



WEEKLY NEWS BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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0520.

(Chorus of good-mornings.) (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Q Ms. Reno, have you had time to digest the IG's report

that came out yesterday on the sharing of intelligence information by the FBI, with the task force, on the possible interference of the Chinese money in U.S. elections?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have read it once, and I am going through it very carefully now.

Q Can you talk about it a little bit this morning, or is it too soon?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We referred this when the occasion arose.

And I am impressed with the work that the IG has done. I think it reflects what we have sensed, that you have a big investigative agency, with a National Security Division and a Criminal Division oftentimes separate in order to protect sources and methods, and it's very important that we devise ways to make sure that information is exchanged appropriately with due regard for the protection of sources and methods.

Q In your opinion, what was the biggest mistake made? What was the biggest breakdown in communication?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think there is any one specific point that you can point to. But I think that the big problem is the massive amount of information that is available and how you link it to the right people. I think modern technology the FBI is exploring and has been exploring, what technical and technological advances it can make to ensure the sharing of information, while at the same time protecting the information.

Q Do you accept Mr. Bromwich's conclusion that the Justice Department was so concerned about criticism in September of '97 that it discarded its longtime procedures and started sending uncorroborated and possibly unreliable information to Congress and the NSC?

Q You always have to balance that, to make sure that you keep people advised with appropriate cautions, which we

tried to do, so that Congress can appropriately exercise its oversight function and the NSC can appropriately exercise its responsibilities. It's a difficult balance to make and one that we are constantly looking at how we can do better.

Q Well, do you think you did it badly at that time for the reasons that you were afraid of criticism?

ATTY GEN. RENO: If I were afraid of criticism, I'd do things an awful lot differently.

Q Ms. Reno, China has now said that it does have the neutron bomb. They announced that yesterday through its Xinhua News Agency. And they said they've gotten it through their own study, their own devices, and not through any type of international espionage. Do you believe that? Do you believe the Chinese got this bomb without spying?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I have not seen their statement, so I couldn't comment.

Q Well, that's about as simple as it is. If that is their statement, what would be your reaction to it?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I would look at the statement and look at it in more depth.

Q Well, a question I've asked you before, has China -- and is China still attempting to steal U.S. secrets? Military secrets, especially?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I would not comment.

Q Ms. Reno, the president seems to be supporting Vice President Al Gore's call for registration of gun owners. What do you think of that idea? I know you expressed some thoughts on it before, but are there any steps underway in the federal government to study this issue or to produce legislation?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We have looked at it in the past. As you

know, I don't talk in terms of registration. What I talk in terms of is I don't think any person should have a weapon unless they have demonstrated the capacity to safely and lawfully use that weapon and pass a written and manual test evidencing their ability to do so.

Q Ms. Reno, I've heard you say that many times in the past, but are you advocating some national training program to make sure people know how to use guns?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think what is important is, each state has regulatory systems with respect to guns -- you can't carry a concealed firearm, for example -- and that always struck me as -- as -- I just didn't understand it. Why can you say you can't carry a concealed firearm, but you say you can carry a weapon if you're, under certain circumstances, if it's not concealed, if -- but no requirement that you demonstrate that you know how to safely and lawfully use it. And I think, based on our system of firearm regulation, the states should look at it and consider whether we can't do something that would help ensure that nobody had a weapon unless they knew how to safely and lawfully use it.

Q Is there a single state that has such a program, outside of the CCW laws?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Not that I know of.

Q So you're advocating this on the state level, not the federal --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have -- mine has just been a general advocacy, stretching back to my time in Florida, when I advocated it in Florida and in terms of advocating what -- when people would ask me, "What do you think is the appropriate way to go," I said, "It seems to me to be -- this is the best way."

And then the response would be, "Well, what will the NRA say?" And my response was, "Most of the people from the NRA that I talk to say it sounds pretty sensible, because the

NRA, for example, has one of the best gun training programs that I know of."

Q Are you talking about it in terms of like a driver's license, tests, I mean, something along those lines, or how -- what form?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Something along those lines that would indicate a written and a manual test in the safe and lawful operation of the weapon.

Q Has the president sent over any directives concerning this issue?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, he hasn't.

Q Would the NRA have a role in training, ma'am, or could they possibly have a role in training?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not foreclose it, because I think they -- from all that I have heard of people who have been through training programs, it's one of the better ones.

Q Today Lamar Smith, Representative Lamar Smith, is going to introduce a bill to basically split up the INS into two agencies, although still within the Department of Justice, one for enforcement and one for processing paperwork. How would you feel about that? Would you go along with a plan like that, or would you like to keep them sort of under the same roof, but still sort of split those duties?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will want to talk to everybody concerned, because I think it is important that functions be delineated. But I think that the issues between enforcement and service are so intertwined that it will be important to have a single head of the agency.

That said, I think we need to look at it, determine the best way to proceed, and work with Congress to come up with a good bipartisan solution.

Q Back to the problem of -- (off mike) -- if I could ask

you, it --

ATTY GEN. RENO: As you know, you can ask me anything.

Q (Chuckles.)

Q Let me try this, then. Thank you. I will. I'll ask if you believe that there needs to be improvement on the part of the FBI and the Justice Department and coordination between FBI, Justice, CIA, National Security Council.

On this particular matter, is there -- was there a threat, is there a continuing threat of violations of the U.S. election laws? Is there a problem basically with coordination of the agencies?

ATTY GEN. RENO: First of all, with respect to your question about election laws, that investigation is pending. As you know, we have charged a number of people, we've received guilty pleas in a number of cases; and those investigations are pending, so I can't comment.

But with respect to the coordination, that's the point that I raised at the outset of the session today. When you have that much information, it is very important that it all be coordinated, that information that the intelligence community has is shared, and vice- versa, as is appropriate, and that we take care to make sure that the intelligence -- that the appropriate lines are drawn between what can be done with the intelligence community and what can't. Coordination between main Justice and the FBI is extremely important, and we have, I think, made some significant steps in improving that over this time. But this is always -- every time you have information, particularly in an agency that big, that covers that many different matters, it is very important that the information -- that we have the capacity to bring that information together so that we can determine relevance.

Q Are there any conclusions or observations by the inspector general in that report with which you disagree?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it was generally a constructive report. I'm going through it in detail now, and I might quibble about some things, but I think it was a good, constructive report.

Q There was one question from this morning suggesting that not only was the communication mishandled but that the investigation itself, the FBI's investigation into Chinese allegations, campaign finance, was mishandled, the probe was bungled. Does the classified report go that far? Do you take issue --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Oh, I can't talk to you about the classified report. But --

Q As a bottom-line conclusion, but -- does it go beyond the issue of communication?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I haven't seen the article, so I can't really comment on the article. But if the question is, "Was it bungled?" anytime something is delayed you can call that bungling. But I think, in terms of the investigation, the investigation itself was not impaired in the end.

Q Ms. Reno, it seems that -- and obviously, we don't have the benefit of reading the 600-page classified report -- but at least from the declassified summary, it seems that the conclusions drawn were that the FBI had messed up by not sending this critical information up to the Hill and to you and Director Freeh in a way that would be flagged so that you would recognize the significance. In other words, it wasn't necessarily the fault of the Campaign Financing Task Force that they didn't have this information.

ATTY GEN. RENO: The Campaign Financing Task Force was clearly, in this situation, the unit that wasn't getting the information.

Q In other words, they were almost the victim. Why then is it that, all of fall of '97 and subsequently, we were hearing that it was the task force that had messed up and you had to bring in Mr. LaBella to straighten out the task

force? It sounds like it was the FBI that needed a shake-up?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you're mixing apples and oranges, and I think you are referring to two different situations.

Q Can you explain that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Let me do this. Let me see what I can say in terms of any pending matters, and ask Myron to give you the best answer we can, consistent with not discussing a pending investigation.

Q Ms. Reno, is there any circumstance, looking at the report, under which information should be withheld from yourself or from the FBI director because of political considerations, as the NSD might have done?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't imagine any information not being shared with the director of the FBI by the National Security Division.

In terms of myself, if I am not recused, if an independent counsel is not appointed, I don't think it should be withheld from me.

But you have to look at each case and determine whether there has been a recusal, whether, if there was national security information that related to me, that might be appropriate. But it wouldn't be because it was political; it would be because it related to me.

Q On that same vein, ma'am, throughout this there appeared to be, on the part of some within the FBI, considerable suspicion of people in the White House. Has anything been uncovered that would justify that considerable and rather obvious suspicion?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think anytime allegations are being made, you have got to be very careful. But I think it is important for all of us that, as we go through an investigation -- and I won't comment on this particular

investigation -- but go through any investigation -- that we keep everything in perspective and that we make sure that we do everything possible to ensure that the NSC has appropriate information necessary to make national security decisions and that Congress has appropriate information necessary to exercise its oversight function.

Q Has the White House been informed, been briefed on the subject? I mean those officials that would appropriately see this information. And is the special counsel or some kind of another counsel, however it might be, still under consideration in this matter?

ATTY GEN. RENO: In which matter?

Q In the campaign finance probe.

ATTY GEN. RENO: At the present time, I have no review under way in which a special counsel is being considered, but it is always -- I always leave an open mind.

Q And about the White House officials who were not receiving materials a couple of years ago because of their being the possible subjects of investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm not sure of what you speak.

Q That was referring to what Mike was referring to about --

ATTY GEN. RENO: If you can get Myron the specific, we'll try to comment specifically.

Q Through Myron? All right, thank you.

Q Mr. Bromwich is leaving after several years here, and he has ruffled bureaucratic feathers probably at least a half a dozen times. What is your thought or observation about not only his performance but the role of the Office of Inspector General in the Justice Department?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think he has done some really excellent work. I think he has -- the division itself, the office

itself and Mr. Bromwich have, I think, performed in the way that inspector generals should perform. Mr. Bromwich knows that I have one concern, and that sometimes is the length of time it takes, because I'd like to have the benefit of his thoughts earlier. And I think he does it very thoroughly and wants to make sure that his product is a good product.

Q On that subject, Ms. Reno, what is the status of the IG's investigation in the Resendez -- or Ramirez matter?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It's pending.

Q Are you satisfied, though, that that will come to you in sufficient time frame? Or can you tell us a little bit more about what's happening on that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just urge that do it as quickly as possible; again using the language of Francis Thompson, with all deliberate speed.

Q If you were to give a grade, in retrospect, to the campaign finance investigation, the Bromwich report and everything, what sort of grade would you give?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, first of all, in terms of the campaign finance investigation, it's still ongoing, so I will wait till --

Q The part that's been completed.

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I'll wait till the end of the school year to -- (laughter) --

Q How about the FBI's performance in passing along classified information?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Again, I think Bev made a point in terms of the campaign finance task force. It has been on the receiving end. I think it is important for all of us, not just the FBI, to make sure that we try to get the information coordinated as well as we can, and that it be

furnished in a manner that will be helpful in a criminal investigation, while at the same time protecting sources and methods.

Q Ms. Reno, are you planning to meet with the students from Columbine and other schools to discuss violence and gun legislation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm going to be meeting with students from Colorado, including Columbine, at the White House this morning.

Q And what do you think the impact, if any, will be?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I look forward to hearing them. My sense is that when young people are involved, when they care, they can have a tremendous impact. They speak in an unvarnished way. They speak without regard to party affiliation. They speak from their hearts, and they are very, very wise.

Q Ms. Reno, there was a lot of energy after the Columbine shootings in this city and in this country to do something about the easy availability of guns. What happened to that energy? How did it slip away from us? And who --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's out there.

Q Well, it's obviously not a driving --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Oh, some --

Q -- a driving force on Capitol Hill at the moment. It's mugged and tied up in the closet.

Q (Laughs.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think you have that sense, and I think, as people hear from America, they will no longer have the sense that you can muzzle something like that.

I was out in Bloomington last Monday at a memorial service for the young Korean doctoral student who was killed as

part of that rampage. It was one of the most moving services that I have ever seen, and in talking to people beforehand, there is a sense that we have got to take action with respect to guns. And I think America's voice is going to be heard.

Q Ms. Reno, are you confident that you will get the money, the Justice Department will get the money, to file a civil lawsuit, conduct an investigation against the tobacco companies?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think this is so important that we protect the interest of the taxpayers, and I want to work with Congress to make sure that we do.

Q Ms. Reno, there's talk that Mike Moore might be heading over to the Justice Department. What role would he play in this tobacco lawsuit?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think so highly of Mr. Moore, but I haven't heard any of the specifics except generally what's been in the paper and the general rumors.

Q But you haven't discussed it with the White House?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No.

Q What is the present status --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I haven't -- I've discussed the rumors with the White House. (Laughter.)

Q What'd they say?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Again, I just said, "I see this in the paper," and there was no confirming it.

Q With whom did you have the discussion?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Mr. Ruff.

Q And he refused to tell you whether there was any --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No, he said he didn't know of -- first of all, I mean, the problem is, with the story, I've got -- a perfectly fine person is here and -- I think it's one of those things that just gets started.

Q But these things usually get started for a reason, and your perfectly fine person has been nominated and if he is confirmed to a judgeship, you will then have an opening.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Then I'll worry about that then.

Q But obviously, people at the White House are worrying about it ahead of time.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know.

Q Did Mr. Ruff say he would check on it for you?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No, he said he didn't know of any decision that had been made.

Q In that discussion with Mr. Ruff, was there any conversation about Mr. Moore's role in tobacco litigation or other expertise that he has?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No. But I do think very highly of him.

Thank you.

Q/STAFF: Thank you very much. Have a good day.

END.