

Civil Rights in the Age of Obama

March 26, 2010 1:30 AM Ryan Rivet
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Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez spoke at Tulane Law School on Thursday (March 25), addressing a question that he said is posed all too often: why does the nation still need a civil rights division?



"We are the moral compass of the nation, the conscience of the federal government," Thomas Perez, the assistant attorney general for civil rights, told an audience gathered at Tulane Law School on Thursday (March 25). (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

"I initially thought this question was a joke," Perez said. "Now I answer that question by saying 'spend a week in the life of our division, and you'll understand why.'" He heads the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and was in New Orleans to talk with officials about the Danziger Bridge shooting case that has rocked the New Orleans Police Department.

Perez detailed cases of discrimination and violence against minorities since the election of Barack Obama, what some refer to as the beginning of "post-racial America."

Describing a racially motivated assault of two African Americans in South Carolina and the refusal of a Louisiana justice of the peace to marry an interracial couple, Perez hammered home his point that the election of a black president is not the panacea for discrimination in the United States.

Perez spoke in broad terms about issues he plans to address in Louisiana.

"We have a host of civil rights challenges here in Louisiana: police departments, voting, housing to name three," said Perez. "We will continue to be here as long as necessary to address those challenges."

Perez assured his audience, largely composed of law students, that there will be a new "robust agenda of restoration and transformation" in the Civil Rights Division, pledging to transform it into an institution that enforces all laws, not picking and choosing among them, as he suggested had been done in the past.

Challenging audience members to find their calling, Perez put his own crusade in context.

"I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to help ensure that we continue to be the conscience of the nation, and we give promise to these laws that people died for."