



AMERICAN-ARAB ANTI-DISCRIMINATION COMMITTEE
CONFERENCE ON "SHAPING THE FUTURE"
SPEECH OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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(STATEMENT OF HON. JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Attorney General Reno: Thank you so much, Senator. And I thank you all for the opportunity to be here with you today, to join you for your 15th National Convention.

The ADC is such an active participant in this nation's dialogue on civil and human rights. Your voice is heard, for you represent the best, most wonderful traditions of this country in your vigilance against discrimination and your vigilance against stereotyping, as you speak out against bigotry and cowardice in this world.

You are an important entity ensuring that our discussion is not when we discuss civil rights that we do not discuss it in terms of divisions. But you bring a positive course of reconciliation through that discussion that is so critically important.

We need to follow your example across this nation and speak out, for haters are cowards. If we confront them, they back down.

And one of the things that I will always remember for as long as I live was the year I spent in Germany as a 13-year-old right after the war.

I asked how Hitler had come to power. People said, "It just happened." ADC will make sure that it speaks out, and we should follow your example.

[Applause.]

Attorney General Reno: About two months ago, Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder and Acting Assistant Attorney General, Bill Lann Lee sat down with members of the Arab American Muslim communities to talk about issues of mutual concern.

That meeting was extremely helpful for the Justice Department, for we need to talk honestly about problems, about differences in our perspective between the government and your community, and about solutions we can pursue together.

We may have disagreements from time to time, but we share so much common ground in the importance of community and family, equal treatment under the law, and firm but fair law enforcement.

The Justice Department is staunchly committed to ensuring that all Americans are treated in a fair and just manner.

I hope that you will agree that after this meeting that we have entered a new era of dialogue between the Department and the Arab and Muslim communities.

I am personally committed to this effort. Together, we need to build a lasting relationship with trust and understanding as the hallmark of that relationship, with an ability to communicate together and say what is on our minds.

One area where we can work together is on fostering a greater understanding of the importance of diversity in this country, of the importance of eliminating racial bigotry and stereotypes.

Diversity is valued, and it is prized. We learn to appreciate each other and each other's struggles. From diversity, we draw our enormous and our lasting strength.

Stereotypes should never influence policy or public opinion. We are committed to ensuring that our laws are enforced without prejudice or favor; and that federal, state and

local law enforcement work together as partners to do all that is necessary to ensure compliance with the civil rights standards.

We must redouble our efforts to ensure that equal justice under the law means the same thing in minority communities as it does in the larger community.

The keystone to justice is the belief that the legal system treats all fairly. And when people have the feeling that they are not being treated fairly, they call to question the rule of law.

There is a wonderful statement on the wall of the Justice building on the east side of 9th Street that says, "The common law issues from the will of mankind, issues from the people, framed by the mutual confidence and sanctioned by the light of reason."

It means that if the law is to be what we hope it to be in this nation, that the law must issue from all of the people, be framed by mutual confidence of all of the people.

In the Justice Department, we recognize the importance of critically reviewing our efforts to ensure that stereotypes and prejudice, whether conscious or unconscious, do not creep into the work that we do.

I think it is incumbent on all of law enforcement to do the same. All of the citizens must respect the law. But the law must respect all of our citizens.

Now, there will be issues about which we have disagreement. Use of confidential evidence in INS proceedings is one. But disagreement should not rise to the level of fear or distrust of the government.

We are reviewing our work every month to ensure that we apply procedures fairly and appropriately. And we want to be able to dialogue with you and communicate with you to obtain any evidence, to follow any leads that indicates that we are not adhering to these precepts.

It is going to be important in obtaining this dialogue. I recognize that the Arab-American community feels that there are examples of stereotyping. There is a direct link between false perceptions of the Arab-American community and acts of harassment. And I think we should acknowledge that and look at what we can do.

For example, reports of harassment, bigotry and violence against Arab-Americans and Muslims increases during periods of international strife, such as the Gulf War. After the bombing of the Oklahoma City, unfounded accusations in the media aimed at the community fueled ill will towards American citizens of Arab heritage. And we saw a surge of anti-Arab

sentiment.

I urged then, as I do now, and as I will continue to do, that no group or person should be judged by where they came from, their religious affiliations, their convictions.

They should be judged by who they are.

[Applause.]

Attorney General Reno: We cannot let anti-Arab or anti-immigrant feelings infiltrate our speech in America, our feelings in America, our actions in America. We have got to think this is one great, magnificent nation that is made great by the magnificent diversity of its people and the threads and the traditions of cultures from around the world.

[Applause.]

Attorney General Reno: We must respond when hate speaks out. We must do everything we can to prevent violence based on hate or bigotry. But when that violence comes, we must join together.

We have just seen in Jasper, Texas, an example that hate and bigotry in its worst and most tragic form is still with us. None of us can relax while that happens in America.

History should not inspire us to bitterness, though. We should take these examples and instead of bitterness, we should aspire as to how we can come together and, through positive communication, through reaching out, to make a true difference.

This is why an America that celebrates our diversity must be our national commitment. We have arrived from all corners of the world, all kinds of backgrounds, for we share in the American dream that ours is a fair and more equal society, where we can reach our potentials through hard work and commitment. We can strive to the best without leaving anyone behind.

The benefits of diversity are seen in the classrooms, where exposure to different perspectives is both enlightening and stimulating. It encourages students to question and challenge themselves and challenge others.

Diversity in law enforcement helps reduce racial tensions and brings trust and understanding between communities and those who protect them.

Diversity in our health professions has led to greater medical services being accessible to underserved and disadvantaged communities.

Would you want your child to be in a classroom where everybody was just like him or her? They would not get the understanding or the strength of America. They would not have the force that has made this nation great.

Would you want a minority community to go underserved, because no one knew how to relate to them in terms of medical care?

Let us reach out and make sure that in our colleges, in our universities, in our law schools, in our medical schools, in K through 12, in preschool programs, all of Americans have an opportunity to participate together.

Recently, I went to a program at Temple University. I sat in a room with about 20 students. They came from so many different walks of life.

One young man told me what it was like to be the only black in a small Pennsylvanian town. It was extraordinary. And then when he came to Philadelphia, the reaction.

I learned more in an hour about how we can do better at living together and understanding than I have learned in a very long time.

It does not make any difference how much you think you believe in diversity. It is so important that you reach out and to appreciate and to learn and to understand how to talk with others.

And as is true with the work of the ADC, diversity brings new issues to the table. It makes us aware of things we have never thought of before. It ensures that we do not leave anyone behind.

A very great deal can be accomplished by sitting down face to face and hashing out our ideas, our feelings, our differences, in a setting that is based on mutual respect.

I try to do that with the lawyers with the Department of Justice. They like to litigate a lot. And I have tried to show them that through other means of dispute resolution, through problem solving and communications, we can sometimes solve the problem more effectively and at far less cost if we sit down and talk it out, rather than going to the courtroom and litigating.

We are working with the police officers to train them in how to resolve disputes without force, without intent and antagonism, but with a right tone of voice, with good body language, with understanding and respect.

And most of all, we are participating in programs where children are learning to resolve disputes without knives and guns and fists.

I have a dream in this nation that every teacher in America will be taught how to teach children to resolve conflicts without knives, and guns, and fists, that every police officer in basic law enforcement academies around this country will be taught how to resolve conflicts on the streets with a minimum of force.

Just think, if we work together, we can build a new generation, a generation that is a problem-solver, rather than a generation that uses the sword.

The controversy surrounding the relocation of the Saudi-Islamic Academy in Ashburn, Virginia, not far from here, is an example of what people can do when they sit down and talk out a problem.

Flyers were distributed in late December 1997 telling homeowners that the school that was being moved into their community would bring Muslim and Arab terrorists to Loudoun, and that "thousands of Middle Eastern strangers would be roaming our streets while we work."

The flyers raised community tensions and disrupted a community that had been relatively free of bigotry and hatred. What could -- can and should be done about such a hurtful and harmful flyer? Talk can go a long way.

Our community relations service at the Department of Justice met with county officials, law enforcement and community leaders, including clergy from a church near the proposed school site, who assessed community tensions and maintained calm during the community forums.

The forums were the largest community meetings in the County, with hundreds of citizens registering to speak. We tried to work with all of the parties to ameliorate the tension and then to improve communications.

The Board of Supervisors and planning and zoning officials approved the proposed plan for relocating the school. And community tension on the issue has steadily decreased.

Indeed, the controversy has prompted many residents of Ashburn to speak out in favor of tolerance, against bigotry and in favor of the academy.

We can make a difference if we talk with each other throughout this time.

Sometimes, as you are aware, however, hatred goes beyond mere pamphlets. One of

the most visible and destructive signs that our nation's promise of equality is not yet a reality is the prevalence of hate crimes.

We see evidence of abiding bigotry and intolerance in awful violence, burned mosques and churches, vandalized homes and bombed buildings. These senseless attacks committed solely because the victim has a different color of skin or practices a different religion cannot be tolerated.

The Justice Department currently has jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute hate crimes committed because of the victim's race, color, religion or national origin. But the federal hate crime statutes do not permit us to investigate or prosecute offenses committed because of a victim's disability, gender or sexual orientation.

In addition, current federal law contains an often problematic and unnecessary hurdle for prosecutors. And this is very important. The law now requires the government prove that the victim was attacked not only because of his or her race, color, religion or national origin, but was attacked while participating in one of a narrowly defined set of so-called federally protected activity.

This unnecessary requirement has limited the federal government's ability to prosecute some of the most heinous hate crimes.

For example, under current law, the federal government can prosecute a violent hate crime if it occurs in the parking lot of a public school, but not if it occurs across the street in the private yard of a family home.

Similarly, the federal government can prosecute a violent hate crime that occurs in a 7-Eleven if the store has a video game, but not if it does not have this kind of entertainment on the premises. It does not make sense.

We must correct the serious shortcomings of the present law. Senators Kennedy, Specter and White and Congressmen Schumer, McCollum and Conyers have been true leaders in this effort.

They have introduced bipartisan legislation that would ensure that our federal criminal laws address a more comprehensive range of violent hate crimes that are perpetrated against all Americans.

This legislation is a thoughtful and measured response to a serious and ever-present problem faced by countless Americans across the country.

Twenty-two state attorneys general have written Senators Hatch and Leahy to express

their enthusiastic and strong support for this Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1998.

In that letter, they write about this legislation as such, "This legislation is a necessary supplement."

These are state attorneys general saying that this legislation is a necessary supplement to state hate-crime enforcement efforts to address bias-motivated victimization.

Hate crimes are the most visible sign that the promise of equality made by our Constitution is not yet a reality. We see evidence of abiding bigotry and intolerance.

These acts ruin the lives of their victims. They make all of our citizens feel vulnerable. They divide our communities, and they destroy our spirit.

The most recent FBI statistics on the number of hate crimes reported to state and local enforcement reveal a total of 9,000 bias-motivated crimes reported in 1996.

More than 5,000 -- we must take action.

We must work together as we are trying to do with state and local law enforcement to ensure that no stone is left unturned in such crimes and that the people responsible are brought to justice.

ADC has been instrumental in efforts against hate crimes by assembling information against attacks -- about attacks against Arab-Americans and Muslims.

Your annual report documents the awful impact in your community. We appreciate your efforts, and it is critical that you continue these efforts.

It is critical that we also do everything to ensure that state and local law enforcement is appropriately reporting these types of crimes, so that we can have a fair measure of what we need in terms of resources to properly investigate and prosecute these crimes.

But as your report recognizes, far too often, reporting is impeded by a number of factors. Immigrant communities often fear that reporting crimes may lead to reprisals. Language and cultural barriers can impede reporting. Other victims may be discouraged to report hate crimes because of disgust of law enforcement.

We need your help in addressing these concerns.

As part of our national hate crimes initiative, I have asked each United States attorney

-- 93 United States attorneys -- I have asked each one to form a hate crimes task force, bringing together federal and local law enforcement with community groups, civil rights groups and victims advocates.

I would urge you -- I would ask you please to join us in these working groups in your community. You could play such a vital role.

Now, we know that sometimes you have felt that the relationship between the FBI and many in the Arab and Muslim community has sometimes been troubled. And I want to assure you that we are committed to a new and a better understanding.

Let us reach out in both directions. When there is a hate crime against someone in your community, please notify the FBI. The hate crimes unit here in Washington is authorized to pursue vigorously the investigation of these incidents. And they should be notified if there are any concerns whatsoever about the accuracy of local response.

Our federal law enforcement agencies must also understand the particular needs of communities. After meeting with Arab and Muslim groups, the National Hate Crimes Unit at the FBI has begun to do just that.

The FBI has recently been designated the point of contact for -- has recently designated a point of contact within each regional office to create a relationship with community groups including the Arab and Muslim community.

And we hope that you will join and ensure that this contact, this liaison is not just a matter of greeting each other over a cup of coffee at a community meeting, but that it is real, actual dialogue that can improve the working relationship.

Finally, I would like to address an additional concern that has often been raised to me. And that is passenger screening for airline flights.

At the request of the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security and the Department of Transportation, the Department of Justice conducted a pre-implementation civil rights review of the computerized passenger screening system known as CAPS that the FAA has begun to implement.

We were guided by recommendations by a civil liberties panel to ensure that the criteria used in the system were not based on constitutionally suspect categories, such as race, ethnicity, religion or national origin.

We were concerned, as you were, about allegations that Arab-American passengers were targeted for additional security measures and treated in a discriminatory and

disrespectful manner.

We needed to ensure a more objective system. The CAPS system is presently being implemented, and the Civil Rights Division will conduct a first implementation review.

The Division has recently reached out to the Department of Transportation regarding the review and to solicit any complaints that they may have.

I urge you to utilize the Department of Transportation's complaint process. It is a real process, and the department is committed to it. Those complaints and how they are handled will be part of our post-implementation review.

The airline consumer protection staff at the Department of Transportation's general counsel's office is designated to receive the complaints.

DOT and the Civil Rights Division will also be meeting with the airlines on training and about proper ways to conduct the procedures in a non-discriminatory, appropriately respectful manner.

In the end, we have the same interest, that regardless of race, national origin, political affiliation, religion, we are all treated equally and fairly.

As attorney general, as I look out on people, I want to think that every American citizen would be treated in exactly the same way as I would want the dearest member of my family to be, by the government. That should be our goal.

We must also remember that we are all diminished if any one of us is subject to discrimination based on race, faith, or where we were born.

ADC is not just about American-Arabs or Muslims. You are about what we are all desiring, a fair chance, dignity and respect.

I want to do something now, and that is to follow-up on my commitment to dialogue. I understand my staff said no questions, but I have a question for you. And let us just spend a few moments initiating a dialogue.

If you were the attorney general of the United States, what would you do to address the issues that I've raised today?

Thank you.

[Applause.]