



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, January 29, 1998

9:15 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:15 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

QUESTION: Good morning.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, good morning.

Over the past year, we have had a storm of prosecutorial and media attention to a number of figures. And over the past week and a half, that storm has turned into a tornado. In all this time -- and I realize you were involved in a lot of this and you can't say anything -- but in all this time, have you ever felt a twinge of concern that somebody's civil rights may be trampled on in this type of procedure?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the points that I have

consistently try to adhere to, as you are well aware, is that I do not comment except to the extent that it is appropriate in the court, where matters should be litigated. And I try to do everything I can to resolve issues in the courtroom rather than in the headlines, where people may be injured by an inappropriate comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno -- (off microphone) -- headline, do you have a policy on whether or not inappropriate leaks from special prosecutors, or others, should be investigated and stopped by the Justice Department if they can be?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, we have a limited jurisdiction with respect to the special prosecutor, or independent counsel. But where there are appropriate circumstances, we will either -- if it is classified information and there is a violation of law, we will pursue it in one direction. If there is inappropriate activity, we will pursue it through the appropriate Office of Professional Responsibility, or possibly the I.G.'s office, depending on the circumstances.

QUESTION: Have you seen any such inappropriate leaks in the past week?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you have any information about an explosion this morning in Birmingham, Alabama?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes, we have. I understand that the FBI is on the scene. We do not know all the circumstances yet, but they are there and they're pursuing it.

QUESTION: Do you have any other details about what happened there?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, we don't. And I will ask Bert -- and I am sure the FBI will make any statement that is appropriate as the information develops.

QUESTION: Was it an abortion clinic?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My understanding is that it is an abortion clinic.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what is the status of reward money in the Kaczynski matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know. Actually, I made a note to myself to

inquire. And I do not know the answer to that. And I will ask Bert to try to furnish you with whatever information could be released.

QUESTION: Do you know whether several applications have been filed?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I say, I made a note to myself to check on it, and I do not have the information.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, now that Independent Counsel Starr has made a public statement, revealing that he sought an expansion of his mandate from you, that you and the Special Division okayed that, will you now consider asking the Special Division to unseal that notification for the public?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are reviewing that to determine what would be appropriate.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Can you help us understand what you are trying to accomplish by attempting to keep the Charlie Trie indictment confidential?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot comment on the matter, because at this point, so far as I know, it is sealed.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, now that Theodore Kaczynski has entered his plea in the Unabomber case, can you give us some -- help us understand why the Department felt that that was in the best interest of justice?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the matter is still pending and it is still to be set for sentence -- or is set for sentencing, I believe, in May, so I do not think I can comment, other than to say we considered all the facts, talked with victims, looked at the law, considered the report, and feel very strongly that justice is done.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, are you upset that news of the Trie charges were reported in the papers and that apparently missteps resulted in it getting out?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know of any missteps on the part of the Department of Justice, but I think it is -- again, as I indicated, I cannot comment on a sealed matter. But let us see how the circumstances unfold and whether we can comment subsequently.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on that subject of foreign influence in the domestic affairs, internal domestic affairs of the United States, the FBI Director Louis Freeh cites the PRC, especially the PLA, the Chinese intelligence organ, as being extremely active in gathering intelligence information, especially from U.S. companies that are licensing in China. Can you tell us, is China indeed conducting espionage on the United States, industrial or otherwise, and how does this relate to the Trie matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not seen Director Freeh's comments, so I really shouldn't comment until I have a chance to review them.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, has the Justice Department ever expressed a view in the past about whether agents of the Secret Service should be required to testify in criminal cases?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: To my knowledge, the Department has not made such a judgment one way or --

QUESTION: Are you -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, this is a pending matter, so I cannot comment further on the specific pending issue.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the First Lady, earlier this week, said in a television interview that she was concerned that, quote, we are using the criminal justice system to achieve political ends in this country. Do you share those concerns or do you have any comment on that observation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I would not have any comment, because it obviously related to the pending matter with the Independent Counsel. And as I have said on a number of occasions, I think the purpose of an independent counsel is to get it out of the Justice Department. And, therefore, I do not think the Justice Department should comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on a procedural matter, does the Treasury Department have its own litigating authority on the subpoena question, or would they have to come to the Justice Department ultimately to go into court on the question?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think that I should comment. Again, this is a pending matter.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, now that Charlie Trie has been indicted, can we expect one for Johnny Chung?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment. The indictment, as I understand it, is still sealed. And I do not think I can comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if I may return to the First Lady again. She, referring specifically to you on this point, was asked, when noted that you had approved the expansion of the Independent Counsel's authority, she said: Well, of course, she -- referring to you -- is, because she doesn't want to appear as though she's interfering with the investigation.

Would you comment on that characterization of your actions at all?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not really think that I can. Again, Congress created -- passed an act which created a procedure for the appointment of an independent counsel. For the Justice Department to comment on the matter after the independent counsel has been given jurisdiction is just inconsistent with the purposes of the Independent Counsel Act.

QUESTION: As a matter of policy, would you recommend to Congress, if asked, that the Independent Counsel should continue as it is, be abolished, or be altered?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: John Keeney, the Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Criminal Division, has testified before Congress as to some changes that would be made. As I have said, I will have had an awful lot of experience with the Act, and I think, at an appropriate time, I would give the benefit of that experience to the Congress, if they wanted to hear from me.

QUESTION: Can you tell us -- I realize it's still premature -- but can you tell us whether one of those areas would be whether the threshold is too low, the independent counsel threshold?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the points that I want to follow in this is where -- obviously, that statute is very much a part of our consideration as we pursue the campaign finance investigation, and I want to look at the statute as it is, not as somebody thinks it should be. And so I have not addressed in any formal way what I think should be done. When the time comes, I will be prepared.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you know if there's any indications yet of whether there could be a connection between this morning's bombing in Birmingham and last year's bombings at an abortion clinic in Atlanta?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I want to stress, because I think it's important, I cannot confirm to you that it is a bombing. Those on the scene may be able to do so. And any comment that is made as to facts should be made from the scene -- first, to ensure accuracy; and, secondly, to make sure that there is no statement that would interfere with the course of the investigations, if one is required.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I, again, think that any details should be made public from the scene.

Yes.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you think that if Secret Service agents do have to testify, would it be limited to this case, or would it possibly have farther-reaching effects?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, the matter is under review, so I think it would be premature to comment.

QUESTION: Back when you said the matter was under review, were you talking about under review here, under review in the court?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Under review.

QUESTION: You cannot say the general location where this review is taking place?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: In the OLC or the --

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, just in an effort at a little clarity, when you say "the matter," are you talking about the issue of principle, as to whether Secret Service agents can testify in a criminal matter regarding a protectee? Is that what --

when you said the matter is under review?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are -- the issue is under review with respect to the law. I think you used something other than the law.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, will the Justice Department file a brief in this matter, or has it been asked to file a brief in this matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, the matter is under review, and it would be premature to comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on another matter. CIA Director Tenet, yesterday, in testimony before the Senate, called the weapons technology proliferation, and especially the weapons of mass destruction, the top threat to United States security. First, do you agree with George Tenet in that matter? And, second, he said that the executive branch leaks like a sieve. I believe that's a direct quote.

And what would you propose to do to remedy? Would you agree with that? And then what would you propose to do to remedy that problem?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As you know, I have expressed concern about leaks -- leaks that prematurely affect an investigation, whether it be affecting national security or a criminal matter. And I think it is important that such leaks be pursued whenever possible in the appropriate manner.

With respect to weapons of mass destruction, they are clearly one of the principal threats to this country. I think we have also got to consider in the same vein the possibility of attacks on our information infrastructure. And I think we must work together -- the intelligence community, law enforcement agencies -- Federal, State and local -- to ensure that we have mechanisms in place to prevent such attacks whenever humanly possible.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what accounts for the sudden fascination with your height and what you wear?

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You all tell me.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Have you become recently taller?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Did you read the article in the Post magazine?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes, I read the article.

QUESTION: So what'd you think? Was it accurate?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Because there was a lot of speculation about other people and why they thought this and why they thought that.

What I cannot understand is why anybody would be interested. I'm pretty much myself. You see me here most every Thursday morning. And I'm basically what you see.

QUESTION: Maybe that's why.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What amused me was, in the same newspaper, here it's my fashion is getting me in trouble, and then, in the Style section, it's my fashion is supposedly okay.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: So I guess it's the story of my time in Congress: I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're going to adjourn down the hall to the library. I think you will find this very interesting. I am told that the kids are really something. So I'll see you in just a few minutes.

QUESTION: Thank you.



QUESTION: Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 9:30 a.m., the press conference concluded.)