



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY SPRING COMMENCEMENT

KEYNOTE ADDRESS OF ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHIEF JUSTICE HARDING: The Attorney General of the United States of America, The Honorable Janet Reno.

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO: Thank you, very much, Chief Justice Harding. Thank you, President Dalenburg, for inviting me here for it is a very great honor for me to share this commencement with the students.

To each of you who graduate, I say congratulations. To your families, I congratulate you. This is a wonderful moment. And it is very special moment for me because I have had in these last two days to meet and talk with students. I have been impressed by their realism and touched by their idealism. I have listened to their examples of service and their commitment to service in their community.

I'm often asked what do you think of young people today? And my answer is very resounding, I think they are perfectly wonderful. They want so to contribute, to make a difference, to help others, to contribute in their community. They're funny. They're witty. They're creative. They're mischievous at times, but they are perfectly wonderful. And the students out there today as you stood evidencing your commitment to service, you are an example to the nation of just exactly what I'm talking about and I salute you all.

From this great university, you will draw strength and wisdom, understanding and faith, that will be with you all the days of your life. Lessons learned here will guide you in success and failure, joy and sorrow. Wisdom gained here will guide you through a world which will change before your very eyes.

How do you navigate that world? Don't let the vastness of the world overwhelm you. Take it one problem at a time, one day at a time. But don't let it intimidate you. Be yourself and believe in yourself.

One of the best lessons I ever had along those lines was when I was about eight years old. We lived in a little wooden house. There were four children in the family. And we were quickly outgrowing it. My father didn't have enough money to hire a contractor to build a bigger house.

One day my mother announced that she was going to build a house. And we said what do you know about building a house? And she said I'm going to learn. And she went to the brick mason, the electrician and the plumber and asked how do you build a house?

She came home and over the next two years dug the foundation with her own hands with a pick and shovel, laid the block, put in the electrical system, the plumbing. I've always liked plumbers better than electricians because the electricians wouldn't give her a permit because she was a woman. And she had to send Daddy down to talk to the people while she stood behind him to tell him what to say.

She and I lived in that house until she died just before I came to Washington and it is still my home. Every time I've come down that driveway with a knotty problem to solve or something that seemed insurmountable, that house standing there was a symbol to me that you

can do anything you really want to most of the time if you try hard enough and if it's the right thing to do.

But that house taught me another very important lesson. When Hurricane Andrew hit the area in August of 1992. About 3:00 o'clock in the morning, the winds began to howl with the most unearthly sound you've ever heard. Trees crashed.

My mother just got up, sat in her chair, folded her hands. And although she was old and frail and dying, she was unafraid. For she knew how she had built that house. She put in the right materials. She had not cut corners. She had built it the right way. When we came out the next morning, the house had lost one shingle and some screens. The rest of the world looked like a World War I battlefield. Build your life the right way, brick-by-brick, lesson-by-lesson, piece-by-piece, and it will last.

But don't forget along the way to laugh at yourself and to question yourself and ask yourself if what you're doing is really right. And if you fear that perhaps you're not objective enough, make sure you have a brother who can quickly puncture your balloon of pomposity or arrogance with a gentle twitch here or there. And if that won't do, make sure you have a sister that calls you to tell you that she thinks you're out of your mind by what you're proposing on a certain issue. Just tell people there who will be your joyous critics.

And be prepared. I stand here today because I was prepared back in about 1964 when I represented a small land owner whose property was being taken by Florida Power & Light. I worked very hard on a motion the night before, looking at all the cases. And I went to court the next morning. The young lawyer for Miami Florida Power & Light was one of Miami's finest lawyers. He was able, excellent. But I had worked very, very hard. I won my case. He offered me a job shortly thereafter. And the same young lawyer asked me to come here today. That's the young lawyer.

Stand for what's right. I ran for office once and I discussed on the campaign trail what I stood for. Some of it was politically unpopular. But a man on the campaign trail said, Janet, just keep on doing and saying what you believe to be right. Don't equivocate. Don't talk out of both sides of your mouth. And you'll wake up the next morning feeling good about yourself. But if you pussyfoot and

equivocate and try to be Miss Popularity by saying everything that you think people want to hear, you'll wake up the next morning feeling miserable.

Well, I woke up the morning after my election not feeling entirely good because I had lost my election. But I remembered what John Orr taught me and it has held me in good stead ever since. Prepare yourself. Understand the decisions you're to make. Make the best decision you can and then live with it because you've known that you tried to do what you believe to be right.

It also helps to know that losing isn't the end of the world. Somebody put a biography on my bedside table that morning and it helped to know that he had lost his first election.

When you lose or when you err, know that these things happen. It's not the end of the world. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and move ahead. There is still a future beyond loss.

And finally, choose an occupation that you will enjoy. I made a promise to myself after graduating from law school that I would never do anything I didn't enjoy doing. There are days that I could do without. But for most of these last 35 years, I have enjoyed each day and the law has been a wonderful, wonderful calling.

And so you will leave here today to go out to pursue some calling that you will enjoy and I hope with all my heart that you go out to carry on the tradition of service that was evidenced here today. As a banker, you can be the best, finest, most honest customer friendly banker and contribute service. While at the same time tutoring a young person. You can be a plumber who's willing to respond in the middle of the night to an emergency and be a coach - you can serve.

But I will tell you of all the experiences that I have had, none can match public service. Yes, you get cussed at, fussed at and figuratively beaten around the ears, particularly before Congress, but it's worth it. Because the opportunity to use the law and to help the American people and to try to make this nation a better place to live is one of the great opportunities and the most extraordinary challenges that anyone could have.

And with that, I would like to briefly talk with you about the challenges that I think you will face as you begin a great adventure. This is a time of prosperity. This is a time when the crime rate has come down six years in a row and violence is at a 20 year low. Do not become complacent. Do not think that we can rest and not be vigilant. The tragedies of Littleton remind us that we can never rest.

Economic situations around the world in evidence clear signals that we must be vigilant. But what must we do to ensure the continued prosperity and the greater peace in this nation. We've got to make sure that everyone in this country has an opportunity, a real opportunity, to participate as productive, creative citizens who are treated with respect and regard and dignity. And right now we have too many people sitting on the sidelines for this nation to maintain itself in the direction it's going.

Let me give you the example of violence that the President has challenged us to consider. Some people think we can build jails and solve the problem. But doctors took me to the public hospital to try to figure out what to do about crack involved infants and their mothers. And they taught me that the first three years of life are the most formative of anybody's time on this earth. The concept of reward, punishment and conscience is developed during those first three years.

Fifty percent of all learned human response is learned in the first year of life. What good are all the prisons going to be 15 and 20 years from now if the child doesn't understand punishment? What good are the great educational institutions going to be to that child if they have no foundation of learning instilled in those first years? How are we going to fill the jobs to maintain this nation as a first rate nation if we do not have a workforce with the skills necessary to fill those jobs? It is a problem for us all, not just for some. And how do we address it?

I think it will be important for us to enhance and increase our abilities in two very important skills, the skill of peacemaking and the skill of problem solving. Let me show you an example in the field of law. Lawyers like to think of themselves as great advocates and great defenders.

The prosecutor too often thinks that they've won the case when they

get a conviction, only to ignore the fact that there are not enough prison cells, there are not enough treatment programs to do something about the problem that got him into the jail in the first place.

Or the public defender thinks that he's won the case when he gets him off on a motion to dismiss, ignoring the fact that he's done nothing to get him treatment for the crack addiction that is a worse prison than the one he would go to.

The prosecutor and public defender who come together to figure out how we get that person off that addiction and into recovery are going to be the true heroes of this next century.

And we're not too good at peacemaking. Lawyers get together to settle a civil case. They think they've settled it when they've agreed on a figure of \$10,000 settlement. But the problem that caused the dispute for which the settlement is occurring is still there. And those lawyers have not sat down to solve the problem that caused the situation in the first place.

If we are going to use the resources of this nation, the people of this nation, and give them opportunity, we're going to have to become better problem solvers and peacemakers. How do we do that?

First of all, we've got to learn how to talk with each other. America has the habit these days of talking too fast, of e-mailing incomplete sentences, of talking past each other, of looking over their shoulder. We've got to talk to each other face-to-face with clear language. We've got to listen as hard as we talk and understand what people are saying to us. We've got to use a tone of voice that is a listening tone of voice and an understanding tone of voice. And we have got to treat each other with mutual respect and regard.

We've got to understand the problems. So many people walk into a situation and think they have it all solved when they don't have the facts at their hands. This university is giving us a wonderful example of what can be done when we bring many disciplines together to solve a problem.

We're not going to solve the problem of violence with lawyers alone or doctors alone or social workers or teachers by themselves. We're going to solve the problem when the nation comes together in

communities to address how we re-weave the fabric of community around those people who have been left out. And lawyers won't do it by themselves.

This university is charting a course for others that brings the disciplines together at the school level so that we begin to build the networks that will help us be the problem solvers. We've got to enhance our skills at conflict resolution, teaching our young people how to resolve conflicts without knives and guns and fists.

How do we do this? Teach it at the university so that every teacher has been taught how to teach students to resolve conflicts. Teach it in the basic law enforcement academy so that every police officer graduating could come to the police force is taught how to resolve conflicts without knives and guns and fists. And then make sure that every student in America from the time they enter pre-school that we begin to teach and continue to teach problem solving skills and conflict resolution skills. If we can teach people to read, if we can send people to the moon, we can teach people how to resolve conflicts far more effectively than we're doing today.

We have to do all that we can to heal the divisions caused by intolerance and bigotry, to heal the youth who is angry, to welcome the immigrants. We need to speak out against prejudice and hate everywhere we find it. Haters are cowards. When confronted, they usually back down. But too often, we let them become entrenched before we speak out because we're too busy. We don't want to get involved. It's not our problem.

Hate and the turmoil it causes is everybody's problem in America. We must do more to reach out to each other before hate and bigotry come between us as a nation. Too often, we live in our insular worlds with each other enforcing our own voluntary racial separation. We pass each other on the streets or in the shopping mall, but we don't connect as individuals.

With this separation, we risk the lack of understanding of the views and the perspectives of others. We risk not learning of the wonderful racial, ethnic and cultural traditions that have made this nation so strong. We must build on the diversity of this wonderful land as reflected in this state particularly.

There is another threat to tolerance and understanding in this country and this is the growing development of anti-immigrant sentiments. There is a tendency defined in new arrivals and new opportunity for scapegoating. My father came from Denmark when he was 12 years old. People teased him about his funny accent and his funny clothes. He spoke not one word of English. He never forgot that and he told us the story of how he felt as a lonely 12 year old.

But four years later, he was the editor of the high school newspaper writing beautiful English and he went onto become a reporter for the Miami Herald for 43 years. He always made clear to me that this nation had done so much for him, for us, and that we must always, always, always honor this nation's tradition as a nation of immigrants.

We cannot let demagoguery carry the day. While immigration is a complex and compelling area of public policy, we must not let the public debate be ruled by divisiveness and fear. Our immigration policy is not about fear from those from other countries. It is not about the color of someone's skin or the native tongue or cultural tradition or accumulated wealth of others. It is about upholding the rule of law in a fair, respectful way.

And so with these thoughts, how do we bring all people into the room to be together in America as opposed to seeing significant parts of the population on the outside looking in. We can begin with the elderly, with problem solving initiatives recognizing that each person can contribute, we can make life a lot more productive and a lot more enjoyable for those that we love so dear.

We can through programs and initiatives bring that person out of a nursing home and into a situation where they can live and continue to learn and grow. You think that not possible? Chief Justice Harding challenged us all to dream and we can make old age a time of great reward.

For the 45 year old who's lost his job and thinks it's the end of the world, lost his job because his skill has become obsolete. We can develop retraining programs that gets that person back into the mainstream of the workforce immediately. If we're going to be a productive nation, we need that person.



Or if a person has a mental breakdown at age 50, we do not have to accept that. Mental health has advanced to such a point in this world today that we can reach out and help that person. They do not have to suffer. And we must take the stigma off mental health treatment so people can get the medical help that they need. It's common sense.

There are a whole number of young men, ages 18 to 35, who have prior records, who cannot get into the workforce and feel alienated and angry. That doesn't have to be. They've served their time. They've paid their price to society. Let's get them back into the mainstream of America. We need them in a nation that is having to import foreign workers. We need them. Let's give them the open door.

But most of all, let us make an investment in our children, in health care, education, supervision, opportunity that too many children never have. Let us not wait until college and law school to talk about affirmative action. Let us provide affirmative action to make sure that every child in America regardless of who they are have appropriate preventative health care and education that will prepare them for the future.

But one final challenge to you that you can exercise right now. I remember my afternoons in the school and in the evenings. My mother worked in the home. She taught us to play baseball. She taught us to bake cakes. She taught us to love Shakespeare. She didn't like Dickens and I'm trying to overcome that now. She punished us. She loved us with all her heart. She taught us to play fair. There is no child care in the world that will ever be the substitute for what that lady was in our life.

As you go looking for jobs, find out who has the family friendly workplace and get together with other graduates and form a consensus in this nation that says you want me and my Ph.D.? You want me and my grade point average? You want me and my skill? You get it if you create a family friendly workplace that gives both parents quality time with their children.

You're starting a great adventure. You have a wonderful foundation. And you are an example for all America of how fortunate this nation is to have such dedicated, caring, wonderful young people who will assume the mantle of responsibility as you go forth. God bless you and good luck.

CHIEF JUSTICE HARDING: Janet, thank you so very much. We are so proud of you as Attorney General. You hold the highest office in federal government that any Floridian has ever held. But more important, you're really making a great difference in that office.

Before the Attorney General took her office, she walked around the building and she read the words written on the walls and the marvelous thing is that she's so terribly old-fashioned that she believed those words and she's acting them out everyday.

We will shortly confer degrees, but I'd like to tell you that we'll have a professional photographer who will photograph each graduate --

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