



Ellis Island Medal of Honor Ceremony

May 6, 2000

Ellis Island, New York

Rep. Rangel: What an honor for me, as a member of our great government, to present to you our Statue of Liberty, the Attorney General of the United States of America, Janet Reno.

Attorney General Reno: This is a moment that I will always remember, and it affirms for me one of the great experiences that I have had as Attorney General. To meet with Ministers of Justice from emerging democracies around the world. To talk across the table with a Prime Minister from a small nation struggling out of tyranny. To talk with representatives of old established democracies, waging efforts against lethargy, sloth, and corruption that threaten to undermine what they hold dear. And I come away from these experiences in awe of how fragile democracy is, and yet how splendid it is, how beautiful, what a magnificent institution it is. Ladies and gentlemen, we must take the energy, the creativity, the diversity in this room, and do everything we can to cherish it. We must never ever take it for granted, and we must give it our very best. It is important in enforcing democracy as we know it, that we honor the rule of law. But if we are to give it our very best we must do more, because there are too many people in this country who do not have access to justice because they can not afford it. As we create the rule of law we must use it. Our rule of law gives us freedom of speech, but too many of us stand on the side lines and do not speak out for what we hold dear, for what we must cherish. We can not be silenced by apathy or indifference. We can not be silenced by disapproval or intimidation. We

must speak out against hate. We must speak out in terms of support for bold new ideas that give equal opportunity to all Americans. Our nation is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, and it must be built on something more than just majority rule, and the rule of law. It must be based and built carefully, thoughtfully, and constructively, on mutual understanding, on tolerance, and on an appreciation of the magnificent diversity of this land. Without these values, segments of our society will feel left out, they will feel separated and apart. They will lash out in anger and in violence, unless we reach out in mutual understanding, in tolerance.

We're here tonight because so many people have come so many different routes, but it is important that the people, the politicians, and the press, start speaking with a civil term that honors the wonderful things of this nation and it's people, instead of tearing it down all the time. (Applause) Instead of criticizing leaders, go run for office and put your ideas into effect. (Applause)

But there will come times when we see things that must be corrected over time, for too long this nation has forgotten and neglected its children. They are our future, there are too many from all walks of life and all stratas of society that are alone, anguished, and uncertain. Let us create a nation where both parents can spend quality time with their children and love them, supervise them, and give them the strength they need to grow as strong, constructive human beings. (Applause)

And let us focus on one group that has so much to offer this nation, young African American men who want so to contribute, so to be somebody, so to make a difference, but we don't know how to talk to them too often, and they don't know how to talk to us. Let us reach out across generations, across communities, and bring together this group of young men so that they can be part of parcel of our democracy and lead us in the future. (Applause)

But then there will be conflict, and there will be hurt, and people will feel betrayed. When those things happen across cultural and ethnic lines, let us reach out and

start to listen to each other, and to speak in small old words of the wonder of the human spirit. That it can overcome tyranny and come to a new land and contribute vitally and make a difference. Let us listen, let us talk, let us reach out in love and in respect, and continue to build the greatest institution I think that man has created, democracy based on freedom. Let us take the wonderful strength, courage, vitality, and innovation that is in this room represented by such extraordinary diversity, and go out and lead the land we love. (Applause)