

Opening Remarks at the White House Conference on Hate Crimes November 10, 1997

The President. Thank you. I don't see that I need to say much. Do you? [*Laughter*] Thank you, Cheunee.

Audience member. You murdered Vince Foster, and it's not a hate crime.

The President. We have the first amendment even here. But I think the hate is coming from your way, not mine.

President Trachtenberg, and members of the administration, Senator Kennedy, Members of the House. And let me also say that in addition to all of you who are here, there are thousands of people at satellite-link conferences all over the country.

We have heard today two moving personal testimonies, from a person who gave his life in law enforcement and from a young person just beginning her adult life but having already lived a lifetime of experiences that we wish she had never endured. They both teach us in different ways that our families and our country can only thrive if they're free from the fear of crime and violence. And we have to do everything we can to give them that security. That's the main reason we decided to hold this White House Conference on Hate Crimes.

As I said this morning to those of you who were at the breakfast, all over the world we see what happens when racial or ethnic or religious animosity joins with lawlessness. We've seen countries and people and families torn apart. We've seen countries go from peace to wholesale internecine slaughter in a matter of months. We've seen people rise up and fight each other over issues that they thought had been dormant for centuries.

But even in America we hear too many stories like the ones Cheunee told us, too many stories like the 13-year-old African-American boy nearly beaten to death when he rode his bicycle through the wrong neighborhood, the gay American murdered as he walked home from work, the Asian-American who lost her store to a firebomb hurled by a racist, the Jewish-American whose house of worship was desecrated by swastikas.

We hear too many of these stories, stories of violent acts which are not just despicable acts of bias and bigotry; they are crimes. They

strike at the heart of what it means to be an American. They are the antithesis of the values that define us as a nation. They have nothing to do with freedom or equality or respect for the law, and most importantly, they prevent us from respecting one another.

Last year I asked the American people to begin a great national conversation on race, to come together, across all the lines that divide us, into one America. We know we can only fight prejudice by fighting the misunderstanding and the ignorance and the fear that produce it. One of the things that I hope will come out of this year is a national affirmation that violence motivated by prejudice and hatred, as Cheunee said, hurts us all. Anybody who thinks that in the world of today and tomorrow, that he or she can hide from the kind of poison that we see in various places in our country, is living in a dream world. Whether we like it or not, our futures are bound together, and it is time we acted like it.

The first thing we have to do is to make sure our Nation's laws fully protect all of its citizens. Our laws already punish some crimes committed against people on the basis of race or religion or national origin, but we should do more. We should make our current laws tougher to include all hate crimes that cause physical harm. We must prohibit crimes committed because of a victim's sexual orientation, gender, or disability. All Americans deserve protection from hate.

I want to thank Senator Kennedy and Senator Specter, who will soon introduce legislation to achieve these goals, and I want to tell you that I will do my best to help them see this legislation become the law of our land. Thank you, Senators.

The second thing we have to do is to make sure our civil rights laws are consistently and vigorously enforced. Under Attorney General Reno's leadership, the Justice Department has taken aim at hate crimes with more prosecutions and tougher punishments. Starting today, every United States attorney in our country will establish or expand working groups to develop enforcement strategies, share best practices, and

educate the public about hate crimes. This national hate crimes network will marshal the resources of Federal, State, and local enforcement, community groups, educators, antiviolenace advocates to give us another powerful tool in the struggle against hate crimes.

I'm also pleased to announce that we will assign over 50 more FBI agents and prosecutors to work on hate crimes enforcement. And the Justice Department will make its own hate crimes training curriculum available to State and local law enforcement training centers all around America.

Finally, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Justice Department are launching an important new initiative that will help victims of housing-related hate crimes bring action against their attackers and get money damages for the harm they suffer.

When it comes to enforcing civil rights laws, let me also remind you that we need strong leadership. I have nominated Bill Lann Lee to head the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice because I'm convinced he'll provide that leadership. He is a son of Chinese immigrants who has seen the damaging force of discrimination. He has dedicated his career to fighting for equal rights, without regard to ideology or political party. Everyone who heard him in the Senate was impressed with his background, his record, his demeanor, his capacity, and yet we are being told that the Senate will not be allowed to vote on him because he supports his own President's position on affirmative action. Now, with all respect, if we have to wait until we get a head of the Civil Rights Division who is opposed to affirmative action, that job will be vacant for a very long time. We had an election about that.

On the other hand, let's not forget, this is but a tiny slice of what the Civil Rights Division does. We have laws on the books against discrimination that 90 percent of the American people support, and they need to be enforced vigorously by somebody who embodies the American ideal. It is wrong to deny this man that job because he agrees with the policies of his President on that issue. It is wrong.

All I ask the Senate committee to do is just to send his name out. They don't even have to make a recommendation; just let the Senate vote. Let all 100 Senators stand up and be counted in the full view of the American people, and let them know their stand.

Let me also say that in addition to enforcement, in addition to pushing for new laws, in addition to training our own people and others better, let's also admit one thing—we have a lot of law enforcement officials who have worked on this—a lot of hate crimes still go unreported. I see a lot of you nodding your head up and down. If a crime is unreported, that gives people an excuse to ignore it.

I'm pleased to announce that today for the first time the National Crime Victimization Survey used by the Justice Department will finally include questions about hate crimes, so we can report them on a national basis along with others. It may seem like a small addition, but it will yield large results. It will give us a better measure of the number of hate crimes, and it will increase what we know about how they occur.

Let me say, lastly, all of us have to do more in our communities, through organizations like the one that Cheunee was part of in putting into Brooklyn High School, and in our own homes and places of worship to teach all of our children about the dignity of every person. I'm very pleased that the Education and the Justice Departments will distribute to every school district in the country a hate crimes resource guide. The guide will direct educators to the materials they can use to teach tolerance and mutual respect. And also, the Justice Department is launching a website where younger students can learn about prejudice and the harm it causes.

Children have to be taught to hate. And as they come more and more of age and they get into more and more environments where they can be taught that, we need to make sure that somebody is teaching them not to do so.

I wouldn't be surprised if today some of the skinheads that threw rocks and bottles at Cheunee when she was a little girl have grown out of it and are frankly ashamed of what they did. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them weren't ashamed of it on the day they did it, but they just wanted to go along, to get along, to be part of the group. But some of the people who were subject to that, some of the people who were on the bus with her or on the street with her, are not here today to make the speech she gave. I'll bet you some of the people were scarred in ways that they never got over.

So as important as it is to enforce the law, to punish people, to do all this—all this is very

important—the most important thing we can do is to reach these kids while they’re young enough to learn. Somebody is going to be trying to teach them to hate. We want to teach them a different way. And in the end, if we all do our part for that, we can make America one nation under God.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:20 p.m. in the Dorothy Betts Marvin Theater at George Washington University. In his remarks, he referred to Cheunee Sampson, Duke University student who introduced the President, and Stephen J. Trachtenberg, president, George Washington University.

Remarks During the White House Conference on Hate Crimes *November 10, 1997*

[The panel discussion is joined in progress.]

The President. Reverend Kyles said this is a dynamite panel. *[Laughter]* I think they were very good. Thank you all very much.

Even though we tried to put the Republican on after the kid, he did pretty well, didn’t he? *[Laughter]* That was so funny. *[Laughter]* You know, as good as Arizona was to me, I would never do anything like that. *[Laughter]* But you made the best of a difficult situation, because you did a good job, Raymond.

Let me ask you all something. We’ve heard from people who work in enforcement, whether it’s an attorney general or a police chief. We’ve heard from people who work in writing the laws. We’ve heard from an educator who’s trying to systematically keep these things from happening in the first place and deal with it. We’ve heard from a minister who has given his whole life dealing with these matters. We’ve heard from a remarkable citizen here who changed the whole psychology of a community. We’ve heard from a young man who had an opportunity to have a remarkable experience, and he made, I thought, a very interesting point, which he deftly went by, but I don’t think we should miss it. He said that he went to a very diverse school where there was a lot of continuing social segregation. And he had an opportunity to escape that on his project where he went to Israel.

In various aspects, I guess most of us who have lived any length of time have been dealing with one or another of these issues our whole lives. It’s been my experience, when I see some form of bigotry or hatred manifest in a particular person, that there’s usually one of three reasons that this person has done something bad. One is just ignorance and the fear it breeds: I don’t

know this person who is different from me, I’m afraid, and I manifest this fear in bigotry or violence or something. We see that a lot with the gay and lesbian issues now, you know, where people are at least unaware that they have ever had a family member or a friend or someone who was homosexual, and they are literally terrified.

Then there are some people—and I saw this a lot when Secretary Riley and I were kids growing up in the South—there are some people who really have an almost pathological need to look down on somebody else because they don’t have enough regard for themselves, and so they think somehow they can salvage self-regard by finding somebody that at least they think is lower down than they are.

And then there are people who have been brutalized themselves and who have no way of dealing with it, no way of coming out of it, and they return brutality with brutality. There may be others, but that’s been my experience.

Anyway, I ask you that to make this point—I announced a series of measures that we would take in my opening remarks, but you’re in all these things. What advice do you have for me, for the Attorney General, for the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, the Secretary of Agriculture—who deals, interestingly enough, with some important aspects of this—and the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation—I think I’ve mentioned them all—and the Members of Congress; what is the most important thing the Nation can do through the National Government? What should we be focusing on? If you could give me advice—you’ve