



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, September 17, 1998

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

QUESTION: -- more opportunities of doing something acceptable to you; and if not, what are the chances of its coming?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is a very important step in the right direction.

In that connection, I would like to read you something. I went to Jefferson Junior High School here in the District several weeks ago, and spoke to kids, to parents, to teachers, and to administrators. One young lady left me a letter.

And she said: You continue to express your feelings for the students. You state that the children are the future and that more things should be done to keep students in after-school activities. Why don't you take more action, and get out into the communities around D.C., see what it is like for students who need more support and better role models, try to experience what they go through. Because if you don't see it through their eyes, the eyes of the children, who will you see it through -- statistics, graphs, charts?

Our futures depend on what we see and hear. How many students actually know who you are or what you have done? What have you done?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: And don't give me a list. Don't give me a speech. What do you really feel about

the children? Show us in your actions, not your words.

And this was a student. I invited her -- she said, please call me. So I contacted her. And she's a wonderful young lady. She and her mother and sisters and a friend came to visit. And we had a chance to talk directly to each other. And I explained what I have been trying to do. I said, I do not want to give a speech, but I can give you some specific examples that you can review.

But we talked about the need for after-school programs for mentors who know how to relate to kids, for networks that provide kids support.

Yesterday I was out at another Jefferson, Jefferson Middle School, in Virginia. And it was again so rewarding to hear from the kids about the needs. We have an opportunity to try to get monies out that provide a balance between prevention and enforcement. And I think the House is a step in the right direction.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What are you doing?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: What do you think is lacking in the House measure that you would like to see put in before the bill passes?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is best if we just work through it as it works through conference. But let me just list the ingredients. We have got to hold the young people accountable for their crimes. We have got to let them know that there is no excuse for committing a crime and they are going to face the consequences.

I think it is important, however, to provide for after-care. It makes no sense to put a kid in detention for a year and then, as I have said to many times, send him back to the open-air drug market where he got into trouble in the first place without a support mechanism in place for him there, without a chance to get back into school, without a chance to develop a skill that can enable him to earn a living wage.

But then, let's look at the front. When a kid gets in trouble for the first time for a minor offense, instead of just giving him a slap in the wrist, let's find out what the problem is. And if there is a problem that caused the crime, if he is living with crack addicts in an apartment over the open-air drug market, let's try to do something about it now so that he has a chance of success.

Let's provide for flexibility for communities across America to figure out how we do it. I go next week, to visit with the Conference of Mayors, who are doing wonderful things in terms of prevention. I think all of us working together can hear the voices of sheriffs, of Neffrateny Francis, who wrote this letter, of chiefs of police, of school administrators, of citizens who care. And we can give children the chance to grow in a strong and positive way.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, unfortunately, as important as youth crime is, there is another subject which is using up all the oxygen.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I know of nothing more important. There are many things that are important. I know nothing more important than the future of America's children.

QUESTION: However, there is another subject which is using up all the oxygen in this town. A short while ago, Chairman Hyde told the Judiciary Committee that stories would start to appear about the backgrounds, or scandals, lurking in their history. And he said, once they did, if it appears it will constitute obstruction of justice, there would be a referral to the Justice Department for investigation.

Now Chairman Hyde has admitted to his own -- what he has described -- youthful indiscretion. Has there been any contact from the Judiciary Committee, asking for an investigation of such stories or -- either about Chairman Hyde or anyone else?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Not to my knowledge.

QUESTION: Would such an action constitute -- could such an action constitute obstruction of justice or obstruction of a direct inquiry?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I can't do "what ifs." We would look at it if it were referred.

QUESTION: You would look at it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I mean we would look at it to determine what the appropriate course of action would be.

QUESTION: There are going to be more stories of this nature. And you can look at it two ways. You live by the sword, you die by the sword -- or you can say is this an obstruction of justice? Is the Department prepared to at least look at the nature of these stories or the origin of these stories and deal with them?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I just told Beverley, we will look at it, and then determine what the appropriate course of action would be. I cannot tell you what it is until I get it.

QUESTION: Have you read the Starr report on President Clinton?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not read it in detail.

QUESTION: Do you have any reaction that you can share with us today about what you have seen of it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. As you know, I have steadfastly said that with respect to independent counsel matters I will not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, that being the case, we understand you can't discuss or give your opinion on anything that the Independent Counsel does. May I ask you, though, whether you can say anything about the decision by Congress to release everything, all the grand jury material that was gathered? This is a congressional decision. Does that raise concerns for you, with all this material that was gathered in secret, what's to be said about the secrecy of a grand jury in a case like this?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: This issue has been raised by a number of people who have asked me. I have not reviewed it in detail, and so I do not think it would be -- I think it would be premature for me to comment.

QUESTION: With all due respect, why is it that you have not read the report in detail or reviewed that question in detail?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: From what I have heard, nobody would really read it in detail. They would read it to find out the substance of it and what the issues were. But there are some details that I do not think I have to read.

QUESTION: Are there exceptions in cases where grand jury testimony is released?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, that issue has been raised on a number of occasions. I do not know the answer to it. And it would be premature for me to comment.

QUESTION: Can you even comment as to whether this report is a competent investigation on the part of Starr and his people?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would, as I have said, not comment on the investigation done by the Independent Counsel. The purpose of having an independent counsel is so that he or she can be independent.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, with regard to your campaign finance preliminary, can you clarify

whether Republican activities will be looked at as well as Democratic?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have said from the beginning that we will pursue every lead.

QUESTION: On the same subject, have you written a letter to Carl Levin?

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Excuse me. For those of you who cannot see, there is a photographer sitting down here.

QUESTION: Have you answered Carl Levin's letter? It's about five weeks now since Senator Levin sent you a letter, saying that there was information that at least suggested that the House Majority Whip had participated in a scheme in Texas to route campaign funds illegally through a third-party conduit. Have you responded to Senator Levin's letter yet?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether they have responded yet or not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what sort of role model do you think President Clinton has provided, given the Starr report and what has come out over the last week or so?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think that there -- as people point out, how do you explain to children these circumstances? And I think it is something that parents are grappling with, trying to explain the role of the President, what his role is as a person. And I think it creates problems for parents that they are struggling to address.

QUESTION: When you have been to the Jefferson schools that you talked about, do any of the kids ask you about the scandal?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: No single kid has asked you about it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not recall any.

QUESTION: How would you explain it to children?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think one of the best descriptions I heard was from a friend of mine, who said she had sat down with her son and she had talked with him. He is old enough to understand what he is hearing on television for the most part. And she has explained that people make mistakes and that they are not perfect, but that you have got to move on and

acknowledge your mistakes, put them behind you, and not let it defeat you for the rest of your life.

QUESTION: President Clinton has said on several occasions that he has sinned, but he has not been at all specific about the manner in which he has sinned and whether there has been any sex in the sin or whether there has been any lying in this sin. Do you find this to be just smoke?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know what you mean by "just smoke," but since it relates to the Independent Counsel's investigation, I'm not going to comment on it.

QUESTION: Attorney General, from the standpoint of a prosecutor, is the release of videotaped grand jury testimony a troubling precedent?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, these are the issues that I think it would be premature for me to comment on.

QUESTION: And why is that? Is the Office of Legal Counsel or anyone else here dealing with a position on this question?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I just think it would be premature for me to comment at this point.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- in your prosecutorial career on which grand jury testimony was released -- have you always considered it sacred and should always stay under wraps?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the Florida grand jury law may be somewhat different than the Federal grand jury law, so I cannot compare one to the other. And anything I might say with reference to my Florida experience, where grand juries provided full reports, there were provisions for reports and grand jury information was made available pursuant to presentments of reports. It might not apply with respect to Federal grand juries.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you said you haven't read the report in detail, but certainly you have read the grounds for impeachment, haven't you? Based on the summaries of the preliminaries that you cited --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have read -- as I say, I have read it, but not in detail. And that would include -- I have read it sufficient to understand the ground.

QUESTION: Have you ever prosecuted someone for perjury?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Have I ever prosecuted somebody for perjury?

QUESTION: Yes.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, speaking strictly historically -- and you are as up on this as I am - do you know of any instance in American history where this particular type of grand jury information has been released, without judging the Starr investigation or anything else?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not reviewed it, so I cannot speak with informed knowledge of history. I cannot think of a situation like this. But that would not necessarily be the most thorough answer that could be given after research.

QUESTION: When you say it's premature for you to comment on the release of grand jury material, at what point would it be appropriate for you to comment?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: When I have got all the information necessary to make an appropriate and informed comment.

QUESTION: So you do not necessarily have to wait until the Independent Counsel's investigation is finished before you can judge this particular issue?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether I have to judge this particular issue. But it is an issue, a question, that has been raised. At this point, I do not have the answers.

QUESTION: Have you sought the answers, asked anyone to predict?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There has been discussion about it.

QUESTION: Does your office have access to the Starr report and the materials that are entrusted to the House, those that are locked up over there in the House? Do you have an interest to know what is in there, or can you have access?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: At this point, we have access to the report that was released, and we will see what else is released and what is necessary.

QUESTION: Just so we are not missing something here, I assume the Department is not contemplating any legal action to prevent the release of this material?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There is no basis for the Department doing that so far as I know.

QUESTION: Is the Department looking to file new charges against Eric Rudolph? Can you characterize what those discussions are right now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on that. As you know, it is pending.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is it your understanding that the Department has prosecuted before for perjury in civil cases? I realize you may not have numbers. And, secondly, is it your understanding that while it is not a frequent occurrence, but clearly perjury is held the same in civil and criminal proceedings?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether -- I cannot give you a specific case in which the Department has -- I understood the question here to be, have I ever prosecuted anybody for perjury? And the answer is yes. Whether the Department has prosecuted anyone for perjury in a civil action, I cannot give you specifics. I will ask Bert to give you whatever is available.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, let me ask on a different subject, the confirmation of judges. About a year ago, you were somewhat critical, as was the Chief Justice, in the case of confirmations in the Senate, and also the fact that the process was extremely partisan. Are you satisfied that is has improved in the Senate, and the fact that your friend, Patricia Sykes, is about to become a judge?

And a related question: Why -- (off microphone) -- been more successful in getting judges through the process than a number of others?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know the answer to that. And I do not know whether they have been more successful or not. But I think that there has been a good effort made to get more judges confirmed. I think it is very important that these judges have their hearings, that there is a vote, that we get these judicial vacancies filled. And I think everybody is in agreement on that now. And I look forward to working with Senator Hatch and the Judiciary Committee to do everything we can to continue to get them confirmed.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as a member of this Cabinet, what are your thoughts on the effectiveness -- Mr. Clinton's ability to govern in light of this report?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: All I can say is, with respect to the issues that I am dealing with, he is -- civil rights, law enforcement issues -- he continues to be fully informed. I continue to be impressed with his grasp of the situation, with his ability to absorb all the facts and make good decisions.

QUESTION: Are you contact with Mrs. Clinton at all?



ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have seen Mrs. Clinton.

QUESTION: And how does she seem to you? Did you have any discussions with her?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, it has now been about a month ago. And I saw her yesterday, as well. But she and the President had a dinner at which we had the opportunity to hear from children's advocates and from others who have, by reporting or otherwise, have focused on children's issues. And she was, as usual, so informed and facilitated such an excellent discussion. Again, I was impressed with it.

QUESTION: At the Cabinet meeting last week, did you make any comments?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: Did you get any?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes.

QUESTION: And you didn't make any comments at the meeting or after meeting with the President?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I went up to the President and shook his hand and said that I appreciated the opportunity to hear.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, have you reached any conclusion yet in connection with the matter you were asked about a week ago as to whether the Department had the proper role in defending the institution of the presidency in any impeachment investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have had some initial briefings from OLC, which is the Office of Legal Counsel. We have not reached any conclusion. I think we will have to do it as the issues arise.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- from that what the practice was in the past? For example, I guess the only time this has ever gone to trial in the Senate before is the case of Andrew Johnson. And did your briefing include -- we were checking around here, trying to figure out what the Department did then -- do people around here have any idea whether the Justice Department has ever done anything like this before?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It is hard to say, because I am not sure of all the facts and circumstances of the Johnson trial and whether there was an independent counsel or the equivalent thereof. So there are a number of issues. And, again, we are working through them.

QUESTION: I think Jack Keeney was an intern.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Speaking of Mr. Keeney, for those who may be listening that do not know him, John Keeney has been in the Department for many years. He is an example for this Nation of what a public servant should be. At a time when people are questioning whether they want to continue to pursue public service because of the fishbowl that it puts you in, Mr. Keeney continues, day in and day out, to have such a sense of justice, a wisdom, a commitment to this Nation.

And if you look at this life -- as I recall, if you walk into his office, there is a bomber from World War II; I think he served either as a pilot or as a navigator -- and you look at his life, and you can still turn to young people and say, there is an example of why public service is some of the most rewarding experience that you can have.

QUESTION: Ma'am at the alternative dispute resolution thing earlier this week. From that, the Federal Government seems to be doing pretty good on that. How does the Federal Government compare to the private sector? Are they equivalent?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think, in some respects, we have been behind the private sector. And I think there are some in the private sector who want nothing to do with what I call appropriate dispute resolution. And let me explain just a little bit about what I mean by that.

There are an awful lot of lawyers who receive a case and decide they are going to trial. And they may settle at the last minute, but it will be at great cost, and oftentimes the settlement will net the client very little. Or if it is a settlement that everybody agrees on, or if it goes to trial and the client gets a money judgment, that money judgment may not be as good as a settlement would be that provided for corrections and modifications and contributions to a certain project that would enhance the area that was the subject of the lawsuit.

When I went to law school, people did not talk about negotiation. You did not learn how to negotiation. Now I think it is clear that you can teach people to negotiation effectively.

And what we are trying to do is to work with our client agencies whom we represent, the Federal agencies we represent, and say, the first thing we have got to do is value the case and understand the risk, and have a good understanding of the case so that we can intelligently figure out what it is worth and what should happen and how it should be disposed of.

Then we need to use our negotiation skills. And we are training our lawyers to be better

negotiators. Then sometimes negotiation will not work between the parties because they will have a tension. At that point, it might be appropriate to bring in mediators or third-party neutrals who can bring down the temperature a little bit and get it resolved.

It is so important because we are seeing, in terms of equal opportunity complaints and work place complaints, that if we work the issues out through mediation or through negotiation, we save the wear and tear of a trial and the tensions and the bitterness and the dissension that are created sometimes in a trial situation. It is just a very important undertaking.

And I think it can be mirrored in the community by police officers and teachers learning how to resolve disputes and how to teach youngsters how to resolve disputes without knives and guns and fists. What it is basically about is how do you problem-solve, how do you listen so that you understand what the other person is saying.

I sit around this table sometimes and I realize that I may not have listened carefully enough to your question. I think it behooves us all to listen with a listening ear, to hear the other person out, to respond in clear terms, to learn truly how to communicate. I think we have made some real progress in the Department of Justice.

I am proud of the work that Peter Steelon and so many of the United States Attorneys Offices have done in training our lawyers in appropriate dispute resolution techniques. And I am very proud of the work that a number of the Federal agencies, including EPA and the Air Force and others have done in this area. I think we can do much more.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, going back to the Starr report, are you satisfied now, having seen part of the report, that you did the right thing to put Ken Starr on this particular subject, when the tapes came to his attention and he came to you about this matter; was that the right move?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, while the Independent Counsel is handling a matter, I do not comment. I have just said that from the beginning, and I would adhere to it.

QUESTION: And then I hear you say that there might be some decisionmaking required by you and your Department with regard to the impeachment if in fact the House decides to take up the matter; would this be something you would want to decide about a priori?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will look -- as I indicated, I have asked the Office of Legal Counsel to pull, and it has made available to the media, as I understand it, some of the public documents with respect to past studies of impeachment. We are reviewing it to make sure that we are prepared, as the issues may arise. It depends on how the issues arise and what the issues are.

But where the institution of the presidency is at issue, I think it will be important for us to be

informed, to make appropriate determinations as to whether we should be involved to address and to protect the institution of the presidency.

QUESTION: And, finally, did I hear you correctly that you would be able to say more about the Starr report and the whole impeachment matter as time goes on and as you learn more and as more is made public about it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If I said that, I was in error. Because what I think I said was that we will review the issues as they arise. And if there is an issue that we should be involved in, in terms of protecting the institution of the presidency or supporting the institution of the presidency, then it may be appropriate for us to be involved. But we will have to look at it, look at our particular role, and see best how to play it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, a follow-up from the earlier questions. When you thanked the President the other day after the Cabinet meeting, did he say anything in response?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you for coming.

QUESTION: And the other question is, who do you favor in the season home run competition, Mark McGwire or Sammy Sosa?

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think that Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa have done such a wonderful, wonderful thing for this Nation. And I would not dare ever favor one over the other. I think they both have been splendid. They are each different people with different backgrounds. But their magnificent feat, just today, is historic. But more so, they seem to be such great people. And the sportsmanship that they have evidenced is just wonderful.

And then to see how contagious it is with the kids -- the kids who come in with the ball, the 60th home run, the 61st home run -- it has just been almost magical.

QUESTION: Would you like to see them tied?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes.

Thank you.

VOICES: Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 9:59 a.m., the press conference concluded.)