



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, May 14, 1998

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

VOICE: Ms. Reno, good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning. How are you.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the Justice Department investigated Alexis Herman for 5 months and basically came up with no incriminating evidence. However, because there might still be some incriminating evidence out there, you asked the three-judge panel to appoint an independent counsel.

Once again, is the threshold of the independent counsel law so low that it is virtually guaranteed to go into effect?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment, because obviously that matter will be pending -- is pending before the Special Division of the court, and will be handled by an independent counsel.

As I have said, when Congress addresses the reauthorization of the Act, I think I will probably have more experience than most anybody, and I will comment then.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, apparently, according to this report, some discussions with the Hill on that very issue of reauthorization have already begun. Can you give us some guidance on what kind of discussions these are and perhaps where that is headed?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will ask Bert to let you know anything that the Department knows about it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, have there been any 11th-hour discussions between the Justice Department and the Microsoft Corporation to try to head off litigation --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will not comment on any aspects of what is going on with respect to that matter.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, earlier this week the President announced a big initiative about international crime, and there was a lot of different elements to that. And I am wondering if you can help us figure out what is perhaps the most element or what is really new here or what we should be paying attention to.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we are trying to do is to make sure that -- what the President is trying to do through this strategy is to make sure that we look at all aspects of what needs to be done, focusing on money laundering, and determining how Treasury and the Justice Department can work together to ensure close coordination and effective enforcement of money laundering laws, and that we work with other nations to ensure the passage of sound legislation, and that that legislation is implemented to effectively address money laundering abroad.

We will look at sanctions, such as the IEPA sanction, that we have utilized in other situations. It is trying to look at all the tools available, whether it be asset forfeiture, money laundering, effective prosecutions, what we can do to prevent it, how we can share information that can lead to effective enforcement.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Congressman Burton, the day before yesterday, had quite a bit to say about the impedance of his investigation and that of the Senate investigators, as well, of the campaign finance matter, especially those matters of possible incursions of the Chinese Government into the electoral process here in this country. He said that there were 53 House and Senate witnesses that took the fifth amendment, 20 witnesses that have left the country, and an additional 18 foreign witnesses that would not cooperate in any way.

Do these facts concern you? And would there be a remedy by which either FBI or DOJ or a special counsel could carry on this investigation to get to the bottom of it? Apparently the committees are stymied.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot speak for the committees as to what is needed in their investigation, except to say that we want to cooperate with them in every way possible with respect to their oversight function. At the same time, we want to make sure that we do not do anything that impedes the criminal investigation that is ongoing. And we are going to continue to pursue that until we have pursued every lead and done everything that is possible.

QUESTION: Yes, ma'am. The committee was going to give immunity to four key witnesses. This was voted down I believe yesterday. The Justice Department was on board with Mr. Burton on this four-witness immunity offer; is that true?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not going to comment with respect to ongoing issues. I think it is more appropriate that the committee does.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I believe Marjorie Stillman Douglas apparently passed overnight. Are you knowledgeable of that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Mrs. Douglas was one of the truly great ladies of the world. Even at 100, she would sit on our sister's porch and talk about the Glades. She wrote a perfectly magnificent book, called "Everglades: River of Grass," that probably is more responsible for saving the Glades and giving people the information necessary to form judgments about what was necessary to save the Everglades.

She came to Miami early on. Her father, as I recall, was the editor or the publisher of the predecessor of the Miami Herald. She worked for him. She, I think, worked for the Red Cross in Europe. She was just an extraordinary person, who lived life to the fullest, was great to be around, even at 100, and was just a magnificent human being.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, earlier this week, in Los Angeles, there was a meeting with some folks from the Civil Rights Division, the U.S. Attorney's Office, LAPD, and so forth, to talk about hate crimes. What do you see as the role for local police in carrying out the Justice Department's hate crimes initiative?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think that local police are on the front line. They are an essential partner in our Nation's efforts to address the issue of hate crimes. They will most often be the ones who respond to the scene of the crime. They will do the crime scene analysis, in many instances, because the Federal Government will not have been advised of the crime.

How they do the crime scene and how they interview witnesses will set the foundation for the investigation that ensues. I think it is very important for the Federal Government to have a two-way exchange with local government, because, from my experience, local police, prosecutors, want to, whenever possible, take action themselves. And if a local prosecutor and

local law enforcement can achieve the same results as the Federal Government, then I say, by all means, let them do it, if that is what they want and if they are prepared to proceed.

So, as with all our initiatives, what we try to do is to build that partnership of a two-way exchange of information, of mutual discussions that say, Okay, what is in the best interest of the case? You have got a good statute, you have got the investigators, you have got a good prosecutor, you go with the State prosecutor. Or the State prosecutor may say to us, Our statute is weak in this regard and we are not going to get that significant a sentence. You have got a civil rights statute that can provide for an effective sentence that fits the crime, why don't you go with it; would you cross-designate one of our local prosecutors?

We want to do it in partnership with State and local law enforcement.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, now that the argument on the Secret Service executive privilege has been opened up, can you articulate for us with a little bit more detail why you feel so strongly that the agents should not be forced to testify?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That matter will be argued this morning in court. And so I think it should be argued in court rather than in the headlines.

QUESTION: Do you attend the briefing by Mr. Moletti when he argued that the -- if the agents had been closer to President Kennedy, they could have prevented his assassination?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have been briefed by Mr. Moletti.

QUESTION: Did he make that particular argument to you?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I would not discuss the foundations of our -- of what is being litigated this morning. I really think that the matter should be litigated in the court.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is there any possibility that the briefs that have been filed will be unsealed? And has the Department so asked?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, they're makin' legal arguments in court this morning. Can you -- you do not have a personal opinion on the effect on the protective function of the Secret Service if they are forced to testify about the private lives of the First Family?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If I am arguing a case in court this morning, or if one of the Justice Department lawyers is arguing a case in court, he certainly does not want

somebody arguing a case outside.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno -- (off microphone) -- down in Tampa about the INS holding of a university professor by the name of Mazan Alnajar. We are being told that you have got a committee looking at that case possibly. I am wondering if you are familiar with that particular case, because there are some allegations regarding his being held on what amounts to secret evidence linking him to the Islamic Jihad. Are you familiar with that particular case, and do you have any concerns about the constitutionality of holding this individual?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on the matter because it is pending, except to say that we always review any claim that anybody has made that something has been done wrong.

QUESTION: Are you reviewing this particular case?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I cannot comment.

QUESTION: The House and Senate judiciary committees are in the final stages of marking up personal bankruptcy legislation today. Why does the Justice Department object to the approach that is being taken in the House bill?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we have expressed our views. And rather than present a confusing statement, since I do not have it right at hand, let me ask Bert to provide that to you.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is there any progress on the dispute between the Department of Justice and the telecommunications industry on the wiretapping issue, on a settlement there and who is going to pay for updating the technology?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As you know, part of the matter -- this is with respect to the CALEA Act -- part of the matter is pending with the FCC. But we continue discussions with industry. I really want to do everything I can to work with industry to address modern issues of technology. I think it is important that law enforcement develop the expertise that will permit it to address the challenges and the problems that modern technology will provide for law enforcement.

To do that requires a good working relationship and a good partnership with the private industry, with academia. And in all of these instances, I am trying to reach out, to do as much of that as possible.

I think that as with any two disciplines which do not have experience with the other, I think you start with kind of suspicion and misunderstanding. And we are trying to work

through those concerns and develop an effective partnership that can permit us to work together for the future, to provide for this Nation's security and to see that our laws are enforced consistent with the Constitution.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the past several years have shown a decline overall in the national crime rate. And we will soon know whether that will continue for the past year. But without regard to what we may learn shortly, Sunday evening, embargoed for 6:00 p.m., I would like to ask a somewhat larger question. What indications have you seen since you have become Attorney General, in light of the continuing decline in the crime rate, that that decline is here to stay, or that it is so fragile that any change in the population or another drug epidemic could wipe it out?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think you have heard my experience in this regard. In the 1980's, it was not 5 years in a row that the crime rate went down, but it was going down. And I thought, ah, we have turned the corner. And then I began to hear about this insidious thing that was cocaine but was not cocaine. And then they had not gotten a name for it yet. And then they started calling it "crack."

And it hit Miami and, I guess, New York earliest. And I saw the crime rate start back up. I saw guns proliferate as a result of crack. And you have seen the story that got written.

What I think is important for law enforcement, for all the American people, is that we can never relax our vigilance about crime, about enforcement, about prevention. And that is the message that I am giving to America.

Yes, America, everyone working together, has made a difference. Police have done such an incredible job. There are so many people that can claim that they have had a role in this, and claim it legitimately.

But you cannot say, Okay, now let us move on to something else. There is going to be a new problem down the road. And I have tried to describe some of those new problems. The whole issue of cyber-crime is going to require tremendous efforts on the part of law enforcement, both at the Federal and at the State and local level, as well.

The gun may become obsolete as people learn how to hack through and provide for transfers and accomplish thefts and scams through the Internet. The whole issue of international crime is going to be more on our radar screen than ever before, as borders shrink and as people become more mobile. Then there are just some old-fashioned issues.

But I think one area where we have a chance to really, really change the attitude of America on a more permanent basis is with respect to domestic violence. In 1978, I could not get many people interested in domestic violence, as we set up a domestic violence



intervention unit. It took the longest time to get courts and police departments to really focus on this type of crime.

Now, they are. Congress and the administration have worked together to provide significant funding to States for programs aimed at domestic violence. Everyone is beginning to realize that we must get to the children early on, who are the witnesses to domestic violence. Because otherwise they will become just inured to violence and think it is a way of life.

If we really make a concentrated, informed, comprehensive effort in this country, in these next 3 or 4 years, with the money that is now available, I think we can really change a culture, a cultural attitude about domestic violence, and make this a far more peaceful Nation.

QUESTION: Does the administration deserve any credit, in your opinion, for the low crime rate? Or does most of the credit go the local police?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think everybody deserves some of the credit. I think the President, with his leadership with respect to community policing, I mean that was his idea of 100,000 police officers. Wherever I go, I hear police chiefs and officers on the line tell me that this has made such a difference. They have spoken of the support his administration has given to local police, to the partnerships that we have created, and the two-way exchange of information and the efforts that we have developed to work together.

But, at the same time, there are some wonderful people out there doing great work. There are prevention programs that are in effect. Finally, as we are getting sentences that fit the crime and we also have the capacity to carry out those sentences in State and local courts.

To some extent, it may be changing demographics. But, in one respect, the figures argue against that, because we see an increasing number of young people, and yet youth violence, which is such a serious problem, looks like it may be going down. But it may be a blip in the screen, and we have got to be very careful.

I think one of the things that has come out of these 5 years is that crime is not a Democratic or a Republican problem. If we approach in a thoughtful, bipartisan way, if we take the facts and figures of the community and say, this is the crime problem in this community, this is how the Federal Government can work with State and local officials, this is what the data reveals in terms of prevention programs that work and drug treatment programs that work, or drug courts, these are the things that can be done, we can make such a difference.

And I think we have provided tools -- drug courts, the Violence Against Women Act, the community policing initiatives -- the ban on assaults weapons I think is a contributing factor.

There are so many people that can claim some of the credit, and I think that is when you are successful in the fight against crime -- when it is not just one person -- when it is all of America that says, We are going to work together to do something about it.

And now our greatest challenge is going to be, let us not get complacent. Let us not turn away and look at other things. Let us retain the vigilance. Let us continue to invest in children. Let us let people know that if they commit a crime, they are going to face a punishment that fits the crime.

QUESTION: Just to follow up on that, does it appear that these predictions that many criminologists were forecasting, that crime would go back up -- violence crime would go back up as the youth cohort aged and moved into the crime-prone years, is there a possibility now that may not happen?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One cannot tell. But here is the beauty of today: instead of just I guess engaging in partisan rhetoric, people are sitting down in communities across America and saying, Okay, here is our last year's figures, here is the intelligence on the drug gangs here. Let us see, they are beginning to merge with some of the juvenile gangs; we have got to be careful, we have got to take steps to address it. When they plan based on the facts and figures -- hard facts and figures -- they can make a difference.

And what the hard facts and figures are saying is that violent crime amongst juveniles looked like it was down last year, for the first time. The murder rate is down 2 years in a row. That could be a blip in the screen.

Indeed, the number of young people, aged 12 to 18, is increasing. If it is not a blip, we are on our way. But we have got to make sure it is not a blip.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, within those crime figures is some troubling numbers. Even though the murder rate is going down, in many cities the police clearance rate of murders is also falling. Any thoughts on why that might be occurring?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. Let me think about that and see if I can comment next week. Because I do not want to talk off the top of my head.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, earlier you mentioned international crime. In our booming trade relationship with China, there is concern that American companies may have breached national security by illegally providing China with technology to improve its rocket telemetry. How seriously does Justice view that issue? And where does the probe stand on that? I think there was some grand jury work.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, I obviously cannot comment on it. But I would ask



Bert to furnish you with any information that could be made available publicly.

QUESTION: With regard to crime and major criminals, 13 years ago, this guy was the most wanted man in the world. His name is Mohammed -- known as Abu Abbas. Mr. Abbas is frequenting Gaza, is acting as an advisor -- one of the top advisors to Mr. Arafat. And when I asked Madeleine Albright 2 days ago, she told me that Mr. Abbas is not wanted in this country, that in fact he is wanted in Italy for the hijacking of the Achille Lauro, complicity in the murder of Mr. Klinghoffer.

One, why is he not wanted in the United States? And, secondly, does the Justice Department think it reasonable to aid the Italians and the Israelis in bringing Mr. Abbas to justice?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me ask Bert to give you whatever information we can say publicly, and in terms of cooperation or in terms of your original question.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Mr. Labella is widely reported to be preparing a report for you this summer. Would you consider releasing some of the nonsensitive portions of that report or making it public?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It depends on what it said. If it is information concerning a pending investigation, no.

QUESTION: Well, if he made some broad recommendations, would you consider making some of those public?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It depends on what they were. If he said, We should do this, this and this, as part of a pending investigation -- again, I have found it very useful to have you all around Thursday mornings, to remind me of the first amendment and to remind me of openness in government. And I sometimes share your frustrations, in the sense of having to "no comment" or to suggest that I cannot comment on a pending case.

However, in the area of law enforcement, you have the inevitable tensions. And if you are conducting an investigation, you do not want the investigation made public, because that is going to be inconsistent with the best way to do it.

If you lay out what you are doing for the person you are investigating, that is kind of dumb. So I want to try to be as open as I can, consistent with doing this investigation the right way.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, when he first came was there a memo of understanding that he would only stay for 3 or 4 months?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. I knew when he came -- he came and he is -- I mean, when you think of what that man has done, I just -- I think he has been magnificent. He came. He left his family. He has been staying in an apartment. He has done an incredible job here, while at the same time making sure that the things that he left in California were properly tended to. He is away from his family.

And one of the things that puzzles me is everybody's assumption that things are going to be the same forever and ever. I have had my Deputy Attorney General leave. She was a great force in this Department. The Department moves on I think.

And so I do not anticipate that everybody is going to stay forever. I think that Chuck has done a wonderful job. And what has impressed me so much is he says he is not going to leave until he ensures that there is a proper transition. So I do not see that the investigation will be impaired at all.

QUESTION: I think that a lot of people have trouble understanding that he is getting this promotion now when the job he came to do is not done.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we try to do is to look at all the -- when you talk about a promotion, I try to look at not whether something is a promotion, but what is in the best interests of all the functions of the Department of Justice. And I make the best judgment I can.

So I do not know when the job will be done, but I do know that people move on. There were cases pending in the U.S. Attorney's Office when Eric Holder became the Deputy Attorney General. That does not say that Eric Holder cannot become the Deputy Attorney General because there are cases in his office that have not been concluded.

If you got a new assignment, a promotion, it does not mean that your long-running investigation on something -- you would have to wait and see it out. I think we have gotten into kind of a rut -- or some have gotten into a rut -- of thinking you cannot move on.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, can you give us a glimpse of your experience and feelings about personal computers? Do you use a PC at home as well as at work? Do you surf the Internet? Do you get mad when your computer crashes? What is your interaction with PC's?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, I was doing okay with the office computer in Miami. And I was getting fairly fluent with it. And then I came to Washington and had to learn anew. I did not do a very good job of it.

And then it got so confusing as to what was on the computer or what was not on the

computer, what was on the hard drive, what was on the soft drive, that it made it easier for me just to do my work with paper and pencil, so I could figure out what I had and what I did not have.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: So you have no personal relationship with Windows 95?

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And at this moment I do not have a personal relationship with the computer.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: What about this persistent rumor that you are going to do a cameo tonight on the last Seinfeld?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What is Seinfeld?

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am certainly learning an awful lot about modern American entertainment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, any general thoughts about the emerging cyberspace economy and the importance to the country?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The cyberspace economy? My mother always taught me to just -- you have a habit of talking about things you do not know very much about, and she would clearly tell you that I was not an economist. But let me put it in more general terms.

I just think that this is one of the most exciting issues that we face: how we use cyber-tools to give us new economic opportunities. I mean, if we can do it right, if we can develop means of commerce that still ensure privacy and the security of economic transactions, we can make such a difference. That is one of the reasons it is important that we solve the issue of encryption -- solve it so that we can have secure communication and that people can rely on the Internet and rely on cyber-telecommunications in the modern world to be private, understanding that law enforcement would continue to have the same authority it has with the telephone now.

So that is one of the issues that we have to face. Clearly, in terms of cyber-economy, it is going to be important for there to be secure and private communication. How we enforce misuse -- criminal misuse of cyber-tools is going to be important. I mean, it is just really fascinating. If somebody starts selling you something from St. Petersburg, Russia, and they are trying to sell something here, and it is totally fraudulent, how do we work together with Russian authorities, to take effective enforcement action against these people?

Those are the challenges.

On the other hand, if we can do business electronically, it is going to be an incredible opportunity. The economists know the magnitude of the opportunity and the risks far better than I do.

Thank you.

VOICES: Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 10:02 a.m., the press conference concluded.)