

New York City Bar Association
Presentation of Honorary Membership
Remarks by Loretta E. Lynch
October 4, 2018

Good evening. Thank you all for that warm welcome. It's so good to be home. President Maldonado I thank you for your warm welcome this evening as well as your stewardship of this outstanding organization. We are fortunate indeed to have you at the helm. Judge Matsumoto, my friend and sister in the law for so many years, thank you for your kind words but most of all for your friendship and support over the years. And to all of you who are here tonight to celebrate with me, I thank you. Looking out over this room I see so many who have meant so much to me over the years. I could not ask for a better group of friends and comrades in arms.

This is an incredible honor you bestow upon me tonight. I am deeply privileged, both to have been able to do the work we've spoken about and to have had such support throughout my career from so many of you who are here tonight. I join an incredibly distinguished list of prior recipients. Many of them have served as an inspiration to me throughout my career. I am tremendously honored to stand where they stood, even for a few minutes, and to join their ranks. I am in awe, still, of their contributions to our great profession.

This award is especially meaningful to me because of my long-standing connection to this bar association. You know, when I first joined it had a much longer name.

I recall my introduction to the New York City Bar Association. It was in the late 1980s and I was still an associate at a Wall Street firm. Like so many young lawyers I was trying to find my way in this great profession of ours, and wondering how to make my law degree, and my work, meaningful in a world of billable hours and document review. A senior lawyer at my firm suggested I join the Association of the Bar of the city of New York, and I recall asking "what do they even do?" I came to reception for young lawyers here at the association one spring evening. I heard about the Association and its committees, and their connection to the larger legal community. I did not know anyone at the reception. But I spent some time speaking with an older lawyer, connected to the association, about what he found gratifying about it. He spoke of his own litigation practice but also about the public interest work he did through the association and other groups. Most importantly, he spoke to me about the importance of the law not just as an individual practice but as service to the larger community. He asked about my work, my goals and talked about the bar association as a place that would support all of that. I was hooked. I wanted in. I didn't know at the time that Michael Cooper was active in the Association's leadership, or would go on to become its president. I did not know at the time that I would ultimately travel to South Africa with Michael Cooper and Evan Davis and Joan Vermeulen to work on the South African visiting lawyers program and I would see firsthand this Association's commitment to advancing the rule of law both here and overseas. I did not know that I would get to know such luminaries of the Bar as Evan Davis, and watch his vision for connecting this association throughout the world come to fruition. I did not know that I would go on to serve in several positions in the Bar Association myself. All I knew that warm summer night was

Michael (call me “Mike”) Cooper exemplified a group of people that were supportive and caring and committed to this great city and the world, as was I. Through all the years of my association with this great organization, that has never wavered. It has been my privilege and pleasure to have served this organization as a committee chair, a member of the Executive Committee and on the Board of the Cyrus Vance center.

The mission of this great bar association is more important than ever, especially your stated commitment to “uphold the rule of law and access to justice in support of a fair society and the public interest in our community, our nation, and throughout the world.” It has been my privilege to have helped carry that mission forward, at home and abroad, as well as to the halls of power in Washington, DC, where it seems as if a reminder of the importance of the rule of law is needed every day.

To state that the rule of law is currently under attack in this day and age is to utter a profound understatement. Having faced this challenge around the world, it is particularly jarring to realize that we are not immune here at home. Institutions that represent our highest and best ideals are being denigrated. They endure a barrage of criticism flung not to improve or to strengthen, but rather to undermine their credibility for personal and partisan purposes. Norms of discourse and behavior are being shattered and ignored. And in the highest office of our land, personal interest has been placed ahead of our country’s.

Of course, this Association has, since its inception, always known the profound commitment required to maintain the rule of law, along with the honor and integrity of our profession. Indeed, you were founded during the post-Civil War widespread abdication of professional ethics and standards and the widespread corruption that ensued from that.

The current attacks on the rule of law are all the more painful because they are so intense. Indeed, they are unwavering and unrelenting. Through these attacks we are seeing a backlash against progress made not just over the last administration but progress made, painstaking and painfully, over several generations. Why is this movement so intense? Because the strength of any backlash is always directly related to the power it seeks to suppress. The strength of any backlash is always directly related to the power it seeks to suppress. The law in particular is a powerful force. The rule of law itself stands as a testament to our highest ideals and aspirations. The law has aided in the path to equality for so many. I stand before you a beneficiary of many of those efforts. Time and again, it is the law that we have used to face down tyranny. It is the law that we have used to uplift the oppressed. And when we achieve true access to justice, we have seen people here and around the world find their voice, reaffirm their humanity and take control of their destiny.

And while the law has not always been used to uplift all voices, let us not forget what we have accomplished, just in our own brief time.

In the war on terror we have worked to safeguard our nation in a manner consistent with our constitution. We have done that.

Although we are not done, we have looked at our criminal justice system and begun to face the inequities it has wrought. We have done that.

We have continued to wrestle with the challenging issue of restoring trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve. We have done that and we continue to do that. We have made marriage equality a reality for all our friends and family members. We did that.

We have held individuals and institutions accountable for corruption, and the way in which they have broken faith with those who placed their trust in them. We have done that.

We have sought justice for so many, in this country and around the globe. We have done that. We have used the power of the law for so much good.

The backlash has come, as it always does after a time of progress.

We now see the efforts to chip away at years of progress that so many in this room worked to bring to fruition.

We see efforts to suppress the vote and diminish our democracy. We see families whose only crime is wanting a better life divided and torn asunder in the name of our government.

We see attempts to weaken the very institutions that pose a challenge to arrogant and unbridled power.

We see all of that.

But let me tell you what else I see, even in these difficult and challenging times.

I see people standing up as well as taking a knee in the time-honored tradition of protest that has made this country great.

I see young people using their own pain and suffering not just to define themselves but to help others.

I see those same young people also calling us all to account in their quest for a safer and more secure society.

I see people across this great country determined to make their way not just to the ballot box but also on the ballot.

I see that the world still looks to us, as an example of leadership in the past but now as an example of how to hold on to the precious freedoms we have achieved.

These are indeed challenging times. We are being tested. Our faith in our institutions, our procedures, in the story of what makes us America is being tested. But we must never forget that our greatest progress has often come after our greatest trials and tribulations.

We must also remember, as we deal with the trials and tribulations of the day, that this has never been easy. Over 200 years ago we decided what kind of a country we wanted to be. We have not always lived up to our founding ideals. Yet we have pushed ever on, and with every challenge we get a bit closer. We have held the truth of the equality of all men to be “self-evident.” We have fought to maintain a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.” And we have followed “a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.”

And at every turn, when our own struggles have threatened to tear us apart, we turn to the law to reconnect ourselves with our highest principles. To give voice to those fighting oppression. To give hope to those seeking the redress of wrongs. To protect the weak from the strong. And to give true meaning to the cry of “never again.” These are our values. These are our beliefs. And when we hold on to them, we do great things.

What we have learned from these challenges is the lesson for us today; it is not that our values are not true and good, but that every generation must commit to them and work to make them real for the challenges of their time. Now it is our turn. And that the price of freedom is constant vigilance.

I am fortunate beyond words to have had a life within the law. I have represented my country in court and represented individuals before the bar of justice. I have worked to ensure that the engines of commerce ran freely. I have worked to ensure that the perpetrators of genocide were held to account. And I was blessed beyond belief to serve the department of justice, the only cabinet agency named after an ideal. Through it all, I have been most touched by the people I have met along the way, such as my colleagues in the search for justice, my comrades in arms. But when I think of my most moving moments, I think back to my time as a young lawyer in the basement of the courthouse in Brooklyn, NY. I think back to my times helping a witness find the courage to tell their story, or telling a victim that we were able to bring justice to their family. What has been most moving to me throughout my life in this great profession of ours has been all those people who had no reason to believe in the legal system or to have faith in the law, but who placed their faith in me, in our system, and in our government.

They now place their faith in all of you. Now is the time to reaffirm our commitment to the principles that have brought us to this point.

Now is the time to understand that even though we are being challenged, we have survived this challenge before.

And now is the time to look at those who look to us, and lean on their faith as we commit ourselves, again, not just to the rule of law but to making justice and equality a reality for all who come to us for protection.

Thank you – not just for this wonderful award but for all you have done, as a body and individually, to support all of those who look to us and place their faith in us. I look forward to standing with you as we continue this fight on their behalf.

Thank you.