

**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee  
Hearing On Oversight Of The Department Of Justice  
January 29, 2014**

I welcome Attorney General Holder back to the Senate Judiciary Committee. His steadfast leadership has been critical in restoring Americans' faith in a Department that had lost sight of its core mission and I thank him for his service.

Founded as part of the Judiciary Act of 1789, the Office of the Attorney General has carried since its inception the responsibility to protect Americans and safeguard the rights and liberties that make our country great. For much of the past two centuries, the Department has faced many challenges – combating violent crime, fraud, and corruption and enforcing our nation's laws.

Over the last several decades, the Department's mission rightly expanded to include protecting the civil rights of all Americans. This is a fight we must continue even today, years after the end of Jim Crow laws and poll taxes, which is why I recently joined with Representative Sensenbrenner to introduce the bipartisan Voting Rights Amendment Act.

We also face ever more complex threats to our national security and more sophisticated methods of criminal activity. The Department has adapted quickly to develop new tools and resources to respond to these threats. Accompanying these rapid changes is the challenge of remaining true to our core values of liberty, privacy and a government responsive to the people.

We now live in a digital world where those challenges are even more acute. Every day, Americans generate an enormous amount of information about their lives through simple, routine tasks like using a credit card, sending a text message, calling a friend, or searching for directions on the web. This technology improves our lives, but the vast amount of data it creates is also remarkably revealing and vulnerable to exploitation. In Vermont, we treasure our privacy, and this makes me wary of government overreach or lax consumer protections. I have long made these issues a priority in this Committee and recent events only underscore the need for Congress and the Department to act.

For example, we need to set appropriate limits on when and how the government can collect vast amounts of data on Americans, while giving the government the appropriate tools to help keep us safe. That is why I will continue to push for passage of my USA FREEDOM Act, as well as legislation to reform the Electronic Communications Privacy Act. We must also work to ensure that the huge amounts of data that are collected, shared, and stored by businesses are kept safe from the growing threats of data breaches and identity theft. The Committee will examine this issue in detail at a hearing next week, and I look forward to working closely with the Department as the Committee considers legislation to address those growing threats to privacy.

It is equally important that the Department continue to fulfill its core criminal justice mission. I know the Attorney General and I share an unshakable commitment to keeping Americans safe, to supporting the men and women on the front lines of law enforcement, and to helping victims rebuild their lives. We worked closely last year to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act

and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act with critical improvements to protect all victims. And after a three year effort, last year the President signed into law my Dale Long Public Safety Officers' Benefits Improvements Act, which will make significant improvements to the Public Safety Officer Benefits program that is so important to our first responders. I appreciate the Attorney General's strong support for the goals of the Justice for All Reauthorization Act, the Second Chance Reauthorization Act, and forensics reform legislation, each of which will improve the effectiveness of our criminal justice system and which I am committed to seeing enacted this year.

I also appreciate the Attorney General's recognition of the bipartisan efforts currently underway in this Committee to address the unsustainable growth of our prison population. In a time of shrinking budgets at all levels of government, this problem presents devastating consequences for other critical public safety priorities. Doing nothing, and allowing the Federal prison population to consume more than a quarter of the Department's budget, makes us less safe. We must act. Incremental changes to mandatory minimums for nonviolent drug offenders is a good place to start, and I am optimistic that we will soon pass out of Committee a bipartisan agreement on a proposal to do just that.

I thank Attorney General Holder for returning to the Committee to discuss these important issues facing the Nation. I also thank the men and women of the Department of Justice who work hard every day to keep us safe and uphold the rule of law. They deserve our gratitude and respect.

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