

Holder Echoes Atticus Finch at 'To Kill a Mockingbird' Commemoration

Tuesday, September 21st, 2010

Attorney General Eric Holder delivered the keynote address Tuesday at the University of Alabama "To Kill a Mockingbird" 50th Anniversary Event. His full remarks are included below.

REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ERIC HOLDER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

"TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD" ANNIVERSARY EVENT

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

Thank you, Dean Randall. And thank you all for welcoming me here today.

It is an honor to support the work being done across the University of Alabama campus to ensure that this place of learning is also a place of healing. Because of that work, this University – once a battle ground in America's civil rights struggle – is now a force for tolerance and inclusion, a forum for the peaceful exchange of views and ideas.

It is a special privilege to join with all of you in commemorating the publication of a book that, for half a century now, has helped to define, and to improve, American life. But today is more than an occasion to celebrate. It is also an important opportunity – a chance for us to reflect on the enduring message of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and, together, to renew our commitment to fulfilling the ideal of justice in our own time.

With her classic novel, Harper Lee inspired millions of children and adults to examine our nation's history; to consider our individual responsibilities, beliefs, and actions; and to think about our own sense of morality and mission.

I was one of those children. And I am one of those adults. Like many of you, in my readings of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I have been struck – time and again – by its power and its continued relevance.

As I look around, I realize I'm one of the few people in this room who was alive in 1960. Let me assure you, at the time of the book's publication, the world was a radically different place. Our nation was on the brink of a decade of transformation – a time between the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the long-awaited passage of the Civil Rights Act. Although the Depression era chronicled in *To Kill A Mockingbird* had passed, it still loomed large in the American psyche. And for some, so too did that era's lawlessness and lynchings; its mob mentality and mob rule. So it's no surprise that when Harper Lee put her story to paper, it became, not only a marker for progress made, but also a guidepost that would inspire freedom rides and sit-ins, epic court challenges and demonstrations, legislative showdowns and leaders bold enough to dream of, and to call for, a world in which character trumped color.

This story – of Scout’s painful education, of Tom Robinson’s shameful trial, of Boo Radley’s unexpected heroism, and of the prejudices, passions and values that can split apart communities – became our story. It became America’s story. With the new issues and fears that now confront us, it remains our story. And it remains an essential teaching tool for students and educators, for advocates and policymakers, for law enforcement officers and judges, for the American people and – of course – for the countless attorneys whose professional paths were first inspired by a small-town, Alabama lawyer named Atticus Finch.

So many of us will never forget the goose bumps we felt when Atticus decided to represent Tom; or the image of him – in a chair outside Tom’s jail cell – keeping watch against the mob he’s sure will soon come clamoring for blood, and keeping faith with his belief that every person – regardless of race or creed or the crime he committed– deserves, what Atticus called, a “square deal...in a courtroom.”

For the last five decades, *To Kill A Mockingbird* has reminded us that, in the work of ensuring justice, one person can make a difference. Individual actions count. And those who are willing to stand up for a principle, to take even one step toward progress, or, simply, to take a seat – be it outside a jailhouse, in a courthouse or a classroom, at a lunch counter or the front of a bus – can help to change the world.

For me, there are few places where this truth is more evident than here – at the University of Alabama.

On this campus, in June of 1963, a young woman named Vivian Malone – a daughter of Mobile and the sister of my wife, Sharon – became one of the first two African Americans to enroll at this University. Governor George Wallace, who famously demanded “segregation now” and “segregation forever,” tried to block her way. But – with the help of the Justice Department, and because of the resolve of my most famous predecessor, Robert Kennedy – Vivian walked through this University’s gates and, in the process, opened doors of opportunity for countless others who have followed in her steps.

Vivian did not know whether she would survive her first day, let alone her first year, at this school. She did not know for certain that she would be safe. But she marched forward anyway, summoning what Atticus Finch would have described as “real courage” – a concept he defines this way to his daughter, Scout: “Real courage,” he says, “is when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.”

“You rarely win,” he tells her. “But sometimes – sometimes – you do.”

It is true that victory does not very often come easily. And progress is rarely made as quickly as we would like. But we must never forget that it is possible.

Just think about what has been achieved on this campus, in this community, and across our country in the decades since Vivian enrolled here – and in the half century since Harper Lee introduced us to Maycomb County.

It may be tempting – when you look at the diversity of the people now studying at this University or at the man sitting in the Oval Office – to think that equal justice has been achieved for all Americans or that we've moved beyond our history of prejudice. We are right to be proud of the tremendous progress we have made as a nation. But it will take more than the election of the first African-American President to ensure that our nation's founding principles apply fully to all Americans. And it will certainly take more than the appointment of the first African-American Attorney General to fulfill the promise of equal justice for all.

But you already know this. You all know – just as Harper Lee knew fifty years ago – that, despite the advancements we've made in creating a more equal nation, we have much more to do.

That is why we're gathered here. That is why *To Kill A Mockingbird* remains relevant. That is why its message still resonates.

Today, we find ourselves again at the threshold of what will no doubt be another decade of transformation. This anniversary is an opportunity for me, as our nation's Attorney General, and for you – its future leaders and the future stewards of its justice system – to look at our society and to ask, "What is left to do?"

As we have seen in recent decades – and, unfortunately, in recent days – the world has not yet run its course of intolerance and bigotry. Injustice remains. Divisions and disparities remain. Bias- and hate-fueled violence persists.

Although life may, in some ways, feel easier today than ever before, and although the doors of opportunity may be open wider than they were fifty years ago, the truth is that there is nothing easy about 2010. Which means that all of you – Alabama's, and America's, best and brightest – have some important choices to make. You also have critical responsibilities to fulfill. In short, you have a future to build.

As you work to build that future, *To Kill A Mockingbird* contains a simple, but important, message: namely, that the pursuit of justice can take many forms – acts of compassion and dissent; campaigns and elections; investigations and trials. But, no matter the form, it always begins the same way: with a simple action, by a hopeful person. Never doubt that it can begin with you.

After all, before Martin Luther King, Jr. was a national hero, he was a preacher in this state. Before Rosa Parks was a national icon, she was a secretary in Montgomery. Before Harper Lee was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, she was a University of Alabama law school student.

As you think about your own potential, and about the choices and challenges before you, I hope that you will commit to standing for what you know to be right – and for what you believe will do the most good.

At the Department of Justice, we have come together over the last 20 months to choose our stand – and to consider the question I posed earlier: What is left to be done?

The answer, I believe, has many parts – one of them being that, all too often, the indigent do not enjoy an equal access to justice. Here in Alabama, and across the country, too many public defenders offices are underfunded and understaffed. Too many who encounter our justice system make life-altering decisions without the means to seek the advice of counsel.

But one small action at a time, today's Justice Department is working to change this. The Department recently has made an historic commitment to expanding and ensuring access to legal services. This spring, the Department established an Access to Justice initiative, led by one of our nation's preeminent constitutional scholars, Harvard Law Professor, Larry Tribe. The Access to Justice Office is working to ensure that quality legal representation is available, affordable, and accessible. I'm not going to pretend that this effort is a complete solution. But it is a start. And I have no doubt that it will enhance our entire justice system.

In addition to working to improve the integrity of the justice system, I'm proud to report that the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division has continued its work as the nation's finest civil rights law firm. Of course, there's still much to be done. But the Division's enforcement efforts are protecting the rights of military and overseas voters, as well as those at home, the rights of disabled Americans, and the rights of workers, as well as the rights of students. We're fighting to ensure that every American- Christian, Jew or Muslim- has the right to practice his or her faith without the fear of violence or prejudice. And we're making extraordinary progress in combating human trafficking, and ensuring fairness in our housing and lending markets.

We're also working to prosecute those who commit bias-motivated violence. Last year, Congress enacted the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act – one of the most significant civil rights laws in decades. Today, our prosecutors are making every effort to enforce this law and to utilize the new tools it provides.

Perhaps none of our work is more meaningful, or more timely, than the Department's efforts to pursue justice for families and communities still suffering from the worst scars of the civil rights era – and to help promote healing and closure. Through our Civil Rights Era Cold Case Initiative, we're reviewing unsolved, racially motivated murders from decades past. In many of these cases, we face obstacles to obtaining convictions. As you can imagine, there are significant jurisdictional and evidentiary challenges. Nevertheless, we are working with United States Attorneys' offices, the FBI, and state and local law enforcement officials to review these cases, and prosecute those we can. Sometimes, this work requires what Atticus Finch would have called "real courage," but I give you my solemn word that the Justice Department will see it through.

In recent years, the Department has secured convictions against former Klansmen for their roles in the 1966 murder of a black sharecropper from Adams County, Mississippi; and the 1964 murders of two black teenagers from Franklin County, Mississippi. We also devoted significant resources, including the considerable skills of then U.S. Attorney Doug Jones, who is here with us today, in securing convictions in the Sixteenth Street Church bombing that took place in Birmingham, 47 years ago last week; the bombing that robbed us of four beautiful little girls and shamed a nation.

It is through this commitment that we will honor the struggles of our past and teach new generations the lessons at the heart of *To Kill A Mockingbird*: that in every time, the present as well as the future, each one of us can make a difference, and that – together – we can fulfill our most important obligation, the committed pursuit of justice for all. Simply put, together, we have the ability to make a better nation.

Thank you.

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