

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**Remarks on the Unveiling of the Official Portrait of Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr.**

*February 27, 2015*

*The President.* Hello, everybody! Thank you. Please, please, everybody have a seat. I think it's important to point out, first of all, that Eric has more gray hair than that. [*Laughter*] Clearly, he posed early in his tenure. [*Laughter*] But it's a remarkable likeness, a wonderful portrait. I am thrilled to be here, despite the fact that Eric is really just milking this departure thing—[*laughter*]—for everything that it's worth. I mean, golly. [*Laughter*]

I'm thrilled to be at DOJ with all of you today to celebrate a great friend and a great public servant, somebody who's led this department with integrity and, along with all of you, made our Nation more free and more just: our Attorney General, Eric Holder.

Now, in September, when Eric and I stood together at the White House and announced that he'd be leaving the Justice Department, he thanked all of you for joining him on a journey that, in his words, "will always be guided by the pursuit of justice and aimed at the north star." And that sums up Eric's career. A life guided by justice, aimed at his north star: his bedrock belief in the fundamental rights and equality of all people.

It's the principle that shaped his career, from his early days as a Federal prosecutor through his years on the bench, his previous turns at the Justice Department as a Deputy Attorney General and Acting Attorney General, and finally, his exemplary service as 82d Attorney General of the United States.

Eric is America's third-longest serving Attorney General. I know it felt even longer. [*Laughter*] And I'll just come out and say it: He has been one of our finest: hundreds of terrorism convictions, the largest Mafia takedown in history, billion-dollar financial fraud cases, long-overdue reforms to our criminal justice system. Thanks in part to Eric's leadership, the overall crime rate and overall incarceration rate declined together for the first time in 40 years last year.

And then, there's all that Eric has done to restore what he calls the "conscience" of the Nation, our Civil Rights Division. And as many of you know, Eric has a personal connection to that office. When Nicholas Katzenbach was Deputy Attorney General during the Kennedy administration, he escorted two African American students through the doors of the University of Alabama after the courts ordered that school to be desegregated. And one of those students happened to be a young woman named Vivian Malone. And her younger sister Sharon eventually became an accomplished and renowned doctor and married a promising young lawyer, somewhat below her standards—[*laughter*]—named Eric Holder. So if you've ever wondered why Eric has Katzenbach's portrait hanging in his office, that's why.

Under Eric's watch, this Department has relentlessly defended the Voting Rights Act and the right to vote, pushed back against attempts to undermine that right. He's challenged discriminatory State immigration laws that not only risked harassment of citizens and legal immigrants, but actually made it harder for law enforcement to do their job. He's brought record number of prosecutions for human trafficking and hate crimes and resolution to legal disputes with Native Americans that had languished for years.

Several years ago, Eric recommended that our Government stop defending the Defense of Marriage Act, because he wants our country to be a place where love is love and where same-sex marriage is recognized on the Federal level and same-sex couples can receive the same Federal benefits as anybody else.

With Eric Holder as its lawyer, America has become a better country, which means that saying goodbye is bittersweet. You have done a remarkable job. It's hard to let you go. I tried to talk him out of it. *[Laughter]* But he's earned a break. And Sharon and Brooke and Maya and Buddy, they've waited a pretty long time to get you back.

Now, Eric promised to stay on until the Senate confirms his successor. And just yesterday the Senate Judiciary Committee approved Loretta Lynch to be the next Attorney General. Once the entire Senate confirms her and she's finally allowed to get to work, I know that she is going to do a superb job. And, Eric, that means that you're leaving the Justice Department in outstanding hands.

Let me close by saying that you don't have to take my word that Eric has made a difference in the life of this country. We collected just a few samples of the letters that were written during the course of the Presidency or after the announcement that Eric was leaving.

"Never in my lifetime," read one letter from an older American in Michigan, "can I remember any Attorney General of the United States that has done so much for our country and all its citizens."

A woman in California wrote: "Eric Holder was the best U.S. Attorney General ever. When people complain about you, that means you're doing something right." *[Laughter]* "He will truly be missed."

A Kentucky man wrote to say: "We thank you, Mr. Holder, for your unwavering passion in pursuit of your honorable vision. You made a difference. *[You are]* much more than simply a public official. *[You are]* a servant, possessing a heart with the audacity to care."

And I'll provide one last testimony from today, not in written form. Working with Eric in the wake of the Trayvon Martin case, we initiated something called "My Brother's Keeper." And we're trying to reach out to young people all across the country who may not have all the advantages, may sometimes be subject to stereotypes, trying to give them pathways for success.

And as part of this, we had a group of young men, African American and Latino, who are White House mentees drawn from this local area. And today we had dinner—or lunch. Broderick was there. And we sat down and I explained to them that they don't have to be that tense about which fork to use, you kind of work your way in—*[laughter]*—that when I had dinner with the Queen of England, I seemed to do okay with just that basic rule and not eating with my mouth open. *[Laughter]*

And we went around the room, and they talked about their hopes and their aspirations and what colleges they had gone to and what they were doing. And there were a couple of outstanding football players in the group and a track star and a number of future neurobiologists and several who are planning to join our Armed Forces. And this one young man, who had a, at the moment, disqualifying haircut—*[laughter]*—said, "I want to be the Attorney General of the United States." Didn't say he wanted to be Governor or a Senator or a Congressman or even President. He said, "I want to be the Attorney General of the United States."

And I think about all the young people out there who have seen you work and have been able to get just an innate sense, without knowing you personally, that you're a good man. And having good men in positions of power and authority, who are willing to fight for what's right, that's a rare thing. That's a powerful thing. It's something that shapes our future in ways we don't even understand, we don't always imagine. It made me very proud.

So, Eric, your country thanks you for your honorable vision and your unwavering passion and, as the gentleman from Kentucky said, your audacity to care. Michelle and I thank you for being a friend and partner throughout this incredible journey.

And to all the men and women of the Department of Justice, thank you for your extraordinary service on behalf of the American people.

With that, it's my pleasure to introduce my friend, Attorney General Eric Holder.

*Attorney General Holder.* Thank you. Before I begin my remarks, I want to do something that's pretty risky, which is to recognize somebody—at the risk of not recognizing a whole bunch of other people—to whom I owe so much: Senator Patrick Leahy is here. And in tough times, both professional and personal, this is a man who has been there for me. He is a patriot in the truest sense of the word. This country is better for the work that you have done as a Senator, generally, and more specifically, when you chaired the Judiciary Committee.

I learned a lot from you. The relationship that we have will continue beyond my time here at the Justice Department. And at least for today—and he'll understand what I mean by this—at least for today, you are the real Patrick. [*Laughter*] Ask him about that.

I came to this Department as an unformed, 25-year-old graduate from law school. I will leave grayer and wiser, but still struck by the wonder of all that this great organization and its people have exposed me to. I have made friends during my time here and lost some of them to the vagaries of life. But each of those people has left an indelible mark on who I am and who I still aspire to be.

The beauty of this Department is that, at its best, it is like our country at its best: always growing, always changing, always being vigilant in the defense of those values that have distinguished this Nation and made it truly exceptional. This quality is derived from the ideals that serve as the foundation for all that we love about America.

Great as it is, our Nation is not yet perfect. The fact that we can acknowledge this is what truly distinguishes us as a people. We have always examined ourselves and determined that which needs to be improved, that which needs to be maintained, and that to which we should aspire. This is the essence of and the beauty of the United States of America. Unlike other countries, complacent in an older, sclerotic system, we are still young, dynamic, and unafraid to question ourselves.

This spirit initially led to revolution and then to the removal of the sin of slavery, the right of women to vote, a great civil rights movement that truly transformed our Nation, and now a recognition of the rights of all Americans regardless of their sexual orientation.

And make no mistake: We still have unfinished business and work to do. Reform of our criminal justice system must continue. And under Loretta and Sally, I'm sure that will be the case. The historic wrongs visited upon our Native people must be righted. The widening gap in income inequality must be reversed. And in the defense of our Nation, we must always adhere—always adhere—to the values that define us. And at all costs—all costs—the right to vote must be protected.

Now, that list may seem daunting. But if we are true to who we are as Americans, no problem is too big, no issue insurmountable. And beware those who would take us back to a past that has really never existed or that was imbued with a forgotten inequity. Our destiny as Americans is always ahead of us. Our gaze is always focused on the horizon.

Those who have loved this Nation most have dared greatly and have sought to change the status quo for the better. The Founding Fathers, who—never let it be forgotten—they chose revolution rather than accept an unjust status quo. Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, Garvey, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey, John Lewis and Dr. King, JFK and LBJ, Vivian Malone, Harvey Milk, Barack Obama.

We should not fear change. It is part of who we are as Americans. It is what distinguishes us. It is what makes us unique.

Now, I leave this place proud of what we have accomplished over the last 6 years and grateful for all that DOJ has given me these past 39 years. This has been my home, and you will always be my family.

I thank the parents who raised me and the West Indian sensibility that they instilled in me, the New York City public school system that educated me, Columbia University that nurtured—and tolerated—me. [*Laughter*] The woman who has loved me so long. The kids who have been the joy and, I hope that they really understand, the true pride—the true pride—of my life. A brother who has been more than a sibling, he has been a dear friend. Beautiful sisters-in-law; a brilliant brother-in-law. The guys at the Colum—the guys at the Colum—you know who you are. And my crew from 24th Avenue and 101st Street.

And more recently, a President and colleagues in this administration who stuck by me when I didn't always make it the easiest thing to do. I'm grateful to this great Nation, who gave a Black kid from East Elmhurst, Queens, New York City, more support and opportunities than any individual could have hoped for. Thank you, America.

To the wonderful, dedicated, accomplished men and women of this great Department: I realize that I've asked for so much from each of you over the last 6 years. But let me make one final request: Keep going, keep fighting, keep believing in your ability to improve our country and our world. And know this—know this: No Attorney General, no AG has ever loved this institution or you more. Not one.

Now, I lack the words to fully convey what this place and all of you mean to me. So let me end this way, and paraphrase Duke Ellington: I will miss you as I have loved you all—madly. I love you madly.

Thank you, and goodbye.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:46 p.m. at the Department of Justice. In his remarks, he referred to Sharon D. Malone, wife, and Brooke, Maya, and Eric "Buddy" Holder III, children, of Attorney General Holder; and Cabinet Secretary Broderick D. Johnson. Attorney General Holder referred to Deputy Attorney General-designate Sally Quillian Yates, ; and his brother, William and sisters-in-law Deborah Holder, Margie Malone Tuckson, Joyce Phillips, and Gwen Moseby.

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