

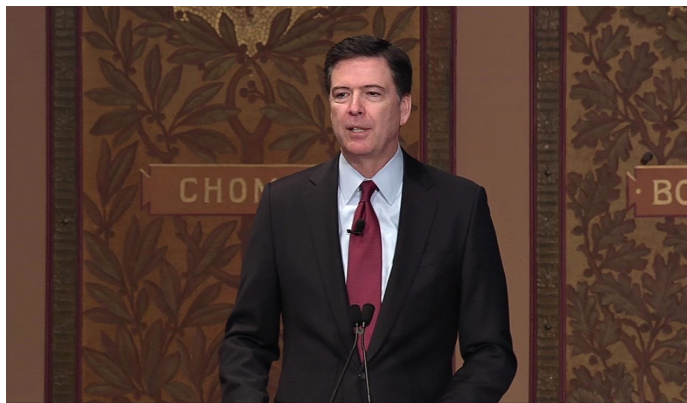


AmericanRhetoric.com

James Comey

Georgetown University Speech on Race and Law Enforcement

delivered 12 February 2015, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

Thank you, President DeGioia. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me to Georgetown University. I am honored to be here. I wanted to meet with you today, as President DeGioia said, to share with you my thoughts on the relationship between law enforcement and the communities we serve and protect. Like a lot of things in life, that relationship is complicated. Relationships often are.

Beautiful Healy Hall -- part of, and all around where we sit now -- was named after this great university's 29th President, Patrick Francis Healy. Healy was born into slavery in Georgia in 1834. His father was an Irish immigrant plantation owner; his mother, a slave. Under the laws of that time, Healy and his siblings were considered to be slaves. Healy is believed to be the first African-American to earn a Ph.D., the first to enter the Jesuit order, the first to be president of Georgetown University or any predominantly white university.

Given Georgetown's remarkable history, and that of President Healy, this struck me as the appropriate place to talk about the difficult relationship between law enforcement and the communities we are sworn to serve and protect.



AmericanRhetoric.com

With the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, and the ongoing protests throughout the country, and the assassinations of NYPD Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, we are at a crossroads. As a society, we can choose to live our lives everyday, raising our families, going to work, and hoping that someone, somewhere, will do something to ease the tension -- to smooth over the conflict. We can roll up our car windows, turn up the radio and drive around these problems, or we can choose instead to have an open and honest discussion about what our relationship is today -- what it should be, what it could be, what it needs to be -- if we took more time to better understand one another.

Unfortunately, in places like Ferguson and New York City, and in some communities across this nation, there is a disconnect between police agencies and the citizens they server -- predominantly in communities of color.

Serious debates are taking place about how law enforcement personnel relate to the communities they serve, about the appropriate use of force, and about the real and perceived biases, both within and outside of law enforcement. These are important debates. Every American should feel free to express an informed opinion, to protest peacefully, to convey frustration and even anger in a constructive way. That's what makes this democracy great. Those conversations -- as bumpy and uncomfortable as they can be -- help us understand different perspectives, and better serve our communities. Of course, they are only conversations in the true sense of that word if we are willing not only to talk but to listen, too.

I worry that this incredibly important and difficult conversation about race and policing has become focused entirely on the nature and character of law enforcement officers, when it should also be about something much harder to discuss. Debating the nature of policing is very important, but I worry that it has become an excuse, at times, to avoid doing something harder.

Let me start by sharing some of my own hard truths:

First, all of us in law enforcement must be honest enough to acknowledge that much of our history is not pretty. At many points in American history, law enforcement enforced the status quo, a status quo that was often brutally unfair to disfavored groups. It was unfair to the Healy siblings and to countless others like them. It was unfair to too many people.



AmericanRhetoric.com

I am descended from Irish immigrants. A century ago, the Irish knew well how American society -- and law enforcement -- viewed them: as drunks, ruffians, and criminals. Law enforcement's biased view of the Irish lives on in the nickname we still use for the vehicles we use to transport groups of prisoners. It is, after all, the "paddy wagon."

The Irish had some tough times, but little compares to the experience on our soil of black Americans. That experience should be part of every American's consciousness, and law enforcement's role in that experience -- including in recent times -- must be remembered. It is our cultural inheritance.

There is a reason that I require all new agents and analysts to study the FBI's interaction with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and to visit his memorial in Washington as part of their training. And there is a reason I keep on my desk a copy of Attorney General Robert Kennedy's approval of J. Edgar Hoover's request to wiretap Dr. King. It is a single page. The entire application is five sentences long. It is without fact or substance, and is predicated on the naked assertion that there is (quote) "communist influence in the racial situation." The reason I do those things is to ensure that we remember our mistakes and that we learn from them.

One reason we cannot forget our law enforcement legacy is that the people we serve and protect cannot forget it either. So we must talk about our history. It is a hard truth that lives on.

A second hard truth: Much research points to the widespread existence of unconscious bias. Many people in our white-majority culture have unconscious racial biases and react differently to a white face than a black face. In fact, we all, white and black, carry various biases around with us. I am reminded of the song from the Broadway hit, *Avenue Q*: "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist" -- part of which goes like this:

*Look around and you will find
No one's really color blind.
Maybe it's a fact
We all should face
Everyone makes judgments
Based on race.*



AmericanRhetoric.com

(You should be grateful I did not try to sing that.)

But if we can't help our latent biases, we can help our behavior in response to those instinctive reactions, which is why we work to design systems and processes to overcome that very human part of us all. Although the research may be unsettling, it is what we do next that matters most.

But racial bias isn't epidemic in law enforcement any more than it's epidemic in academia or the arts. In fact, I believe law enforcement overwhelmingly attracts people who want to do good for a living -- people who risk their lives because they want to help other people. They don't sign up to be cops in New York or Chicago or L.A. to help white people or black people or Hispanic people or Asian people. They sign up because they want to help all people. And they do some of the hardest, most dangerous -- dangerous policing to protect communities of color.

But that leads me to my third hard truth: Something happens to people in law enforcement. Many of us develop different flavors of cynicism that we work hard to resist because they can be lazy mental shortcuts. For example, criminal suspects routinely lie about their guilt and nearly everybody we charge is guilty. That makes it easy for some folks in law enforcement to assume that everybody is lying and that no suspect, regardless of their race, could be innocent. Easy, but wrong.

Likewise, police officers on patrol in our nation's cities often work in environments where a hugely disproportionate percentage of street crime is committed by young men of color. Something happens to people of good will working in that environment. After years of police work, officers often can't help but be influenced by the cynicism they feel.

A mental shortcut becomes almost irresistible -- and maybe even rational by some lights. The two young black men on one side of the street look like so many others that officer has locked up. Two white men on the other side of the street -- even in the same clothes -- do not. The officer does not make the same association about the two white guys, whether that officer is white or black. And that drives different behavior. The officer turns towards one side of the street and not the other. We need to come to grips with the fact that this behavior complicates the relationship between the police and the communities they serve.



AmericanRhetoric.com

So why has that officer -- like his colleagues -- locked up so many young men of color? Why does he have that life-shaping experience? Is it because he is a racist? Why are so many black men in jail? Is it because cops, prosecutors, judges, and juries are racist? Because they are turning a blind eye to white robbers and drug dealers?

The answer is a fourth hard truth: I don't think so. If it were so, that would be easier to address. We would just need to train -- change the way we hire, train, and measure law enforcement and that would substantially fix it. We would then go get the white criminals we have been ignoring. But the truth is much harder than that.

The truth is that what really needs fixing is something only a few, like President Obama, are willing to speak about, perhaps because it is so daunting a task. Through the "My Brother's Keeper" initiative, the President is addressing the disproportionate challenges faced by young men of color. For instance, data shows that the percentage of young men not working or not enrolled in school is nearly twice as high for blacks as it is for whites. This initiative, and others like it, is about doing the hard work to grow drug-resistant and violence-resistant kids, especially in communities of color, so they never become part of that officer's life experience.

So many young men of color become part of that life -- officer's life experience because so many minority families and communities are struggling; so many boys and young men grow up in environments lacking role models, adequate education, and decent employment -- they lack all sorts of opportunities that most of us take for granted. A tragedy of American life, one that most citizens are able to drive around because it doesn't touch them, is that young people in "those neighborhoods" too often inherit a legacy of crime and prison. And with that inheritance, they become part of a police officer's life, and shape the way that officer, whether white or black, sees the world. Changing that legacy is a challenge so enormous and so complicated that it is, unfortunately, easy -- easier to talk only about the cops. And that's not fair.

Let me be transparent about my affection for cops. When you dial 911, whether you are white or black, the cops come, and they come quickly, and they come quickly whether they are white or black. That's what cops do, in addition to all of the other dangerous and difficult and hard and frightening things that they do.



AmericanRhetoric.com

They respond to homes in the middle of the night where a drunken father, wielding a gun, is threatening his wife and children. They pound up the back stairs of an apartment building, not knowing whether the guys behind the door they are about to enter are armed, or high, or both.

I come from a law enforcement family. My grandfather, William J. Comey, was a police officer. Pop Comey is one of my heroes. I have a picture of him on my wall in my office at the FBI, reminding me of the legacy that I have inherited and that I must honor.

He was a child of immigrants. When he was in the sixth grade, his father was killed in an industrial accident in New York. so he had to drop out of school to support his mom and younger siblings. He could never afford to return to school, but when he was old enough, he joined the Yonkers, New York, Police Department.

Over the next 40 years, he rose to lead that department. Pop was the tall, strong, silent type, quiet and dignified, and passionate about the rule of law. Back during Prohibition, he heard that bootleggers were running beer through fire hoses between the Bronx and Yonkers.

Now, Pop enjoyed a good beer every now and then, but he ordered his men to cut those hoses with fire axes. And then he needed a protective detail because certain people were angry and shocked that someone in law enforcement would do that. But that's what we want as citizens. That is what we expect. And so I keep a picture of Pop on my wall in my office to remind me of his integrity, and his pride in his -- the integrity of his work.

Law enforcement ranks are filled with people like my grandfather. But to be clear, although I am from a law enforcement family, and I have spent much of my career in law enforcement, I am not looking to let law enforcement off the hook. Those of us in law enforcement must redouble our efforts to resist bias and prejudice. We must better understand the people we serve and protect -- by trying to know, deep in our gut, what it feels like to be a law-abiding young black man walking down the street and encountering law enforcement. We must understand how that young man may see us. We must resist the lazy shortcuts of cynicism and approach him with respect and decency.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We must work, in the words of New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, to really "see each other."¹ Perhaps the reason we struggle as a nation is because we've come to see only what we represent at face value, instead of who we are. We simply must see the people we serve.

But the "seeing" needs to flow in both directions. Citizens also need to really see the men and women of law enforcement. They need to see what police see through their windshields and as they walk down the street. They need to see the risks and dangers of law enforcement encountered on every typical late-night shift. They need to understand the difficult and frightening work that they do to keep us safe. And they need to give them the respect and the space they need to do their job well and properly.

If they take the time to do that, what they will see are officers who are human, who are overwhelmingly doing the right thing for the right reasons, and who are too often operating in communities and facing challenges most of us choose to drive around.

One of the hardest things I do as FBI Director is call the chiefs and sheriffs of departments around the nation when officers have been killed in the line of duty. I call to express my sorrow and to offer the FBI's help. Officers like Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos, two of NYPD's finest who were gunned down by a madman who thought his ambush would avenge the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. I make far too many calls. And there are far too many names of fallen officers on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial and far too many names etched there each year.

Officers Liu and Ramos swore the same oath all in law enforcement do, and they answered the call to serve the people, all the people. Like all good police officers, they moved toward danger, without regard for the politics or passions or race of those who needed their help -- knowing the risks inherent in their work. They were minority police officers, killed while standing watch in a minority neighborhood -- Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn -- a neighborhood that they and their fellow officers rescued from the grip of violent crime.

For -- A couple of decades ago, Bed-Stuy was shorthand for a kind of chaos and disorder in which good people had no freedom to walk or shop or play or just sit on the front steps and talk. It was too dangerous. But no more, thanks to the work of those who chose lives of service and danger to help others.



AmericanRhetoric.com

But despite that sacrifice, that selfless service of these two officers, and countless others like them around the country, in some American communities, people view the police not as allies but as antagonists, and think of them as someone not to be treated with gratitude and respect but with someone worthy of suspicion and distrust. We simply must find a way to see each other more clearly. And part of that has to involve collecting and sharing better information about violent encounters between police and citizens.

Not long after riots broke out in Ferguson late last summer, I asked my staff to tell me how many people shot by police were African-American in this country. I wanted to see trends. I wanted to see information. They couldn't give it to me, and it wasn't their fault. Demographic data regarding officer-involved shootings is not consistently reported to us through our Uniform Crime Reporting Program. Because reporting is voluntary, our data is incomplete and therefore, in aggregate, unreliable.

I recently listened to a thoughtful big city [police] chief express his frustration with that lack of reliable data. He said he didn't know whether the Ferguson police shot one person a week, one a year, or one a century, and that in the absence of good data (quote), "all we get are ideological thunderbolts, when what we need are ideological agnostics who use information to try to solve problems." He's right.

The first step to understanding what is really going on in our communities and in our country is to gather more and better data related to those we arrest, those we confront for breaking the law and jeopardizing public safety, and those who confront us. Now "data" seems a dry and boring word, but without it we cannot understand our world and make it better.

How can we address concerns about "use of force?" How can we address concerns about officer-involved shootings if we do not have a reliable grasp on the demographic[s] and circumstances of those incidents? We simply must improve the way we collect and analyze data to see the true nature of what's happening in our communities.

The FBI tracks and publishes the number of justifiable homicides reported by police departments. But, again, reporting by police departments is voluntary and not all departments participate. That means we cannot fully track the incidents in which force is used by police, or against police, including non-fatal encounters, which are not reported at all.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Without complete and accurate data, we are left with ideological thunderbolts. And that helps spark unrest and distrust and does not help us get better. Because we must get better, I intend for the FBI to be the leader in urging departments around this country to give us the facts we need for informed discussion -- the facts all of us need, and to help us make sound policy and sound decisions with that information.

America isn't easy. America takes work. Today, February 12th, is Abraham Lincoln's birthday. He spoke at Gettysburg about a "new birth of freedom" because we spent the first four score and seven years of our history with fellow Americans held as slaves -- President Healy, his siblings, and his mother among them. As a nation, we have spent the 150 years since Lincoln spoke making great progress, but along the way treating a whole lot of people of color poorly. And law enforcement was often part of that poor treatment. That's our inheritance as law enforcement and it is not all in the distant past.

We must account for that inheritance. And we, especially those of us who enjoy the privilege that comes with being the majority, must confront the biases that are inescapable parts of the human condition. We must speak the truth about our shortcomings as law enforcement and fight to get better. But as a country, we must also speak the truth to ourselves. Law enforcement is not the root cause of the problems in our hardest hit neighborhoods. Police officers, people of enormous courage and integrity in the overwhelming main, are in those neighborhoods, risking their lives, to protect folks from offenders who are a product of problems that will not be solved by body cameras.

We simply must speak to each other honestly about all these hard truths.

In the words of Dr. King, "We must [all] learn to live together as brothers -- or we will all perish together as fools."

We all have hard work to do, challenging work, and it will take time.

We all need to talk and we all need to listen, not just about easy things, but about hard things, too.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Relationships are hard. Relationships require work. So let's begin that work. It is time to start seeing one another for who and what we really are. Peace, security, and understanding are worth that effort.

Thank you for listening to me today.

¹ Phrase used five times in close proximity during Commission William Bratton's Eulogy for Officer Rafael Ramos

² Words delivered during Dr. King's Commencement Address at Oberlin College