



**Inaugural Address - Orleans Parish District Attorney Jason Rogers Williams**

**January 11, 2021**

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One of the founding ideals of our nation, one of America's most celebrated pillars is that agents of government should treat all people fairly and equally under the law. Now, that does not simply mean a defendant has the right to an attorney at trial. Taken to its logical conclusion, it means that the entire system should operate under the presumption that anyone unfortunate enough to wind up in the back of a squad car is innocent until proven otherwise.

While this ideal predates the United States of America, it is an essential part of the story we tell about our nation's founding. John Adams, our second president, defended British soldiers who committed the Boston Massacre. He defended the very men who fired shots that killed six Americans. They fired the shots that led us down the road to war, and ultimately to independence and the beginning of the American experiment of a government that gets ALL of its authority from the people. Now, while he fiercely advocated for American independence, John Adams knew that providing these enemy soldiers with an adequate defense, treating them fairly under the law, would be critical to the health of this new nation that he was dedicated to creating.

In his opening statement at trial, he transformed an ancient maxim into a core tenant of our democracy – that it is more important to a community that we protect the innocent than recklessly punish those who we have already decided must be guilty.

When a legal system condemns, incarcerates, and executes innocent people because it prioritizes convictions over justice, then why would members of the public believe that doing the right thing will keep them safe? In such a system, Adams succinctly tells us that "Virtue itself is no security."

Fighting for victims does not mean stacking up convictions. Fighting for victims does not mean using police and prosecutorial power to intimidate those caught up in the criminal justice system. Fighting for victims does not mean scaring an innocent person into pleading guilty to a lesser crime that was never even committed. As most of us know, the vast majority of inmates locked up in The Orleans Justice Center have not been convicted of any crime.

Many are there just because they are poor. Many are there because they just do not have access to the same support systems other people in our community take for granted. Keeping people locked up for months, or years, before they are ever convicted is not fighting for victims. It has done nothing to keep our community safe.

If more than half our community views the operation of justice in New Orleans as more focused on clearing cases than protecting the innocent, then what incentive does that

truly provide? How does that deter criminal behavior? How does that keep our children and families safe? Well, it doesn't. It simply does not.

But it's not just our historic tendency to punish the innocent that endangers our democracy and fractures our communities. Last week, for the first time in history, the Confederate flag, the rebel flag, was raised inside our nation's capitol. Something that 360,000 American soldiers died to prevent during the Civil War.

It was accomplished by an angry mob of people who figured they would not have to face the consequences of their actions in a court of law, because they know that all too often, justice in America is not distributed equitably. Everyone is not treated the same. Many who participated in that riot are still free today. A riot that physically unseated our democratically-elected government and held our leaders hostage in an underground bunker. Five people are dead, including a police officer who found himself overrun and without backup from any federal agencies.

This hero, Officer Brian Sicknick, died at the hands of his fellow citizens who were sent on a fool's errand to try to subvert our democracy. And while federal authorities are now on a nationwide manhunt to arrest those responsible, the fact that this mob was met with minimal resistance and allowed to walk away free after violently disrupting the transfer of power to a democratically elected president is just a visceral and stark reminder that the scales of justice in this country are weighted differently based on a person's skin color. The scene in Washington last week will forever alter how we view ourselves and how our friends around the world see us.

President Macron of France gave a speech in front of an American flag to remind the world how important American democracy is to democratic principles in his own country. World leaders, just as we are, are mourning the America that shined so brightly in their own imaginations.

But while these events are shocking and unprecedented, they did not pop up out of thin air. We have seen our share of them here in New Orleans. The Battle of Liberty Place, when the Crescent City White League deposed a democratically-elected governor in the name of white supremacy, which ended with dozens dead. Instead of facing the consequences for this insurrection, many of the participants were rewarded. They became politicians, business leaders, and local celebrities. One organizer eventually became Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. A statue erected in his honor stood outside of our Louisiana Supreme Court building until three weeks ago.

I am a native New Orleanian who is the product of hard-working parents, Carver Alums. But my mother, who was my primary parent for most of my upbringing, is a native of Bogalusa, Louisiana. She had two uncles who were members of the Deacons of Defense. Citizens who exercised courage

to stand up to brutality and white supremacy in the Jim Crow South of their rural Louisiana hometown. I grew up hearing about what they fought for, which will forever remind me that we must never shy away from a fight to protect people and even sometimes ourselves.

That courageous service of others is instilled in our DNA, and we must summon it up now more than ever. At this moment, in this time, all of the challenges we face today require courageous service. We all have a responsibility to each other to do the things that are hard for our communities and for our families; so, that they thrive and are safe.

The call to service is sacred, and I will forever be grateful that the people of this great city have selected me to serve as District Attorney. District Attorneys in America have a role that is unique across this country. A prosecutor who works for the benefit of the public and is directly accountable to the people should not prioritize convictions and sentences. Because that has not kept us safe. And that will not keep us safe. The prosecutor's job is to deliver justice.

Here is my commitment to you. Every single day, irrespective of what is reported in the news or the latest chatter of the day, I will fulfill the legal and moral obligation that comes with the office of the prosecutor. I will wield this enormous discretion that is bestowed on me, always remembering that this power, this responsibility, this discretion, is granted to me by the people. A District Attorney who is truly accountable to the people knows that this office holds the keys to making change at both the systemic and individual level. We know that individuals in the criminal legal system are not merely names that appear on court dockets. Each person has a story. Each person is someone's child. Each person has inherent worth and God-given humanity. And we also know that some of them are innocent.

I will be a DA who knows that every person we hold accountable for harm to the community is a human being. To be clear, we will hold people who harm this community accountable, but we will do it knowing that no matter how angry we are with that person, that every person is more than the worst thing they have ever done.

We can use our criminal laws for public safety without using them for racial oppression. For too long we have allowed powerful interests across this country to confuse in our minds those two goals. And that is why we have become the most incarcerated country in modern history and New Orleans has been the epicenter of that dreadful distinction. We have literally sleepwalked our way into the most racially oppressive system of criminal justice in the world.

That stops here. That stops today in New Orleans.

95% of the prisoners in the DOC from New Orleans are Black. That racial disparity is higher than ANY OTHER parish in the state, including Caddo Parish, former capital of the confederacy. Why? Because we have normalized criminalizing behaviors associated with being poor - addiction, acting out because of mental illness.

If we can give people ways to thrive - tools instead of trap doors no matter how mad we are with them - we won't have the most racist system in the state. Because you see, ladies and gentlemen, when we mass produce criminal convictions, there are too many defective products. The defective products in this mass production are ruined lives and no justice. We cannot get it right when we are trying to prosecute everyone for everything. That's when innocent people get convicted and go to prison for decades, because there's no way to do quality control when the volume is just that immense.

It is no coincidence that New Orleans has, for decades, had the highest incarceration rate in the world and also, the highest rate of proven wrongful convictions. Together we will end the normalization of incarceration.

And guess what everybody – almost everyone who goes to jail will get out one day. That's just the history of the criminal legal system. Focusing on putting people away for as long as possible, without providing any intervention, support, only hurts public safety. Removing someone from their family, friends, work, and community, and expecting them to piece it all back together on their own years later has not worked, because it does not work. This lesson has made itself apparent to our country for decades, begging us to learn from it. We will continue to work with the re-entry community to help individuals returning to society achieve stability and success.

But let me be absolutely clear - those looking to skirt justice, those who think they will not be held accountable for heinous crimes, know this: We have, and we are building, a team of the best and brightest attorneys and investigators. And I will train them to be extraordinary at their work. If you commit a serious crime in Orleans Parish, you will face consequences. In order to have the energy & resources to focus on these most heinous and harmful crimes, we will no longer clog up court dockets with cases that arise out of addiction, mental illness and homelessness but instead, we will be partnering with healthcare providers and social workers and intervention experts to find solutions outside of the criminal legal system to deal with root causes of criminal behavior.

We will renew the fight for survivors of sexual assault by providing continuous and comprehensive support for survivors. Sexual violence is a scourge on our city holding back every community because it is in our homes, schools, workplaces, streets, public transportation, and even places of worship. And it is not bound by race, gender, sexual orientation or class. We have not properly focused on these crimes.

The harsh reality is that our city is plagued with violence because we have for too long ignored domestic violence. Let me repeat that - the harsh reality is that our city is plagued with violence today because we have for too many decades ignored interpersonal violence in our homes. We know that those who commit domestic violence are more likely than others to murder and act violently outside of the home. My office will prioritize the safety & support of these survivors AS WELL AS THEIR CHILDREN.

Traditionally, the focus is on the effect of domestic violence on the primary victim. But we must also deal with the effects on children witnessing domestic violence. The trauma that occurs to the secondary victims who live in homes where partner abuse occurs, is monumental. Everything from anxiety, depression, poor school performance, anger management and impulse control, and difficulty in relationships with others.

I will work with the mayor and the city council to conceptualize a comprehensive strategy to finally address domestic violence throughout our city. We have a national movement around breast cancer where all parts of the community raise awareness and highlight survivors. And similarly, I will bring together and galvanize every part of our city to bring the issue of domestic violence into clear focus in order to uproot this cancer from our households and community.

Let me be clear, these are not reforms for reform's sake. If we do them right, they will actually make everyone safer because what we know is that being more selective about prosecutions will allow us to better focus on the crimes that matter most. We've got to go beyond punishment and invest in our community to heal, restore, and create justice that endures. We are working to create a 21st-century District Attorney's office that will deliver real justice to New Orleans. But delivering justice is an endeavor for us all, not just the DA. And I am calling on every segment of our community to step up – to invest in our community. We all are called to do everything that we can to ensure that those who need help and not jail can get that help that they need.

I am not asking you to be altruistic. I am not asking you to view this work as some sort of charity or something to help yourself sleep better at night, though it may help you sleep better. I am asking our community, the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana, to work together to do the critical work to help keep our communities safe.

Just over a week ago, police booked a 15-year-old on a second-degree murder charge after a shooting that killed a 52-year-old woman right here in New Orleans East. And according to the NOPD, the boy's father brought him in to surrender and confess to the crime.

I'm a father of three. God forbid that I have to make a decision like that. But he did the right thing, and this father should be commended for his courage to stand for what's right even when I know it hurts so much. While I firmly believe that not housing children in

adult facilities and not trying our children in adult courts is the right thing to do based upon the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Montgomery vs. Louisiana* 'children are children' - they must still be held accountable.

And not only should kids be held accountable if we're going to get this right, but we must also hold the adults accountable who abuse them, neglect them, and put guns in our children's hands. We need so many more parents not only doing their part on the back end of this issue, but also, proactively on the front end when the offenses are not as serious. We must help these parents, because when we take care of each other, when we support all of our city's children, when we provide real foundational support and permanent housing to the homeless, to families in crisis, to those battling substance abuse, we all become stronger. We all become safer. We all become more secure.

I will not end with platitudes, but I'll end with a request. Just as the people of New Orleans elected me to this awesome responsibility, my ask is that you pray for me and pray for my team. Support our efforts to get this right – to right this ship and turn this system around. We all know what we've been doing has not been working and has not served us.

We cannot deliver change overnight. It's going to take patience and everyone working with us. We will make mistakes and we won't be afraid to admit when we do. Crime will continue. Crime is as old as humanity. And a new DA cannot stop crime. But bear with us. Because the right DA can give every neighborhood a justice system that they believe works for them.

And I firmly believe one of my heroes, Bryan Stevenson, when he says that the opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice. And I'm also transfixed on the poignant words of James Baldwin, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

So, let's get to the hard work of delivering systemic change in how we support our kids, change in how we look out for neighbors, change in how we invest in our communities, change in how we police, change in how we prosecute, change in how we rehabilitate, change in how we see each other and change in how we imagine our city.

Every day forward will not be easy, but I have never been more optimistic about what we can accomplish when we stay focused on truly delivering safety and justice for the People of the City of New Orleans.

Thank you for your trust.

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