

Opening Statement of Attorney General-Designate Jeff Sessions
U.S. Senate Confirmation Hearing
Tuesday, January 10, 2017
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, distinguished members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today. I thank you for the opportunity to respond to your questions as you discharge your duty in the appointment process prescribed by our Constitution.

I also want to thank my dear friends, Senator Richard Shelby and Senator Susan Collins for their kind introductions. It is hard to believe, really, that the three of us have served together in this body for nearly 20 years.

I want to thank President-elect Trump for the confidence and trust that he has shown by nominating me to serve as the Attorney General of the United States. I feel the weight of an honor greater than I have aspired to. If I am confirmed, I commit to you and to the American people to be worthy of that office and the special trust that comes with it.

I come before you today as a colleague who has worked with you for years, and with some of you for 20 years. You know who I am. You know what I believe in. You know that I am a man of my word and can be trusted to do what I say I will do. You know that I revere our Constitution and am committed to the rule of law. And you know that I believe in fairness, impartiality, and equal justice under the law.

Over the years, you have heard me say many times that I love the Department of Justice. The Office of the Attorney General of the United States is not a political position, and anyone who holds it must have total fidelity to the laws and the Constitution of the United States. He or she must be committed to following the law. He or she must be willing to tell the President “no” if he overreaches. He or she cannot be a mere rubberstamp. He or she also must set the example

for the employees in the Department to do the right thing and ensure that, when they do the right thing, they know the Attorney General will back them up, no matter what politician might call, or what powerful special interest, influential contributor, or friend might try to intervene. The message must be clear: Everyone is expected to do their duty.

That is the way I was expected to perform as an Assistant United States Attorney. That is the way I trained my assistants when I became United States Attorney. And if confirmed, that is the way I will run the Department of Justice.

In my over 14 years in the Department of Justice, I tried cases of nearly every kind—drug trafficking and very large international drug smuggling cases, firearms cases, other violent crimes, a series of major public corruption cases, financial wrongdoing, and environmental violations. Our office supported historic civil rights cases and major civil cases. Protecting the people of this country from crime, and especially from violent crime, is a high calling of the men and women of the Department of Justice. Today, I am afraid, that has become more important than ever.

Since the early 1980s, good policing and prosecutions have been a strong force in reducing crime. Drug use and murders are half what they were in 1980. I am very concerned, however, that the recent jump in the violent crime and murder rates are not anomalies, but the beginning of a dangerous trend that could reverse the hard won gains that have made America a safer and more prosperous place. The latest official FBI statistics show that all crime increased nearly 4 percent from 2014 to 2015—the largest increase since 1991—with murders increasing nearly 11 percent—the largest single year increase since 1971.

In 2016, there were 4,368 shooting victims in Chicago. In Baltimore, homicides reached the second highest per-capita rate ever.

The country is also in the throes of a heroin epidemic, with overdose deaths more than tripling between 2010 and 2014. Meanwhile, illegal drugs flood across our southern border and into every city and town in the country, bringing violence, addiction, and misery.

We must not lose perspective when discussing these statistics. We must always remember that these crimes are being committed against real people, real victims. It is important that they are kept in the forefront of our minds in these conversations, and to ensure that their rights are always protected.

These trends cannot continue. It is a fundamental civil right to be safe in your home and your community. If I am confirmed, we will systematically prosecute criminals who use guns in committing crimes. As United States Attorney, my office was a national leader in gun prosecutions every year. We will partner with state and local law enforcement to take down drug trafficking cartels and dismantle gangs. We will prosecute those who repeatedly violate our borders. It will be my priority to confront these crises vigorously, effectively, and immediately.

Approximately 90 percent of all law enforcement officers are not federal, but local and state. They are the ones on the front lines. They are better educated, trained and equipped than ever before. They are the ones who we rely on to keep our neighborhoods, and playgrounds, and schools safe. But in the last several years, law enforcement as a whole has been unfairly maligned and blamed for the unacceptable actions of a few bad actors. They believe the political leadership of this country abandoned them. They felt they had become targets. Morale has suffered. And last year, while under intense public criticism, the number of police officers killed in the line of duty increased ten percent over 2015; and firearms deaths are up 68 percent. This is a wake up call. This must not continue.

If we are to be more effective in dealing with rising crime, we will have to rely heavily on local law enforcement to lead the way. To do that, they must know that they are supported. If I am so fortunate as to be confirmed as Attorney General, they can be assured that they will have my support.

As I discussed with many of you in our meetings prior to this hearing, the federal government has an important role to play in this area. We must use the research and expertise of the Department of Justice to help them in developing the most effective and lawful enforcement methods to reduce crime. We must re-establish and strengthen the partnership between federal and local officers to enhance a common and unified effort to reverse the current rising crime trends. I did this as United States Attorney. I worked directly and continuously with state and local law enforcement officials. If confirmed, it will be one of my primary objectives.

There are also many things the Department can do to assist state and local law enforcement to strengthen relationships with their own communities where policies like community-based policing have been proven to work. I am committed to this effort and to ensuring that the Department of Justice is a unifying force for improving relations between the police in this country and the communities they serve. This is particularly important in our minority communities. Make no mistake, positive relations and great communication between the people and police are essential for any good police department. And when police fail in their duties, they must be held accountable.

In recent years, our law enforcement officers also have been called upon to protect our country from the rising threat of terrorism that has reached our shores. If I am confirmed, protecting the American people from the scourge of radical Islamic terrorism will continue to be a top priority of the Department of Justice. We will work diligently to respond to threats, using

all lawful means to keep the American people safe from our nation's enemies. Partnerships will also be vital to achieving much more effective enforcement against cyber threats, and the Department of Justice clearly has a lead role to play in that essential effort. We must honestly assess our vulnerabilities and have a clear plan for defense, as well as offense, when it comes to America's cybersecurity.

The Department of Justice must never falter in its obligation to protect the civil rights of every American, particularly those who are most vulnerable. A special priority for me in this regard will be aggressive enforcement of our laws to ensure access to the ballot for every eligible American voter, without hindrance or discrimination, and to ensure the integrity of the electoral process.

Further, this government must improve its ability to protect the United States Treasury from waste, fraud, and abuse. This is a federal responsibility. We cannot afford to lose a single dollar to corruption and you can be sure that if I am confirmed, I will make it a high priority of the Department to root out and prosecute fraud in federal programs and to recover any monies lost due to fraud or false claims.

The Justice Department must remain ever faithful to the Constitution's promise that our government is one of laws, not of men. It will be my unyielding commitment, if I am confirmed, to see that the laws are enforced faithfully, effectively, and impartially. The Attorney General must hold everyone, no matter how powerful, accountable. No one is above the law, and no American will be beneath its protection. No powerful special interest will cover this Department.

I want to address personally the fabulous men and women in the Department of Justice. That includes personnel in Main Justice but also the much larger number that faithfully fulfill

their responsibility every day throughout this nation. As United States Attorney, I worked with them constantly. The federal investigative agencies represent the finest collection of law officers in the world. I know their integrity and professionalism. I pledge to them a unity of effort that is unmatched. Together we can and will reach for the highest standards and the highest results. It would be the greatest honor to lead these fine public servants.

To my colleagues, I appreciate the time that each of you have taken to meet with me one-on-one. As Senators, we don't always have the opportunity to sit down and discuss matters face to face and so, for me, this was very helpful. I understand and respect the conviction that you bring to your duties. Even though we are not always in agreement, you have always been understanding and respectful of my positions.

In that regard, if I am so fortunate as to be confirmed, I commit to all of you that the Department of Justice will be responsive to the Congress and will work with you on your priorities, and provide you with guidance and views where appropriate. The Department will respect your constitutional oversight role, and particularly the critically important separation of powers between the branches.

There is nothing I am more proud of than my 14 years of service in the Department of Justice. I love and venerate that great institution. I hold dear its highest ideals. As God gives me the ability, I will work every day to be worthy of this august office.

You can be absolutely sure that I understand the immense responsibility I would have. I am not naïve. I know the threat that our rising crime and addiction rates pose to the health and safety of our country. I know the threat of terrorism. I deeply understand the history of civil rights and the horrendous impact that relentless and systemic discrimination and the denial of voting rights has had on our African-American brothers and sisters. I have witnessed it. I

understand the demands for justice and fairness made by the LGBT community. I will ensure that the statutes protecting their rights and their safety are fully enforced. I understand the lifelong scars born by women who are victims of assault and abuse.

And, if I am so fortunate as to be confirmed as your Attorney General, you can know that I understand the absolute necessity that all of my actions must fall within the bounds of the Constitution and the laws that Congress passes.

While all humans must recognize the limits of their abilities—and I do—I am ready for this job. We will do it right. Your input will be valued. Local law enforcement will be our partners. My many friends in federal law enforcement will be respected.

I have always loved the law. It is the very foundation of our great country. I have an abiding commitment to pursuing and achieving justice and a record of doing just that. If confirmed, I will give all my efforts to this goal.

I ask only that you do your duty, as you are charged by the Constitution to do it, and by the light that God has given you to do it.

Thank you.