
8 because the doctors then took me to Jackson Memorial
9 Hospital, our public hospital, to focus on crack-involved
10 babies and their mothers to try to determine what we would
11 do about them.

12 I learned then that the most formative time in a
13 person's life is zero to three. That is the time the
14 child learns the concept of reward and punishment and
15 develops a conscience. Traditionally, the family has been
16 the institution that has been the care giver, the educator
17 and the nurturer during that formative period of time.
18 But in too many instances, we see the family falling away
19 from the child, either by conscious abuse or neglect or by
20 the fact that a single parent is struggling to make ends
21 meet, does not have adequate child care provisions, and
22 the child is not supervised and loved as much as they
23 might be.

24 I began to realize that no matter what I did as
25 a prosecutor at the end of the line, so much of it was

1 Sheriffs Association, they are understanding it. They are
2 talking about children.

3 And I think we should establish a national
4 agenda for children that sets forth the continuum of
5 development, and determines where we can most effectively
6 intervene to make a difference in a child's life, knowing
7 that the intervention along the way must be consistent.

8 I would begin by making sure that we focused on
9 teen pregnancy, and that we do something about it to
10 ensure that our parents are old enough, wise enough and
11 financially able enough to take care of their children. I
12 would suggest that in every high school in America there
13 be parenting skills courses.

14 It has always puzzled me, in this day and time,
15 that we require people to graduate with some foreign
16 language requirements or other requirements, and yet we do
17 not require them to graduate with a skill that can enable
18 them to earn a living wage, or that we teach them
19 parenting skills, which, oftentimes, they have to learn,
20 kind of, catch as catch can.

21 I think it is imperative that we focus on
22 freeing parents' time. I have talked not glibly about an
23 8 to 3 workday, where both parents could leave work to
24 pick up their children, and eliminate the need for
25 after-school care, and give the parent more quality time

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1 is in prenatal care.

2 For every dollar spent for prenatal care, you
3 save \$3 down the road for health care costs associated
4 with low birth rates resulting from lack of prenatal care.

5 We have got to provide preventative medical care
6 for our children. Something is terribly wrong with a
7 nation that says to a 70-year-old person you can have an
8 operation that extends your life expectancy by three
9 years, but a five-year-old whose parents make too much
10 money to be eligible for Medicaid but do not have health
11 care benefits cannot get medical treatment that provides
12 good preventative care for their child.

13 This is a stupid nation that does not provide
14 current immunizations for all its children. I mean
15 anybody that looks at what epidemics have produced just in
16 the last five years in America in terms of epidemics, in
17 terms of hospitals overwhelmed, has got to know if you can
18 immunize against measles, why not.

19 But we are penny wise and pound foolish and we
20 wait until the crisis occurs.

21 We have got to develop sound educare programs
22 where, from birth to the time they enter school, you have
23 a consistent pattern of care if the parents are unable to
24 properly care for their children, and that it is a
25 nurturing care, for zero to three is the most formative

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1 young people learn to talk to young people.

2 Everywhere I go, prisoners, recovering gang
3 members, or former gang members, young people in high
4 school tell me when I ask them, if somebody could just
5 talk to me with a little bit of respect instead of
6 hassling me, if I could walk down the street minding my
7 own business without being stopped by a cop who says, what
8 are you doing -- I've got a right to walk down the street.
9 If I do something wrong, I expect to be punished, but I
10 expect to be treated with respect.

11 People don't know how to talk to kids. They
12 don't know when to give a youngster a pat on the back and
13 when to talk stern. Again and again, young people say,
14 people just put me down.

15 I think we can do so much in terms of
16 communication, in terms of in-police training programs, to
17 teach people how to talk to young people, because I think
18 the young people have the single most difficult job in
19 America today. Growing up in America today is an
20 extraordinary challenge. The principal cause of death of
21 young teenagers is homicide, and that's wrong.

22 When you look at the pressures that are placed
23 on a child in America today in terms of peer pressures,
24 we've got to do everything we can to back them up, to
25 treat them with respect, to make them think there's a

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1 reduce deficits. Nobody disagrees on the ultimate
2 objectives in these instances. We've got to put aside
3 petty politics. We've got to put aside petty division and
4 talk about principle. We're not always going to agree,
5 but if we work together to figure out what the right thing
6 to do is, we can make a difference.

7 Harry Truman said it best: doing the right
8 thing is pretty simple. Knowing the right thing to do is
9 very difficult, and that's going to require respectful,
10 thoughtful discussion and debate on the part of all
11 Americans in these next several years.

12 That's one of the reasons I like to come and
13 talk to interns and students and scholars, because I find
14 that you ask me far better questions than anybody,
15 including newspaper reporters, so why don't you fire away
16 with questions at me?

17 QUESTION: Could you tell me what the current
18 legal definition of an assault rifle is?

19 (Laughter.)

20 QUESTION: You have to take into account I'm
21 from Mississippi, and I'm probably not so popular here,
22 because I'm in the NRA, but I know that it's going to come
23 up, and I want to be able to go back to Mississippi and be
24 constructive in solving the problem that we do have.

25 GENERAL RENO: You ask wonderful questions.

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1 within 1 mile of a school it's a Federal crime, and so the
2 penalties are twice as stringent as if you weren't in a
3 school zone.

4 We have this problem now when you're in an urban
5 area you're invariably 1 mile from a school, so you end up
6 with it turning out that disproportionately minorities who
7 live in the cities are having prison sentences twice as
8 long as offenders out in the suburbs.

9 GENERAL RENO: I'm concerned about that, because
10 we had the same problem in Miami. The legislature passed
11 a bill requiring a minimum mandatory sentence for anyone
12 arrested within 1,000 feet of a school either dealing or
13 possessing for dealing.

14 What we have tried to do, we tried to focus on
15 it and use it wisely, so that we went after the major
16 distributor, but for the user who was also caught, and
17 oftentimes minorities, we tried to develop -- because we
18 didn't have discretion not to seek the sentence, so what
19 we did was reduced charges and tried to get them into our
20 drug court program, which is a very good program for first
21 offenders, and we've expanded it to second- and third-
22 time offenders who have a drug problem.

23 It gives them an opportunity for treatment, job
24 training, and placement, rather than prosecution, and if
25 they successfully complete the program charges are dropped

1 and what we're trying to review is just who is in prison,
2 look at the disparity, look at the disparity of charging,
3 and work with the Sentencing Commission to try to
4 eliminate any arbitrary factor that inappropriately
5 discriminates in any way.

6 One of the most difficult issues -- because we
7 faced this issue at home in Florida -- it was said that
8 the 20 State Attorneys were guilty of applying our career
9 criminal statute in a way that inappropriately affected
10 blacks more than whites.

11 The legislature, concerned about this, did a
12 very thorough study of the 20 State Attorneys. Only two
13 were found not to apply the statute in a disparate manner.
14 Fortunately, one was ours, but we had done a lot to make
15 sure that that happened over the years, so I felt very
16 good about that study.

17 It was interesting, though, about nine of these
18 State Attorneys hollered bloody murder that the study was
19 statistically flawed and not properly done, but the others
20 started looking at it and said, my God, they're right. We
21 never intended that.

22 Before I left, we had developed an automation
23 system that I would die for in the Federal system, in
24 which we were going to be able, I think, to look at each
25 step of the way -- the charging decision, the diversion

1 ducks in a row, so we've been working with the civil
2 rights community to make sure that it's done right.

3 QUESTION: Attorney General Reno, I was going to
4 ask what might be your opinion regarding the 2-1/2 year
5 sentence of the two officers who were convicted?

6 GENERAL RENO: I can't comment on that, because
7 we are reviewing it right now to determine what is the
8 appropriate action for the Department of Justice.

9 That is sometimes a frustrating experience for
10 me. It was oftentimes frustrating in Miami, because I
11 have always had a policy not to comment on pending
12 investigations or on pending prosecutions.

13 Pending investigations shouldn't be commented on
14 because it might unfairly label an innocent person. It
15 might interfere with the investigation, and secondly,
16 pending prosecutions should be tried in the courts and not
17 in the headlines.

18 But what I have tried to do is to say that after
19 a matter is concluded, I should be accountable to the
20 people, and I will be happy to answer questions, so if at
21 the conclusion of this matter you have questions, give me
22 a call.

23 QUESTION: I was wondering, in terms of your
24 talking about finding cost-effective, common-sensical
25 solutions to crime that reduce disparity because of racial

1 Wisconsin hate crimes statute was upheld.

2 QUESTION: Okay.

3 GENERAL RENO: Florida had passed a similar
4 statute that went into effect last July, and we were the
5 first office to bring a prosecution under it, and we're
6 dedicated to trying to make sure that it was upheld. I
7 believe that conviction has been affirmed, but I'm not
8 sure. It's very difficult to leave an area that you knew
9 all the details and suddenly be so far removed and not
10 know what happened.

11 We're exploring what the Federal response should
12 be, because there are limited -- you can bring a
13 prosecution when somebody's civil rights have been denied
14 while they have been engaged in a federally protected
15 activity, but that limits in some instances what the
16 Federal Government can do, so we're exploring the
17 development of Federal hate crime legislation.

18 What I want to be careful of, though, is that
19 there has been a tendency to federalize a lot of crimes,
20 car-jacking and the like, just to respond to terribly
21 tragic and emotional situations, and I want to make sure
22 that everything we do is done based on sensible principles
23 of federalism and not just a reaction.

24 QUESTION: I've been working at the General
25 Accounting Office this summer in the administration of

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1 doesn't explain it all, but as compared to Northern
2 Europe, is the vast expanse of the American frontier where
3 guns were a fact of life, and the glorification of cowboys
4 and all that they did. I don't know. I've never really
5 read what I consider to be a good account of why.

6 But I suspect that -- again, it's more a
7 suspicion -- that the concept of the American frontier,
8 the reliance on guns, has been important. The right to
9 bear arms, the fact that that is included in the Bill of
10 Rights, has probably had an impact.

11 What you do about it -- because guns to me are
12 in a way like drugs. They're symptoms of a deeper
13 problem, and if you look at it this way, if you have
14 children who are not nurtured in that first 3 years of
15 life that do not learn the concept of reward and
16 punishment and develop a conscience, then you're going to
17 see what we're seeing now, 13-year-olds using guns in
18 mean, horrible, wily ways.

19 Then you sit down with the kid afterwards, as I
20 have done, and they have no remorse. But then you start
21 talking to them, and they're not what I would call bad
22 kids. They're just kids who have never been raised with
23 any sense of structure or order or understanding.

24 Even if you get through the first 3 years, you
25 look at kids just wandering around the streets in the

1 see her about once every 3 months -- to see how much she
2 learns, and to understand suddenly what you're talking
3 about.

4 She's taught to be peaceful -- no, you don't hit
5 him, be careful now, the little bitty baby, he's smaller
6 than you -- so you can just see her change from aggressor
7 to start to patting him. She's been raised not to be
8 violent, and you can understand what the needs are, but
9 then carry forward into school and the Head Start
10 programs.

11 The DARE program has worked in a number of
12 schools around the Nation. It has diminished the use of
13 drugs by a significant part of the population. I think we
14 can do the same with respect to violence, in terms of
15 teaching people you don't solve your problem by violence.

16 QUESTION: My question has to do with youth
17 gangs, and because imprisoning youth gang members hasn't
18 stopped the gang activities, what alternatives to
19 detention are being developed, and if none are, where can
20 I send my suggestions?

21 GENERAL RENO: To me. I truly welcome all --
22 10th Avenue and Constitution, and I don't remember what
23 the zip is.

24 VOICE: 20530.

25 GENERAL RENO: 20530.

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1 they need something to let them know they can't do this.

2 We then formed a team composed of a community-
3 friendly, highly respected police officer, a public health
4 nurse, and a social worker, started in a public housing
5 project where the gang activity was centered, and we would
6 identify the bad ones, and the ministers and the police
7 officer who was respected would go up to the juvenile
8 court and would get those detained, and we'd get some
9 reasonable sanctions.

10 But others, whom the police officer would say,
11 no, that's little Freddy -- give me Freddy, Your Honor,
12 and I'll take Freddy and put him in an alternative program
13 we have in the community. He's got a lot of computer
14 skills. I've got a computer bank. We'll put him in this
15 after-school program.

16 They had so diminished and so broken up the gang
17 that -- that team was started in April of last year. By
18 the time Hurricane Andrew hit and devastated the housing
19 development in the community, they had so diminished crime
20 and knocked out the gang that the police wanted to
21 replicate it in other jurisdictions.

22 So there is so much that can be done, again, if
23 we use a common sense point of view, and I would welcome
24 your ideas.

25 I've got time for two more questions.

1 salaries, and you look what money has done for people.
2 Money is nice, but it's not the end of the world, and part
3 of it is just thinking, what is most important?

4 I grew up where there was a hole in the couch.
5 We didn't have much in china, didn't have much in crystal,
6 kept losing our forks, and as someone said when they heard
7 that I was being considered for Attorney General, he said,
8 oh, Janet will do fine. She's never had a housekeeper,
9 and she couldn't pass Housekeeping 101.

10 (Laughter.)

11 QUESTION: Could you talk about the new crime
12 initiative that you announced with the President this
13 week?

14 GENERAL RENO: It is the beginning. I don't
15 think it is the end-all of the end-alls.

16 I think there are going to be a lot of issues to
17 address on the Brady bill and on assault weapons. I
18 strongly support a ban on assault weapons that are not
19 used for sporting purposes. I think we need to go further
20 down the line, but I think this is a good beginning.

21 The President promised to put 100,000 police
22 officers on the streets. I think in this economic time
23 that's going to be a difficult promise to achieve, and one
24 of the things that I'm trying to do is to make sure that
25 we don't do it with smoke and mirrors, but that whatever

1 win, and my father looked at her as though she was crazy,
2 though both of them voted for Truman, and so they went to
3 sleep at about 3:00 a.m.

4 Colorado had come in, and then H. B. Carlton
5 Moore, who was a salty conservative, just said, wait till
6 the grassroots come in. Well, the grassroots kept coming
7 in, and Truman kept winning, and about 5:30 or 6:00 in the
8 morning he suddenly got the returns in California.

9 I can still remember -- we were still in the
10 good old wooden house, and can I still remember the
11 Stromberg-Carlson, and looking at it as if it were a
12 person because it was such exciting news.

13 In 1960, the spring of 1960, I was president of
14 the Women's Student Government at Cornell and Truman came
15 to Cornell, and I will never forget introducing him to the
16 student body and having dinner with him beforehand. Most
17 importantly, I sat down across from him, looking down the
18 table, and seated on his right was Francis Perkins, the
19 great Secretary of Labor.

20 You talk about somebody being real, Harry Truman
21 was real. The student body even criticized him for giving
22 too simplistic a speech, but in the speech it was basic
23 Harry Truman of just do the best you can, and one of the
24 things that I've always loved about Truman were his
25 letters home to his mother and to his sister Mary. If