



WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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0520.

Q Good morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: How are you all this morning?

Q Good morning. (Cross talk.)

Q Ms. Reno, there are several independent counsel
investigations ongoing. In the absence of a viable
independent counselact, if one of these independent

counsels should resign before the investigation is over, what action would the department take? Would you ask for a new independent counsel? Would the department take over the investigation? Or would you look to appoint a special counsel?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As you know, I don't do what-ifs. And the reason I don't do what-ifs is that I don't what it is.

Q (Chuckles.) But you have no information that a particular or any independent counsel is going to step down?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, it depends on whether you believe what you read in the papers.

Q (Chuckles.)

Q Do you? (Laughter.)

Q Are you saying that you have not received any communication from Mr. Starr?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I wouldn't -- I've made it a practice not to comment on any independent counsel matters, so as to ensure their independence.

Q Ms. Reno, what does, though, the independent counsel law say when an independent counsel steps -- in the unusual situation if an independent counsel steps down after the law has expired, does the three-judge panel have the authority to appoint another independent counsel?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it would, again, depend on the circumstances, and so I should not comment.

Q We can give you some circumstances. (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, but they would be hypothetical.

Q How -- I mean --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm not meaning --

Q -- I'm just wondering how it depends on the circumstances. Wouldn't it -- an informal look at the law would either say it either does give them that power or it doesn't.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it better just to -- for the Department of Justice to address the issues as they arise.

Q Is this an issue the department is now looking at, the legality of that situation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's best that we address it as it arises.

Q Ms. Reno, last week at the ABA you made a speech calling for a new kind of court system modeled on drug courts. What's the next step?

For example, do you have any plans to ask NIJ, or some other Justice Department agency, to award grants to fund pilot projects or anything like that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The National Institute of Justice and the Office of Justice Programs is looking at the whole issue because what we are faced with today is that 450(000) to 500,000 people are coming out of prisons -- state, federal and local -- each year. That is a tremendous burden on a community.

These people sometimes come back to the apartment over the open- air drug market, where they got into trouble in the first place. In many instances, they have dropped out of school; they are not prepared in terms of job skills, they do not have support mechanisms in the community, they do not have supervision. And guess what? They are oftentimes back in the system.

I think community safety and law enforcement need to address the issue of how we supervise these people as they come back to the community, to give them a chance of

success and to ensure that public safety is addressed.

The model of the drug court is a good one because what it basically says is: "Yes, you get an opportunity at treatment, but you have the supervision of a court as you do it. And in the first days of the drug-court process, you may be before the court daily on a regular basis. You will be asked to test for drugs. And if you test positive, there will be a sanction." But there is a sanction and a supervision that is important.

If we can bring people back to the community with a chance of getting off on the right foot, of not going back to prison, it will be one of the most important steps we can take in terms of again, this whole effort that is under way to end the culture of violence in this country.

In addition, we have a nation that is looking beyond our shores for people with skills to fill the jobs to maintain this country as the greatest nation in the world. When you have that many people come back into the system, you want to try to make sure that they have got the resources and the skills to do the job.

Q Ms. Reno, on a different subject, mental-health advocacy groups point to research that say that, except for a small group of people with psychotic symptoms or psychotic episodes, that people who have had mental illness are no more likely than the general population to commit violence.

Yet the Justice Department -- one of the security forms that is for outside contractors -- has a broad question: "Have you ever had a nervous breakdown? Or have you ever had medical treatment for a mental condition? Is yes, give details."

What is the security rationale for such a broad question? And does that violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the ADA?

ATTY GEN. RENO: When I took office, I asked for a review of all such forms. As I understand it, the public access/

disability rights section is looking at that to determine whether it addresses the spirit of the issue that you raise and the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Q When do you expect a report back from them?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would assume it would be shortly.

Q Ms. Reno, we had a fairly senior former official at Los Alamos, involved in counterintelligence, make some statements regarding Wen Ho Lee, the suspect in the espionage investigation. And he said that the evidence is lacking and also that Mr. Lee might have been targeted because of his race. Any thoughts on that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I obviously have testified on this issue with respect to the initial investigations. Much of it is classified, and so I don't it appropriate for me to comment. With respect to the ongoing investigation, clearly that is ongoing, and I should not comment.

Q You spoke about the culture of violence. I'm struck by the fact that you and some others have revived the idea of licensing and registration of guns or gun owners. Do you think that the political chances are better now to go for something like that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I want to clarify something, because I went back over statements that I made. What I'm in favor of is licensing the person who possesses or uses the weapon --

Q Right.

ATTY GEN. RENO: -- not in -- I don't -- I'm not focused on gun registration, because I think the person who has the gun should demonstrate that they have the capacity to safely and lawfully use the weapon, and the willingness to do so.

And that makes -- that's common sense to me, and I think most Americans understand it. As I have suggested on other occasions on these Thursday morning press availabilities, I

think a large section of the National Rifle Association would support it, because they don't want people who don't know how to use guns packing guns.

Q Just as a purely political matter, though, I mean, what are the chances of something like that? Because that idea was kind of buried after 1994. Now we're hearing more about it.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, as a purely political matter, I don't address things that way, because one of the things that I've discovered is if you keep talking about something and if it's right, even if the politics originally don't indicate success, right will oftentimes come out if you keep talking about it and if you keep showing how things can work to protect people, protect their public safety.

Q Is it right for private individuals to have access to rifles that shoot 15 millimeter bullets, as the Washington Post highlighted this week?

Q Fifty caliber?

Q Fifty caliber, I'm sorry.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, I think, again, there are some weapons that have no purpose but just to kill people. The ban on assault weapons has been extremely important. You've got to look at each weapon and understand that, again, we can make a difference if we rationally, thoughtfully approach this issue.

Q Ms. Reno --

Q Why not include registration, then, along with licensing, as Senator Bradley and others are suggesting? Why not group the two together?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I've not focused on that. I've focused, again, on the fact that there are some weapons that simply do not have any purpose, as far as I'm concerned, except to kill people. And secondly, I've focused on what we can do

to make sure that people who possess weapons or who use weapons know how to safely and lawfully use them.

Q Ms. Reno, how would you go about doing it? How do you envision that being done? Do you envision having someone pass some sort of test on a combat range, or a simple demonstration of ability to load a weapon? I'm not sure what you're advocating.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: First of all, I think people should understand how to lawfully use a weapon, and so as you go take a -- get a driver's license in most states, you would go take a written test demonstrating that you knew how to safely and lawfully use the weapon.

Secondly, when you get a driver's license, you go out and show somebody you know how to drive that car. That includes parallel parking. I would think it would include how to load a gun, how to aim a gun, and various aspects of gun safety. It seems to me common sense.

Q Ms. Reno, the NRA has some role in gun safety, whatever any of us think about them as a gun lobby. Would you be in favor of the NRA having some input into whatever licensing --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have always been that told when there have been gun-safety courses available, the NRA has some of the best.

And what I'd like for the NRA to do is work with everybody else to make sure that people who don't know how to use weapons either learn how to use them or don't use them.

Q Ms. Reno, have you directed your staff to begin looking at ways if this --

ATTY GEN. RENO: We did that some time ago. And the conclusion was that it was, consistent with our principles of federalism, an issue that the states should address. We are continuing to look at that and to see whether, with so much mobility in the country, what laws should apply.

But again, it is so important to come back to the fact that the Senate has passed some reasonable gun provisions. The House will be considering those. It's to close the gun-show loophole. It's to prevent violent juvenile offenders from getting guns when they are 21 and make Brady apply to them. It's child safety locks; it's common sense. I think it is important for us to focus on those provisions and at least get them passed.

In addition, the administration has proposed the reinstitution of cooling-off periods, raising the limits for handgun possession, limiting how many handguns a person can buy in a month, and providing for adult responsibility for allowing children access to firearms. Those are, again, common-sense provisions.

It's just important for this nation to speak out and to say, "Let's start doing something sensible about guns."

Q Ms. Reno, there is a report this morning that in Detroit the murder rate has exploded. I think it's like a 16 (percent) or 17 percent increase over the previous year.

In Richmond, Virginia, where there is a federal gun-crime program called Project Exile, some of the officials or people who are involved in that program, have been very critical of the Justice Department for what -- they say the Justice Department is not exporting this program to other cities. They say it works very well in Richmond; the murder rate is down by 40 percent.

Do you think that a program like Project Exile, which would give federal time upon conviction to convicted felons, drug dealers, drug users and other people who are not allowed to have guns who are caught with guns, do you think that would have an impact on the murder rate in Detroit?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: What we're doing in each case is looking at what contributes to the murder rate, analyzing the information and then taking appropriate action in partnership between the federal government and state and local officials in determining what course of action should

be taken.

I'm not going to comment on Detroit per se, but in other instances, in other cities, there may be a drug organization that is contributing to the increase in homicides. It may be violent recidivists coming back from prison. We need to take a look at each case and make a determination as to what the problem is and how to effectively deal with it, and we're in the process of doing so.

With respect specifically to Project Exile, what we have done is to recognize that it's going to be different from state to state. Some states have good, strong gun laws that give adequate sentences. In other states, there may not be such laws. What we have done, as, for example, in Boston, is to sit down with the state and local officials and say, How can we work together using our respective laws, consistent with principles of federalism, to address the issue that ensures that anyone who illegally possesses, uses, distributes, sells or does anything else with a firearm illegally is appropriately dealt with? And I think that makes far better sense than doing the cookie-cutter approach that may work in one jurisdiction but is not as effective in another jurisdiction.

Q Well, one of the federal judges in Richmond has been very critical of Project Exile on those grounds. He said that it puts an unnecessary burden on the federal courts, because it brings what he views as petty gun crime cases into federal docket, which he views as being sort of a serious thing. A lot of judges seem to view it as being a serious place where terrorism trials are carried out, and so forth. Do you think that that criticism is fair?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think each city, each jurisdiction, must be examined on its own merits and, in some situations, it will be better handled in state court. The one thing I think is important for us all to consider is, Let's apply principles of federalism. Let's apply principles of what is right for the community. Let us not be interested in turf; let us not shy away from confronting the grave issues of our time. And if it is appropriate, consistent with

principles of federalism, to prosecute a case in federal court, and if the community interests dictate it, and if it contributes to the reduction of violence, I think it makes good sense.

But we are very cognizant of the balance that must be achieved, and I think we work with all to achieve that.

Q Ms. Reno, another question about background checks. George W. Bush in the past couple of days was asked a question about drug use and replied to it, saying he hadn't used drugs in the past seven years and that was a pretty standard question in terms of employment.

Do you think people who are applying for jobs in the Justice Department should have to answer such questions going beyond -- back beyond seven years?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not comment in the context that you raise it, but I'll ask Myron to give you our forms.

Q Another subject? Okay. Thank you.

The Omar Roca Soto (sp) gang was busted up this week. This is a major drug distributor in this country. I would ask your comments on that and ask you if we can expect the same federal efforts to bear fruit in the bigger gangs, the enormous gangs of Arellano Felix and what's left of the Juarez drug cartels? Have you anything to tell us about those?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I obviously am not going to comment on pending investigations.

I will commend all those who were involved. I think it was an excellent effort involving Justice Department agencies, the FBI and DEA, involving Treasury agencies. And I think it is so important for us to work together to identify the problem, develop strategies to take it out; do so, rejecting who gets the credit, rejecting turf battles; and let's just get the job done.

I think it's important also for us as we initiate these investigations that result in arrest, that we have systems in place, weed-and-seed programs and other initiatives, that can move into these distribution centers and fill the vacuum before others come back to fill it.

Q Ms. Reno, I would follow by asking if the same techniques, the same, you know, "no turf disputes, just get the job done" can and will apply to those bigger gangs that are getting richer and richer and richer and more powerful, those in Mexico especially?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, I can't comment with respect to any pending investigation.

But anybody that's listened to me for the last six and a half years knows that the principles I apply are: Let's get into this; let's figure out who should do what, in the best interests of the case, consistent with principles of federalism.

Let's not worry about turf. Let's not worry about credit. Let's just get the job done, consistent with the law.

Q Ms. Reno, in just about an hour the FBI will hold a press conference to announce an arrest concerning military contracting fraud by Navy contractors. Is this is a new area that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is going to focus on? And how big a problem is fraud and abuse in terms of contracts, military contracts?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, first of all, do you think I would upstage somebody that's going to have a press statement? (Laughter.)

Q It's been known to happen -- (off mike). (Laughter.)

Q They do it over there all the time.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, I don't think -- I think it's more appropriate to wait and let the comments be made at the time.

Q Ms. Reno, are you concerned with the increase of the influence of the Russian mafia in the United States? And is the FBI looking into this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it is important to consider the issues of organized crime on a regular basis, not just at any one time. We have put a lot of time and effort into it, into traditional organized crime, into international organized crime, as it affects this nation. And it is -- that type of inquiry is extremely important because, as I have said on a number of occasions, crime is becoming international in its origin and international in its consequence and impact. And it requires more than just our traditional crime-fighting efforts; it requires that we work with other governments around the world to address these issues, and we're in the process of doing so. It requires that we develop the most sophisticated ability to identify money-laundering schemes, to do everything that we can. And we're spending a great deal of effort in that undertaking.

Q Ms. Reno, have you had any discussions with Randy Bellows (sp) about how his review is proceeding? You know, IPR -- (off mike)?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not personally had any discussions with him. I understand that we will be meeting shortly.

Q And will that be an interview situation, or will he be reporting to you what he's uncovered so far?

ATTY GEN. RENO: At this point, I am sure that I will be interviewed. But I also want to make sure that he has the resources he needs to do the job and that the structure is such that he feels comfortable with it.

Q Ms. Reno, I've been given to understand that you have a meeting scheduled on Monday with some of the Pan Am 103 families.

If that is indeed the case, can you give me an idea as to

what that is going to be all about; what the purpose of the session is?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think it is very important for survivors, for victims, to understand what the processes are. The Scottish government and the Scottish prosecutors will be dealing with this issue. They have made arrangements to meet with the victims' families here and to try to address all the questions that arise before a trial is to begin to indeed make sure that survivors are informed.

Q So this is British and Scottish officials as well as you who are going to be meeting -- or are going to be part of this session?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: As I understand it, it's a two-day session, I believe, and I will ask Myron to give you the details with respect to it.

Q If I could ask you just one more on this line -- as you are undoubtedly well aware, the trial of the two Libyans in the Pan Am 103 case has been delayed now for about six months until some time in the winter, at the request of the Libyan defense. Were you at all concerned that this may represent a stalling tactic or are you satisfied that this is -- I don't know what the proper word is. Proper? Satisfactory?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I would not comment.

Q Ms. Reno, you've become something of a hero to the considerable number of Americans with Parkinson's. Did you ever expect this would happen --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No. (Laughter.)

Q -- simply by the simple process of continuing to do your job? Do you hear much from those people when you travel? What's been your reflection on that?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: People have been extremely kind and

wonderful and very touching. I get notes and letters from people, and other people come up and say, "Thank you." And then other people come up with great encouragement, because a member of their family had Parkinson's. And it's, I think, again, an example -- we hear so much about the meanness in America, but there is so much more kindness and thoughtfulness and people who have just been great about it.

Q In the Wild West of Mexico City, there was an attempt on Herran Salvatti, the drug czar of Mexico this week. I would ask you to comment, if you could? And then, he mentioned that there will be two methadone -- not methadone, Methedrine -- kingpins that might be extradited to the U.S. in the very near future. Have you any knowledge of that?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I won't comment on any expected events or unexpected events.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: But I will say, I called the attorney general to express our concern about Mr. Herran. He has been a pleasure to deal with and we are just very, very glad that he and his wife are okay and that they were not hurt.

Thank you.

Q Thank you, ma'am.

Q Good day to you.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: And to you all.

END.