



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, November 6, 1997

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: On Monday, I will join President Clinton at the first White House Conference on Hate Crimes, a day-long gathering of more than 300 Americans from across the country. This conference is a very important step. For too many communities, hate crimes are a grim reminder of the challenges we face in building our American family. While the available data understates the problem, FBI figures show nearly 10,000 bias crimes occurred in 1995 alone.

Hate crimes are really the embodiment of intolerance. They are acts intended to create tension, to create fear. As President Clinton has stated, hate crimes tear us apart when we should be moving closer together. By forging new links among law enforcement, educators and victims, President Clinton's conference will help us build communities that are safer, stronger and more tolerant.

At the conference, I will be leading a discussion on the benefits of coordinating efforts by Federal, State and local law enforcement to address this problem. That is because hate crimes need to be addressed at every level, and it is one of the

most important jobs of our Civil Rights Division.

As many of you know, our Civil Rights Division is charged with pursuing and prosecuting hate crimes at the Federal level, from cross burnings to church burnings. That is why the Senate Judiciary Committee's vote today is so important.

By voting for Bill Lann Lee to become the first Asian American to head the Division, Senators can send a clear message that they are committed to strong enforcement of our Nation's civil rights laws and strong leadership in the fight against hate crimes. Bill Lee is a well-qualified civil rights attorney, who knows how to lower the temperate when dealing with racial issues. Even those on the other side of the table, like Republican Mayor Richard Reardon, have hailed his conciliatory style.

Senator Hatch has expressed his opposition to Mr. Lee. While I strongly disagree with his position, I know he does so on the basis of his strongly held beliefs. I have known Senator Hatch since I first came to Washington, and I know him to be a man of the highest principle and the highest integrity. We disagree on this matter, but I know he is taking any action based on principle.

Bill Lee's nomination deserves to be considered by the full Senate. If he is given a fair shake, then I am confident that a majority of the Senators will support him.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, one of the reasons some members of the Senate have said they oppose him is because he favors affirmative action, and some in Congress have said, if you look at the vote in California, and you see that the country is going against that. Now we have the vote in Houston. Do you think that some members of Congress overstate how much the country is turning away from affirmative action?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not sure that we should look at it in terms of turning away from. What we have to look at are the principles underlying affirmative action. And as the President said, he does not want to end it, he wants to mend it -- mend it so that it really focuses on what it was intended to do, which is to eliminate the vestiges of racism and of discrimination. And that is what we are about here. And I think, as Justice O'Connor in her opinion in the Adarand decision recognized it very clearly, it still -- the remainders of it still exist. And this represents -- affirmative action, mended, represents efforts to finally, once and for all, do away with it.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, can you tell us what you are going to be doing today to

work for Mr. Lee? Are you going to be contacting any Senators individually?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have made some calls and I am expecting calls. And we will see, as the day goes on.

QUESTION: And who have you contacted so far?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have spoken to Senator Hatch and Senator DeWine, not today but in the course of the last week. And we will continue our efforts.

QUESTION: And today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have a call in to Senator Hatch at this point.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, do you know what the vote count is for Bill Lann Lee at this point? Have any vote counts been taken -- head counts taken?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I wait for the votes to be taken, and I believe that he's going to -- we are going to be able to get him out of committee so that the whole Senate can vote, and so that people can have a chance to look at this man's record, look at what he has done, where he has come from, what he represents. And, given that chance, I think they will vote to confirm him.

QUESTION: Have you heard any further word from Senator Arlen Specter? I know a lot of people are saying that the eight Democrats on the committee will vote for Bill Lann Lee. The question is to whether Senator Specter would vote for him. Have you heard any further word about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I have not.

QUESTION: Is it wrong for Senators to vote against somebody because they disagree with that person's philosophy, in your mind?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the President should be able to name members to positions such as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, and other positions, that reflect his views. And because someone disagrees with the preexisting views of the President should not be the basis for voting not to confirm a presidential appointee.

QUESTION: Well, presumably, the President -- presidents will always nominate someone who agrees with them. And if that is a disqualification, could you ever

get anyone named to this job?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It would be very difficult.

QUESTION: Presumably, in any universe of possibilities, you are going to have somebody who not only agrees with the President, but agrees with Bill Lann Lee. If any possible nominee for this job would have to have the same views as Bill Lann Lee, why this exercise? What is going on here?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I hope that what is going on here is that the process is unfolding, that people are having a chance to understand what an extraordinarily experienced and fine nominee that he is, that we sit back for a moment and look and say, the President ought to be able to name people who reflect his views. And these people with experience like Mr. Lee's, with abilities like Mr. Lee's, with the personal experiences, these people should be given the opportunity to serve the President and reflect his views.

QUESTION: Precisely. So are we looking at a political event? Is that what is going on here, that the Republican Party is making a political stand?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think there are those that are speaking out and stating what their positions are. And they have every right to those positions. But I think, in this confirmation process, we have got to recognize that you cannot staff government with presidential appointees unless they are going to reflect the President's views.

QUESTION: Reducing hate crimes, what specific priorities would you have for the Civil Rights Division? What do you want to see the Division do?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I want to see it continue in its efforts, one, to focus on hate crimes. I think they have done an excellent job with the Church Arson Task Force, in working with State and local governments in a cooperative way, and working with Treasury, the ATF, in an excellent way, to make sure that all of these instances are pursued, and that appropriate action is taken, either at the local level or at the Federal level.

I think it is important that we continue our efforts in terms of efforts against lending discrimination and housing discrimination. And I am proud of the record of the Division during these last 4 years in that regard.

I think we have got to continue efforts to mend, not end, affirmative action, and make sure that it is used in the right way, to eliminate the vestiges of

discrimination that still exist in this country. I think it is important that we continue to pursue the good record of the Division in terms of enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act. I think they have done a great deal in terms of outreach to the community, to let them know that the Act is not a matter of, as someone said, tariffing regulations, but that it is a matter of a common sense approach to give people access to so much that they did not have access before this Act was passed.

Those are some of the priorities. And I think Bill Lee would do an extraordinary job in continuing those priorities and in bringing his experience and understanding to the job.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, in the last couple of months, your people have made a pretty big deal of the fact that Bill Lann Lee was supported by a number of moderate Republicans, primarily Mayor Reardon, in Los Angeles. He was also introduced at his confirmation hearing by Senator D'Amato. Where are those voices now? Why have they not been speaking up in his favor?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: From all I understand, Mayor Reardon has been consistent in his support. And I have heard again and again of his support. I am a little puzzled. I think you should check with Senator D'Amato, because I would not want to speak for him.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, 209, of course is a big sticking point here. Some of the people who sued 209 are already planning lawsuits against the specific programs that may be wiped out by the proposition. Would you want the Department to join in those lawsuits if they are filed?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we do on all these cases is take them on a case-by-case basis, look at the issues, look at what is involved, and see whether it is appropriate for the Federal Government to be involved, both as a party or as an amicus, and whether it is appropriate to be involved on the substantive issues of the law.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, talking about Prop 209, it was denied certiorari -- or a challenge to 209 -- was denied certiorari Monday in the Supreme Court. The SG's office did not file a brief in that particular challenge, as I recall, at the Supreme Court level. Was there some thought given to give --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The Solicitor General's office has made clear that when they have not been invited to file a brief at that stage of the process, they have generally not filed one. And so that was part of the process before the

Supreme Court.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, you have spent a lot of time with Bill Lee. What are his -- how does he feel about the process? Is it more rough and tumble than he expected?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It is a real -- it gives you a lot of insight into the man, to be around him. Certainly, he is prepared for it. He is totally unafraid. We have a saying in our family when the going gets tough, we say to each other: Strength and courage. And you do not have to say that to Bill Lee.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, just to switch subjects, there is growing evidence that Russian organized crime is forging a new alliance with Colombian drug cartels, which could only create a very powerful organization. Do you feel that this is something that law enforcement agencies here are prepared for? And do they have enough money to combat that kind of threat?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, we pursue all allegations of that nature and will continue to be vigilant as we work with other agencies of government on a continuing basis to address the issues of organized crime in this hemisphere.

QUESTION: Just to follow up on that, the Caribbean nations say that they are being caught up in the forefront of this kind of activity, because their offshore financial institutions are being used for money-laundering. And yet they feel they are not getting the support from the international community which they might be due. Do you think there is a need to look again at what the Caribbean nations are getting in the way of assistance?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the President, through his visit and continued efforts by different departments in government with the Caribbean, are trying to reach out and do everything we can in terms of technical assistance and other support to help them address these issues, as appropriate, and as reflective of their best interests.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, going back to Bill Lann Lee, is there any reason to believe or is there any evidence that would suggest that what is going on now is in retaliation to what was done to Robert Bork or to Clarence Thomas? Is there any reason to believe that that comes into play here?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not heard that specifically raised.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, still on Mr. Lee, some of the opposition to him -- and I

apologize if I am misinterpreting anyone, but it appears to be that he would be supportive of continuing challenges to Proposition 209. Is that a position that fits with the Department's philosophy? I mean, should that -- does that conflict with anything?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated in answer to the earlier question, what we want to try to do as issues come up is look at each case on a case-by-case basis, understand the nature, if it is a legislative provision, understand the exact wording, understand the context, and make the best judgment we can. And he is supportive of that effort.

QUESTION: Despite the levels, the court rulings that have gone through, the Department does not look upon 209 as settled law?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, you have the Court of Appeals decision, but the Supreme Court has said that it would not take cert. It has not effectively ruled on it. And we just have to look at each case and make sure that we understand the legal issues involved and make the best judgment we can.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, about Senator Hatch, he is taking a lot of criticism from conservatives for being too accommodating to the administration. Do you think that criticism played a role in his position on Mr. Lee?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I do not think so.

QUESTION: Do you feel like he waited to pull the rug out from under you at the 11th hour by deciding to go ahead and oppose him?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I do not think that Senator Hatch pulled the rug out from under me. It has been a real pleasure to deal with him. He tries to make things work. He has some very firmly held principles. We sometimes, as we do here, disagree. But he is a special person in that regard. He is a thoughtful person. He is not one of these people that carps and criticizes unduly. And he really tries to make government work.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, let me go back to the subject of drugs.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I hope that does not hurt him.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Let me go back to the subject of drugs and Mexico, in this case, and

referring to Molly Moore and John Anderson's articles. There have been reports that the Cali cartel is hiring mercenaries to train their enforcers in paramilitary capabilities that threaten U.S. and Mexican law enforcement. It is said by Ms. Moore and Mr. Anderson that distrust has never been greater among law enforcement on the border. And I understand also, in the last week, the former prosecutor of the Mexican drug -- former -- drug administration was murdered in Cuernavaca. Have you any comments, especially to this mercenary threat to U.S. law enforcement?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is important -- has been important. And it has been one of the issues that I have focused on with our law enforcement agencies, within the Department of Justice, to take all appropriate steps to protect our law enforcement agents who are on the front line. Obviously, I cannot comment about how we go about doing that. But it is certainly one of our strong priorities.

QUESTION: Do you find this training in paramilitary -- of mob enforcers -- to be a new and more threatening dimension in this battle?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment upon what the dimensions are or whether they are new or old.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, it seems like much of this discussion around Mr. Lee has been about whether he sets policy. Does the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights set policy anyway? You know, his opinion is one thing, but does he actually sit there and set the direction that the Justice Department is going to go?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It depends on what the issue is. In many instances, it will be the President that sets the policy. With respect to one version of a regulation, it may be a matter that the Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division sets the policy. It may be the Attorney General that sets the policy. But, clearly, the Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division is going to have, if he does not set the policy on particular issues, is going to have a very vital voice in the policy of the Civil Rights Division and civil rights enforcement in this country.

Thank you.

QUESTION: I understand the FBI is going to bail out of the TWA 800 investigation. Can we interpret that to be that there is no criminal evidence -- evidence of any criminal wrongdoing in the bombing?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would let the FBI address that question.

QUESTION: Mrs. Reno, your name was mentioned in a prime-time television program last night, a Murphy Brown episode. Do you have any thoughts about that? Is this -- I do not mean your name being mentioned, but I mean --

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: -- well, maybe if you have any thoughts about, too. Is there any danger to that sort of depiction of marijuana?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Wait a minute.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: How did you get from my name being mentioned to --

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Let us see, I forgot, the Florida Marlins were not on that episode.

VOICE: Wait about. Do you know what the show was about? Do you know what he is talking about?

QUESTION: She -- the show has had a -- there may be no point in asking you this question.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: But I have gotten myself so deeply in now.

As I understand it, even though it is on one of the lesser networks --

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: -- the program involves Murphy Brown's battle with cancer. And she has, apparently in last night's episode, used some marijuana to relieve some of the symptoms of the therapy and some of the suffering she has had. This caused

some concern for the DEA Administrator, who felt that it was the wrong message to send.

What I am wondering is if -- is this sort of depiction a dangerous thing for young people to see?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I did not see the program. So, as usual, I cannot really comment. I think we have got to recognize and be very concerned about the dangerous of marijuana. With respect to the medical use of marijuana, the National Institutes of Health is addressing that issue now. And I think that is where the sensitive, critical issues of the medical use of marijuana should be addressed in the first place.

QUESTION: Do you expect a decision any earlier than next -- do you expect a decision any earlier than next Thursday regarding to go forward or not regarding Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, with a 90-day preliminary investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will not comment on the timing.

QUESTION: Are things going smoothly with the White House now as far as evidence, tapes, videotapes, the whole ball of wax in the investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will not comment about the details of the investigation except to say that my understanding is that matters are proceeding apace.

QUESTION: Next week, Ralph Nader will be holding an Appraising Microsoft conference, and he has invited Bill Gates and Vice President Gore. Will you be attending? And have you been invited?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether I have been invited. I had not heard about it. You might check with Bert afterwards.

Thank you.

VOICE: You are very anxious to leave today.

QUESTION: Well, I thought I was gone. I do not want to impose myself on you all.

(Whereupon, at 9:52 a.m., the press conference concluded.)