



WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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Q Good morning.

Q Good morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Q Ms. Reno, the president made some comments yesterday about, even though while violence in general is going down, we seem to have more and more of these cases where someone on a rampage with a very effective gun, kills a number of people. Do you have any more statements, or can you give us any idea of how the legislation is moving forward in Congress to restrict some of the access to guns?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just hope that in the time remaining in this year that Congress will address this issue because I think all America now has seen what guns do and how easy access to guns produces such tragedies.

We want to be careful because we don't know exactly how people came to acquire the guns, and we want to be objective in the way we pursue it. But we have a chance to really make a difference now.

I was in North Carolina day before yesterday. The three U.S. attorneys presented their gun initiative to me. I heard from local DAs and chiefs of police and ministers, about what we can do, in a comprehensive effort that combines prevention and punishment and reentry programs, that can truly make a difference.

It is time for us to come together, and let's get the job done. Let's make sure we have legislation that keeps guns out of the hands of people who don't belong -- to have them, and that we join together with state and local officials throughout the country to make sure that those who illegally use guns are held accountable.

Q Ms. Reno, have you ordered any type of review of the recent spate of multiple shootings like this year?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We have reviewed each, but the FBI has been involved in a review of school violence situations and we're trying to take a look at them and see just what can be done to prevent it.

Q Ms. Reno, the conventional wisdom on Capitol Hill is that if you support gun control then there is a political price to pay, but if you maneuver and you mug gun control measures, or measures that restrict guns more than they are now, that you do not pay a political price. What motivation does Congress have for moving on the juvenile justice bill in the direction that you want?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Because it's right. We've got to get past the point of rhetoric and concepts and come to the reality: guns kill. The guns that we are seeing across America today that are doing some of this killing are as lethal as anything I know. Guns in the hands of people who don't know how to safely and lawfully use them just doesn't make any sense.

We have a chance. Over the last several years, gun prosecutions, between state and federal prosecutors, has gone up 22 percent. Gun violence has gone down 35 percent. Let's keep this effort up. Let's make a difference. These are human beings we're talking about -- it's not concepts, it's not words. These are people who are being killed because of guns, because this nation has for too long not taken a common-sense, reasonable approach to guns.

Q We have a Congress that's in the hands of the Republicans and a Democrat administration, the House is separated by only 10 votes. It's a very emotional issue. I mean, isn't it going to take another election before they get some kind of political consensus on the gun question?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't think it's a Republican or a Democratic issue. I think it's an issue for all Americans; an issue that we approach from a common-sense point of view, and we've shown what can be done. We can do a lot more if we come together and make sense of it.

Q Ms. Reno, crime has dropped dramatically in the last few years. Still, the number of homicides in this country has never fallen below 15,000. Is that number still too high?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You have made the very point that is so important. Crime is down significantly, but we still are one of the most violent nations in the world, and we don't have to be.

I remind you of the figures that I've cited to you before. Between 1992 and 1996, Chicago had over 3,000 gun homicides. Toronto, a city of similar size, not that far away, had 100 gun homicides. It doesn't have to be.

Q Ms. Reno, the shooter in the Honolulu incident apparently had a huge arsenal at home, but had apparently bought them -- all of his

weapons legally and registered them all legally. And Hawaii has very stringent -- by comparison -- gun control laws. So what makes you sure -- what makes you believe that any of the gun control measures that you support would make a difference in these rampages that seem to be coming basically twice a month?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's the reason I said we have to look at each case and make sure that we don't jump to conclusions. But we have seen so many different types of situations where people who should not have guns come into possession of them, where people have arsenals. We've got to look at each situation and see what is the right approach, what legislation, if any, should address it, what other actions should address it. But somehow or another, this nation has got to come to grips with the fact that you don't need to have arsenals, and what can be done to ensure that people who possess weapons, no matter what they possess, have the ability to safely and lawfully use those weapons, and the capacity and the willingness to do so.

Q One of the other triggers of this kind of violent behavior that might be eliminated, I would say -- I would think that -- obviously some of the violence in the media. But what else?

What else can be done?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Just think about the building blocks for a minute. There are different answers. Beverly has quite correctly pointed out that you may have different responses to different situations, and we have got to look at the whole picture.

The early identification of mental illness, mental or emotional illness that could be treated, and the capacity to treat it; positive, constructive childhoods that give children a chance to grow in a strong and positive way, free of conflict, with the ability to resolve conflict short of violence; supervision after school and in the evenings, when children are inclined to get into trouble; workplace efforts to ameliorate and to abate tension in the workplace -- there is so much that we can do if we use common sense, if we get out of the political rhetoric, and if we focus on what's the right thing to do.

Q I understand that the president tried to persuade Hollywood to back off on some -- to back off on the level of violence that's currently

being produced and shown to the world, but he failed, I understand. Is there any action that could be taken by the Justice Department to persuade Hollywood to reduce the level of violence?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it is important for us all, whether we be Hollywood or an individual, to take stock of where we are in this country.

I'm one of those that likes "The Sound of Music," and I think an awful lot of other Americans like that type of movie.

And I think it's important that all Americans tell advertisers what they like to see and hear.

Q Ms. Reno, Egypt(air) Flight 900 -- anything suggesting foul play at this point?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not heard of any situation, but the FBI is cooperating with the National Transportation Safety Board, and we will continue to assist in every way that we can.

Q Can you give us some idea of the intensity of the FBI's efforts so far? How would you characterize what they've been doing in support of the NTSB?

ATTY GEN. RENO: They're accompanying the NTSB on interviews and helping to analyze evidence once it's gathered. There are about a little over 300 agents involved in the effort.

Q Ms. Reno, you mentioned earlier about the FBI's review of these school shootings. Can you state when that started and what they are exactly -- (inaudible)?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll ask Myron to get you the details.

But to give you an example, one of the best sessions that I have had was with a group that the FBI had brought together -- principals, police chiefs, academicians, treatment specialists -- to figure out what can be done, what were the patterns and what can be done to address the issue of school violence.

And my understanding is that there have now been two separate efforts

pursued in this regard. And we'll get you whatever is available at this point.

Q Ms. Reno, is the FBI bending over backwards to downplay the possibility of a criminal act in Egypt Air because of what happened with TWA Flight 800 a couple of years ago?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's just trying to pursue, with the National Transportation Safety Board, everything that would be responsible for pursuit.

Q But is there -- a serious concern to try to avoid that situation, where people assume from the get-go it was some kind of terrorist act and it turned out not to be?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we just take it as the evidence indicates.

Q Ms. Reno, there were some problems reported by the NTSB and the cooperation with the FBI in the Flight 800 investigation, as far as jurisdiction.

In this case, there's been indications that there was a deliberate attempt to change the relationship between the two agencies. Was that in fact the case, or was it merely based on the factual evidence at the time of the crash?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think everybody is trying to work together, in the most effective manner possible, to see that every lead is pursued and that it's done the right way.

Q But is this done differently though on purpose, as compared to 800?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you look at each case on a case-by-case basis and pursue the evidence as it indicates pursuit.

Q Ms. Reno, the Justice Department made its filings this week in the Supreme Court case involving the Miranda rule, which you signed yourself. Why did it take so long for the department to come to the view that it would support the Miranda ruling and the view it took on the federal statute?

ATTY GEN. RENO: When you consider a situation, you have got to

consider the law as applied to facts to make sure that you have properly analyzed the law and properly applied it.

Miranda was decided in the late '60s. It was constitutional in nature because the Court, the Supreme Court, had applied it in Miranda to the State of Arizona and has subsequently applied it to the states in other cases; in a whole series of cases.

The Supreme Court does not have supervisory jurisdiction over state courts in terms of telling them what to do or what procedures to utilize, unless the direction is constitutional in nature, and the Court's continued application of the Miranda Rule to the states would indicate that it is constitutional in nature. The matter has now come to the Court through the processes described in the brief, and we have taken our position.

Q I guess what I'm wondering is, it seems now when you read the brief you filed, it seems all very logical. Why did it take a long time to come to that view? Was there a lot of internal debate, was there a big reassessment of the role that the Miranda warning plays for federal law enforcement officials?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I won't go into internal deliberations, but in any situation like this, you try to be as careful and as thoughtful as you can.

Q Ms. Reno, in about an hour and a half you're going to go across the street to push a button, as I understand, to show that NCIC and other law enforcement computer systems are Y2K compliant -- among other things, that the prison -- the bureau prison doors aren't going to pop open at the stroke of midnight in the year 2000. Can you give us a little advance briefing on what this is going to be about?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We'll see! (Laughter.) I wouldn't want you to think it was rigged. (Laughter.)

Q Ms. Reno, I want to ask about the Justice Department lawsuit against Columbus that was filed earlier. The initial -- the original letter from Justice said that the investigation was started after the Justice Department received 10 complaints over about a 15-month period. What is the criteria for launching an investigation like this, into police wrongdoing?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: What we try to do -- and I will ask the Civil Rights Division to give you whatever they have in terms of procedure.

The Civil Rights Division, upon receipt of complaints, looks at them, determines whether there's a basis for them, and reviews the materials and the documents and the records of the police department. If there is evidence supporting the conclusion that there's a pattern and practice, then it is -- of misconduct or other inappropriate action, then it is pursued.

Q Ms. Reno, the Microsoft ruling, the first ruling, is expected any Friday now. Could you tell us your view of the factual findings? Is it a significance of the factual findings versus the second ruling in conclusion of law if you consider this particular ruling a significant point in the Microsoft prosecution of the antitrust case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think any time the court makes findings of facts, that the ruling is significant. But I can't tell you the significance of it per se until we see the findings.

Q Do you think it could possibly hold weight of law, given that it's considered right now to be the first of two rulings? Do you think it could be used in other cases involving collateral estoppel?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know; I haven't seen the findings.

Q (Chuckles.)

Q Is it possible that it could?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't do "what ifs."

Q (Chuckles.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's important for us to wait and see the findings and make an appropriate judgment at the time.

Q May I come back to the year 2000, but not the technical part of it; the -- rather, the concern that it may hold significance for lots of different groups? The FBI put out its Project Megiddo findings to law enforcement. The Anti-Defamation League has its own survey of what it

calls Y2K paranoia.

What is your sense, from the briefings you've had, of how much concern there is in law enforcement that there could be real serious violence at the turn of the year?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think what law enforcement is trying to do is to take reasonable precautions on a time that is extraordinary. I remember as a child my mother telling me that I would live to see the year 2000, and it didn't seem possible. And it seemed so strange that, in 1944, there would be a year 2000. It is special, and it is special as we enter the cyberage, where we've got to adjust with -- you can't turn the clock; you re-engineer computers.

There are so many things that are at issue here. And what I think law enforcement wants, as all America should want, is a happy, joyous celebration of a special moment in history, a moment in history that is really extraordinary right now.

I am still influenced by the fact that crime has become global in its nature. But opportunity -- opportunity for learning, opportunity for trade, opportunity for exchange of ideas -- has become global, as well.

We are coming into a great new age, where each nation is going to have to take pride in its history, its tradition, and yet somehow work with others to ensure peace, to resolve conflicts, to promote trade, to give all people access to justice, not just those who can afford it, and to give equal opportunity to all. It's an exciting time to be alive; it's an exciting time to be in public service. And I think all of us want to make sure that it's not marred by violence or exuberance that might lead to violence.

Q Have you read the FBI's report on Project Megiddo?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have read it but not in detail.

Q Ms. Reno?

Q But based -- if I could follow this for just one other question. When you read these reports, it seems all very dire.

And of course, that's what they are focusing on, of course. But when you read them, is there a sense that you get from your briefings that something like this is inevitable or very remote? Or how would you characterize the warnings?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the warnings are just common-sense warnings: "Let's take appropriate reasonable care."

Q The FBI has said repeatedly, including in the Project Megiddo report, that they have little if any evidence that extremists groups -- militias, Christian identity groups -- are planning any malicious activity around Y2K. In fact, they do say what you just said, that it is more of a general warning, "Be on the lookout."

Do you think putting out reports like Project Megiddo, which has sort of an interesting name in and of itself, does that cause unnecessary worry or maybe even paranoia?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't think it should cause worry. I think we are in a time when we have got to take reasonable precautions. When we have information, we should make sure that it is available in a reasonable way, in a prudent manner. In this world, with the weapons we have, with people's ability to move quickly, it just requires that we all figure out how we live together with strong feelings on the part of many, but without the violence that can tear us apart.

Q Ms. Reno, returning to the Columbus situation for just a second, the Justice Department has requested a million dollars in its 2000 budget to increase or expand the investigations into police wrongdoing. What sort of a role do you see these investigations playing in the the future? Are you looking for more of them?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't look for them. What I do look for is professional policing, and I see it in so many situations. And what I think -- and I've said on many occasions -- that policing is one of the hardest jobs there is. It requires that -- you have to make legal decisions oftentimes without going to law school; you've got to protect yourself and the community, sometimes without a backup; you've got to be prepared -- I sometimes think it's easy to be a lawyer, but to be a police officer on the stand getting questioned by lawyers is sometimes more difficult, particularly when the case has taken a year to get to trial and you've got to remember everything

that happened. So I think that police officers have an extraordinarily difficult and very challenging role and a very critical role.

And what I hope that we can do is work together with rank and file, with police administrators, to share best practices and to create situations where we have immediate exchange of best practices and ideas as to how they can be implemented in departments across the country.

Q The Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that there's more police per capita now than at any time in the past quarter century. How many police are enough? What's the optimum number?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It's going to depend on the circumstances and on the situation. It will vary from community to community, and then it will vary from time to time. It will vary with the demographics, and it will vary with new challenges.

If my dream comes true, we will continue the effort, from one administration to the next in a nonpartisan, thoughtful common-sense way to bring violence down, through prevention programs, intervention programs, punishment that fits the crime and reentry programs that give people a chance to get off on a fresh start.

But we are going to turn around and find that there are whole new challenges for federal, state and local law enforcement in cybercrime. If people can rob without ever crossing the border themselves through electronic fraud, if people can sell and engage in trade fraud through the Internet, we have got a whole new world that we have got to address. And a police officer who understands guns is going to have to be a police officer that understands computers and how to search a computer and how to investigate.

In between all this, there's probably going to be some new drug or substance that we have got to deal with. We have got to be prepared, and we have got to be able to forecast what's coming and deal with it in a manner that is appropriate, meets due process and other constitutional limitations.

Q Ms. Reno, do you think a trial is inevitable in the Columbus case because of the strength of the union there? I mean, the union there

has been described as "one of the strongest in the country" in terms of what's protected.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I always hope that you can conclude something without a trial, that you can work it out, that all the parties can come together, and that you can sit down and say: "What are we interested in? We are interested in how we can develop professional policing, at every level, in practice and procedure. And how can we do it together?" So I don't ever think that a trial is inevitable.

Q Ms. Reno, may I ask about Khobar Towers? When Al-Sayegh was deported and the Justice Department made its decision to deport him, a statement that went out, over the signature of Eric Holder, said that the administration did not have any evidence that Iran was involved in the bombing.

This past week Michael (Sheehan ?) -- Ambassador (Sheehan ?) -- testifying before Congress, said the government did have information that Iran was involved in the bombing. Where does that stand now? What is the Justice Department's view about whether Iran was involved?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Let me do this because you have just told me something that I think we need to clarify -- and I am going to ask Myron immediately afterwards to get the exact information for you so that we do not confuse the issue.

Q On the subject of terror in the Middle East, Osama bin Laden is receiving increased donations -- donations, some of them, coming from businessmen in Saudi Arabia. But since he's been on the Ten Most Wanted List, the donations have increased. And the United States, according to this article in USA Today, has made Osama the hero of the Muslim world.

Can you make any comment about this alleged report?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not seen the report, so I really couldn't comment on it. But --

Q It was also stated in the report that Osama bin Laden is involved in selling drugs for profit to finance his terrorist activities. Can you make any comment about that, or --

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I say, I have not read the article. And one of the things that I've learned to do is not comment till I've read.

Q Well that's what it says.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, more than two years ago, the FBI and the NTSB ruled out a bomb or missile in the Flight 800 case. Can you assure the American people beyond a shadow of a doubt that that is in fact the case? And why do you think that bomb and missile theories continue to propagate?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't assure beyond the shadow of a doubt, because I don't even, in terms of convicting somebody, assure beyond a shadow of a doubt. I'd assure beyond a reasonable doubt. I would ask the FBI to provide whatever standard it has used in making that conclusion and share it with you.

Q Why do you think the theories persist?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Theories persist because people in all situations where there have been unusual happenings have different theories and different ideas. Theories persist because we are in a time of extraordinary ability to communicate through the Internet, through the media, through cable. I mean, it is fascinating to see what the marketplace of ideas has become. And I think that's probably the reason those ideas continue to persist.

Thank you.

Q Thank you.

END.