

Celebrating Women's History Month

Janet Reno

(1938 — 2016)

Janet Reno wasn't the first choice to be the first female Attorney General in American history, but she had experience as a pioneer in the criminal justice system when the opportunity came her way.

Janet Wood Reno was born in Miami on July 21, 1938. Her parents wrote for Miami newspapers while building a home at the edge of the Florida Everglades. They sold some of their land to help pay her way through Cornell University, where she became president of the school's Women's Self-Government Association. After earning a chemistry degree, she entered Harvard Law School and was one of only a handful of women in her 1963 graduating class.

Many elite law firms still refused to hire women lawyers in 1960s Florida. Reno found greater opportunities for advancement in state government. She started her public career as general legal counsel to a legislative judiciary committee in 1971. After running unsuccessfully for the legislature in 1972, Reno became an assistant prosecutor for Richard E. Gerstein, the state attorney for Dade County, which included Miami. After three years with Gerstein, Reno joined a law firm that had refused to hire women a decade earlier.

Gerstein wanted Reno to succeed him when he resigned in 1978. Following a temporary appointment by the governor, Reno won a special election that November. As Florida's first female state attorney, she managed hundreds of lawyers and bureaucrats in one of the country's most crime-ridden communities. She focused on crime prevention and child welfare while creating an innovative drug court that offered alternatives to jail for first-time offenders. She strove to improve race relations after riots sparked by the acquittal in 1980 of policemen accused of killing a Black motorcyclist. Despite being a Democrat in a heavily Republican county, she enjoyed bipartisan support and was re-elected four times.

When Bill Clinton was elected President in 1992, his plan for a diverse Cabinet included a woman to run the Justice Department. His first choice didn't want the job. The next two dropped out of consideration because they had hired undocumented immigrants as nannies for their children. Clinton's brother-in-law, a Florida public defender, recommended Reno. The U.S. Senate confirmed her unanimously in March 1993.

The new Attorney General inherited a crisis in Waco, Texas. Federal officers had besieged the Branch Davidian cult compound after losing four men while attempting to seize illegal firearms. Concerned by reports of child abuse inside the compound, Reno authorized an assault that went tragically wrong. After 76 people died, she won new respect by taking personal responsibility for the disaster.

As American politics grew increasingly divisive during the 1990s, Janet Reno faced increased criticism. Some opponents of the Clinton administration accused her of abusing her authority by hindering investigations of alleged misconduct. At the same time, people inside the Clinton administration complained that Reno didn't do enough to protect the president from unfair investigations. Despite the criticism and the onset of Parkinson's disease, Reno remained at her post until Clinton left office in 2001.

After losing the Democratic primary for governor of Florida in 2002, Reno retired from public life. She died on November 7, 2016. Her legacy may be subject to debate, but her place in history is indisputable.



Source: Wikipedia - U.S. Department of Justice