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Department of Justice

ADDRESS

OF

THE HONORABLE EDWIN MEESE III
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE

THE CONGRESSIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL
NATIONAL YOUNG LEADERS CONFERENCE

9:15 A.M.
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NOTE: Because Mr. Meese often speaks from notes, the speech as delivered may vary from the text. However, he stands behind this speech as printed.

Today I would like to discuss some of the domestic issues that you as young adults are facing now, and will be facing in the near future. Soon enough, all of you will be making the transition from school to the job market, and eventually you will be thinking about becoming young parents. Consequently, you will be paying more attention to the quality of life in your communities. And almost every major issue that you will confront -- such as drugs, crime, obscenity, and the AIDS crisis -- involves public safety, public health, or both.

Now, this may sound like a fairly unobjectionable, common sense approach to these issues. But to some, it is not. Some -- especially among our cultural and intellectual elites -- insist that community health and safety must take second place to the claims of individuals to do whatever they please, whenever they please, without regard to the social consequences.

Take, for instance, one of the greatest challenges facing our society today -- the illegal use and sale of narcotics. Drugs are ravaging the health and safety of our families, schools, and neighborhoods. All of you are familiar with the images: The father who comes home to find his daughter dead of an overdose of heroin. The mother weeping at the funeral of a son killed by cocaine dealers. These scenes are all too real, and are occurring all too frequently.

From 1982 to 1985, cocaine-related deaths rose 200%. In San Francisco, cocaine-related deaths doubled from 1986 to 1987. The

potency of cocaine has increased so much that, according to one expert, the new bumper crops of cocaine are capable of literally breaking down the walls of the human heart.

Drugs are not only killing users, they are creating killers. A U.S. Customs Service study found that the police chiefs of twelve large metropolitan cities attributed a fifth of all murders to drugs. In fact, the study concluded that there was a "pervasive and powerful relationship" between drugs and "almost all types of major crime".

Amazingly, despite the reports of personal tragedies and the obvious links to crime, there are still some in our country who argue that use of illegal drugs is merely a personal preference, or even a right. These drug libertarians mistakenly focus on the user and the dealer, and very conveniently forget the broader community's health and safety concerns.

This Administration, however, has not forgotten these concerns. That is why we have taken the tough, no-nonsense approach of strong law enforcement. Our goal is to protect the public against the criminals who produce and peddle their poisonous wares.

To this end the President has signed a number of important pieces of legislation, including the landmark 1986 Anti-Drug Act that mandated minimum sentences for various classes of drug offenses. These laws have proven to be so successful that,

according to the Bureau of Prisons, within the next few years drug offenders will constitute 50% of the prisoner population.

Adding to the success of these laws has been our dramatically stepped up enforcement efforts. While the drug apologists would have Americans believe that narcotics enforcement is a waste of time and money, our South Florida Drug Task Force proved just the opposite. Shortly after it was created, homicides in Miami were reduced by 26%.

We are also seizing more drugs at our borders than ever before. For example, in just one year, from 1986 to 1987, our Mexican border task force operation doubled the amount of marijuana seized, and tripled the amount of cocaine seized.

For all our efforts to limit drug supply, however, it is essential to understand that we will not solve this problem unless we stop the demand for drugs. Therefore, among other things, we at the Justice Department have had all 93 United States Attorneys -- who are the ranking local Federal prosecutors -- create drug demand reduction activities within their district. The U.S. Attorney in Utah, for example, sponsored a drug education program at every high school in that state. The U.S. Attorney in Hawaii held special drug prevention clinics for school and health personnel.

As much as we in government are doing, however, it is going to take each and every one of you to go out and make a difference. We can send speakers into your schools to talk

about the dangers of drugs, but without your constructive influence on your friends, we cannot hope to succeed. This was demonstrated by a recent study of 11th and 12th graders, which showed that the habits of friends had at least five times more impact on teenage drug use than any other lifestyle factor.

All of you, therefore, hold an incredible amount of power -- in some ways more power than that exercised by teachers, principals, and governments. When you go back to your hometowns, I urge you to talk to your friends and classmates, and tell them about the need for drug-free schools and drug-free communities. Recently, a survey showed that for the first time there was a drop in the regular and experimental use of cocaine among high school seniors. We must build on such encouraging developments. That is why your help is so essential. With the active involvement of student leaders such as yourselves, we will go a long way toward solving our drug abuse problem, and therefore toward improving the health and protecting the safety of our communities.

In addition to drugs, one of the greatest problems facing our local communities is obscenity. While censorship, of course, must be avoided, the American people are becoming increasingly aware that what is at stake is not just a particular person's viewing tastes, but serious public health and safety issues.

Much of this heightened consciousness comes from recent revelations about child pornography. The Attorney General's

Commission on Pornography, for example, played an important role in documenting both the extent of child pornography, and the genuine psychological and physical harm suffered by these exploited children. Those involved in this trade range from teenagers your age down to year-old infants. It is concern for the health and safety of our young people, not the supposed rights of the sexually perverted, that guides this Administration's actions.

This is why I established the National Obscenity Enforcement Unit within our Department. Just recently, we indicted over 150 individuals in two undercover operations for violation of Federal child pornography laws. We will also be vigorously supporting the President's proposal to toughen obscenity laws, especially those for child pornography.

Moving on to the broader issue of crime, at one time it would have been axiomatic to say that this is a public safety issue. Not anymore. If one listens to some of what passes for informed opinion in some circles today, one will hear that crime is an economic question, a sociological question, a mental health question, almost everything but a public safety question.

There are some so-called experts who argue against sending convicted criminals to prison. Such notions lead some to suggest that we place even violent offenders in non-prison programs like probation or community service. Now I am very much in favor of utilizing alternatives to incarceration in appropriate cases.

But that is a far cry from advocating that no one should go to jail or prison. But pundits who offer these so-called solutions seldom if ever ask how their proposals would affect the safety of the citizenry. Their views and proposals, unfortunately, too often center on the criminal, not the interest of the public.

Because of this bias, these supposed "experts" seldom acknowledge the phenomenon of the career criminal, but this type of predator is an unfortunate fact of life. The Bureau of Justice Statistics just released a report suggesting that four out of five state prison inmates are repeat offenders, and that 53% had at least one prior conviction for a violent offense. A startling 20% of these state prison inmates had been jailed or placed on probation six or more times. Such figures point us toward the only course compatible with public safety -- incarceration. As the data prove, these career criminals plainly cannot be dealt with through utopian measures like community service. If we admit these criminals back into the community, the only service they are likely to render will be more robberies, rapes, and murders.

This Administration has cracked down hard on the career criminal. In 1984, the President signed the Armed Career Criminal Act, providing a 15-year mandatory sentence, with no parole, for a defendant who uses a firearm in a crime, and who has three or more prior convictions for robbery or burglary. Furthermore, the new Federal Sentencing Guidelines virtually

eliminate probation for career criminals, and create a "special offender category" that calls for mandatory 20-year sentences.

During 1988, we plan to enforce these laws energetically, and we will be looking to our U.S. Attorneys to ensure that career criminals are receiving the appropriate sentences. We will also be pushing Congress to enact the President's proposals that limit the ability of criminals to escape their just punishment because of legal technicalities. We want our citizens to be able to walk their neighborhoods without fear. Separating the career criminal from the community is essential if we are to replace neighborhood fear with neighborhood security.

If imprisoning these career criminals is the answer, then one essential ingredient is more prisons. Right now we are experiencing a shortage of prison space on both the Federal and state levels. Over the next decade, the overcrowding rate in the Federal Prison System could reach 183%.

Currently, the Federal Bureau of Prisons is involved in the largest prison expansion program in its history, with 7,000 bedspaces for inmates now under construction. It is going to take more, however. We will be asking Congress to join us in a long-term commitment to increase the capacity of the Federal Prison System. Our objective is to see that murderers, rapists, and robbers are not permitted to roam the streets of our communities, jeopardizing the safety of innocent citizens, just because we did not have a jail cell available.

As I say, prison is the answer for career criminals. Certain criminals, though, are so dangerous, their crimes so heinous, that the only appropriate societal response must be capital punishment. In no other area, however, have arcane philosophical disputes so thoroughly obscured what is clearly an issue of public safety.

The opponents of capital punishment, like the opponents of imprisonment, too often focus entirely on the criminal. They show no concern for the innocent victim who died an often agonizing and horrible death at the hands of the remorseless predator.

Take for example the recent killing of a prison officer by a multiple murderer who was already serving a life sentence. What is the appropriate punishment for someone like that? Merely adding more years to this murderer's sentence would be no punishment at all.

Considerations like this prompted President Reagan to introduce the Criminal Justice Reform Act, which calls for capital punishment in the most serious types of deadly crime. The public already knows that some offenses merit capital punishment. This penalty in appropriate cases is supported by upwards of 80% of the American people in recent surveys. The American people realize that without capital punishment, real justice would be withheld and the value of human life would be cheapened.

As should be clear by now, a common thread running through our policies is concern for the crime victim as well as the potential crime victim. Our view is that society must be willing to help and offer support to the victims of crime, if public safety is to be advanced.

To this end, we have enthusiastically supported the victims assistance programs of various states and localities, through the Federal Crime Victims Fund, created by the landmark Victims of Crime Act of 1984. Between 1986 and 1987, more than \$120 million was distributed to state programs from this fund. And the best thing about it, from a poetic justice standpoint, is that all the Fund's revenues come, not from the taxpayer, but from the criminal himself through fines, penalty assessments, and forfeitures.

Finally, I believe a few words need to be said about the current AIDS crisis. While some have tried to characterize this issue as strictly a question of an individual's civil or privacy rights, we must always remember that AIDS is first and foremost a public health issue. While we must be attentive to the rights of AIDS sufferers, it is equally important to protect our communities against the threats posed by this disease.

This past year, the Department of Justice adopted a four-point program to deal with AIDS. Under this program we have expanded AIDS testing and counseling of Federal prisoners. This will lessen risks not only to prisoners and prison employees, but

also to the communities to which these prisoners eventually return.

Another part of the program requires AIDS testing for immigrants, refugees, and legalization applicants. All those testing positive would be denied entry into this country.

While we must avoid any sort of hysteria regarding AIDS, the fact remains that it is contagious and incurable. And until we find a cure, all our future decisions regarding this disease must strongly weigh public health and safety considerations.

In conclusion, I would ask all of you to be aware of the public health and safety aspects of these issues as they are debated during this election year and beyond. We must remember that such legitimate community concerns have to be considered in our policies, as well as the legitimate rights of individuals.