



WEEKLY MEDIA AVAILABILITY WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

JUSTICE DEPARTMENT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2000

9:30 A.M. EST

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Q (Off mike) -- imagine you showing up here. (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, you intrepid souls have come through sleet and rain.

Q You don't get this in Miami Dade, do you? Or not much.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Just hurricanes.

Q That's right.

Q We were told there would be "hot news" today, so we showed up. (Laughter.)

Q Ms. Reno, unless Juan Gonzalez asks for political asylum for his son, Elian, in the United States, do you see any scenario under which the boy would be allowed to remain in the United States?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The matter is now pending in federal court, and I think that comments should be made there.

Q Ms. Reno, you said that in a written statement, the joint INS-

Justice Department written statement yesterday, that the department would move to handle this expeditiously. Now, what does that mean? Is there some federal rule that you would proceed under? How does that work?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will look at everything that can be done to have the matter heard appropriately and promptly, with the recognition that it does the child no good to be in limbo.

Q Would you think that federal lawyers would be able to respond to these relatives before this week is over?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I want to respond as soon as possible consistent with appropriate preparation.

Q Ms. Reno, there's supposed to be a hearing in Miami at noon to deal with allegations that Judge King has an apparent conflict because the family spokesman has done some work for the judge's son, who's a Dade County judge. Have you taken a position as to whether you think that presents the elder Judge King with a conflict?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think any matter like this should be discussed in court.

Q Ms. Reno, will the Justice Department have a representative at that hearing, do you know?

ATTY GEN. RENO: So far as I know, we will.

Q Are you still confident that INS made the correct decision in deciding to reunite the son with his father?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I've said all along, I'm always open to any new information, but based on the information that we have, I think it is a correct decision.

Q What would be the impact of Congress declaring the child to be a U. S. citizen?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We would look at it at that time and make an appropriate determination.

Q Ms. Reno, has the department reached any conclusion yet on the Burton subpoena, whether that is a show-stopper for you all or what the appropriate response is to that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're still reviewing that.

Q INS so far has been unable to implement its decision. Do you want the federal court to create an enforcement mechanism?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we will work with everyone concerned. And as I have indicated previously, the matter is now in federal court, and that's where our position should be set forth.

Q Will it be handled by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami, or will folks from main Justice be down there as well?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will be working with each other to make sure that the government is appropriately represented.

Q How passionately do you feel about seeing through the position that you articulated earlier this month that there's a natural bond between father and son and that it shouldn't be interrupted by other forces, be they political or symbolic?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I have indicated previously, law, morals, family values that we talk about all say that the bond between parent and child is one of the most sacred, one of the most important relationships there is. I don't know whether "passionate" is the word, but I believe that with all my heart and soul with respect to the way I grew up, and if somebody had -- if I'd inadvertently ended up in another land and was told I could not go home, I would have felt deprived. I think we have got to look at this carefully, thoughtfully. I don't think passion is the appropriate response. I think careful, deliberate thought about how the law should be executed is the way we should approach this.

Q (Off mike.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Can you speak just a little bit louder?

Q What about the idea that I've heard out there about the boy's grandmother -- (off mike)? Is that something the INS is -- (off

mike), or are you saying now to send him back to the father?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think I'd let the State Department talk about whatever conversations they've had on that subject.

Q (Off mike) -- Cuba is seeking assurances that the grandparents would not be subpoenaed. Is the department in any position to offer such an assurance to Cuba?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know the context in which they have asked that. We would just have to review it and see what we could do or not do.

Q Ms. Reno, on another subject, there's been some concern that Chinese Americans have been unfairly targeted in security investigations at the national laboratories. There's also been some concern that Arabs or Arab Americans had been unfairly targeted in terrorism investigations surrounding the new year. As we take appropriate action to secure the country, are we in danger of crossing a line here? Are we unfairly targeting --

ATTY GEN. RENO: This is an area that I care a very great deal about. And I want to make sure that anything we do is based on an appropriate predicate that permits an investigation to proceed, and if we see any instance where there may be questions about it, that we review it carefully.

Q The department rightly attacks racial profiling of African Americans and Hispanic Americans when it's apparent that that's occurred. Are you convinced -- still convinced that there was no racial profiling in either of these instances?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I have indicated, I want to do everything I can to make sure there was none, and if there is any question about it, to review it to ensure that it doesn't affect the case.

(Extended pause.) Thank you. (Laughter.)

Q On the gun issue -- (off mike) -- the president, and among the proposals for this year are millions and millions of dollars for more ATF agents and particularly, as concerns you, something like a thousand additional prosecutors. Can you talk about how the system

would be able to digest so many prosecutors and what impact you think they could have?

ATTY GEN. RENO: First, let me take you through the whole history of it, because I think it's important as we figure out what we do together to end this culture of violence in this country.

In '93, when we came into office, we made the determination that violence in America was at an intolerably high level, and that there was a role for the federal government to play with respect to drug organizations that crossed district lines, with respect to armed career criminals who went from one jurisdiction to another, that there were many ways that the federal government could be a partner with state and local law enforcement, making decisions about what to do, based on what was in the best interest of the community and consistent with principles of federalism.

In our first efforts, we focused on the major organizations. We focused on the career criminals. We focused on street gangs that were responsible for a great deal of the violence. And we saw -- in a city where we'd take action and take out a drug gang, we would see a corresponding reduction in violence.

We also implemented the crime bill and began to put community police officers on the streets of this country. The Brady act was passed. And I think we have kept guns out of the hands of people who don't belong to have them.

In this process, we worked with others, state and local officials, private officials, members of the faith community in Boston to address the issue of the large number of youngsters who have been killed as a result of violence. The U.S. attorney, working with the local district attorney, developed a partnership with respect to gun possession and gun charges, who should handle it, and they met regularly to determine who should handle it, again consistent with principles of federalism and the best interests of the communities involved.

That, I think, has had a powerful effect. And we've printed up material concerning how it worked, and it was interesting to see the number of people who went to Boston to see how Boston was doing the job, recognizing that it was not just enforcement, but it was also

alternative opportunities for kids that was an effective part of the Boston gun project.

In these last -- in, I'd say, this last year, two years, as people have observed the Boston project and have implemented their variations, and as the president has directed gun initiatives in districts across the country, we have resolved to try to do everything we can to make sure that any illegal use of a weapon is appropriately handled. And the thousand prosecutors involved in the president's proposal are not just federal prosecutors but state and local prosecutors as well, since they are on the front line. And here's how you absorb it.

I don't know what the caseload figures are now, but when I left Dade County, a prosecutor handling gun charges might have as many as 100, 200 felonies at any one time. This would give prosecutors' offices the personnel needed to look at each gun case, make appropriate determinations, see that they were effectively handled. And I think as we take one step after another, if we ensure that we don't become complacent, that we continue to look for strategies on the enforcement side that can make a difference while at the same time providing prevention programs that work, we can truly make a difference in violence in this country, not just for the moment, but a lasting difference.

Q Do you have any rough idea how many of these thousand would be federal and how many would be local?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I'll ask Myron to give you that information, if it's available.

Q Was this program developed in response to the criticisms of the NRA and others that federal prosecutions were falling?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think I tried to spell out, because the NRA was -- they were just criticizing us for everything back when we started, became involved, in the Boston Gun Project. And that project was developed in response to, and with a grant from, the National Institute of Justice. David Kennedy, from the Kennedy School, did some really wonderful work in developing the project, and I think so much has flowed from that --

Q I just remember when the gun bill came up last year, the NRA's arguments seemed to penetrate quite well. A lot of congressmen mentioned the fact that federal prosecutions were down. Now we have what the White House calls "the biggest enforcement project in history," and I'm just wondering if the two events are related.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, all I can do is speak for myself, and what, again, they ignore is that in that period of time, federal and state prosecutions for gun cases has gone up by 22 percent. And what we tried to do was to develop a partnership with state and local officials, realizing that they did some better than we did and that some cases were better handled in federal court, and to make a determination as to who did what -- not who got the credit and numbers, not who could say to Congress, "Hey, our gun prosecutions went up in the federal system." They went up together by 22 percent.

And that's the type of effort we've tried to undertake. Not who gets the credit, but what the impact is.

Q Do you think that message is getting through on the Hill, particularly to the rural Democrats who worry about gun issues?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think everybody understands that we have had, for a variety of reasons, real success in bringing the crime rate down. At my last hearing with the Senate Judiciary Committee, I had to tell them that it wasn't all my doing, after they congratulated me on the effort.

And it isn't all our doing; it is a collection of pieces of things. And you have got to constantly look at what more we can do, consistent with constitutional principles, to make this country safer for all of its people.

Q But, Ms. Reno --

Q One of the -- go ahead.

Q Why is it -- and what we have been hearing for the last several years was that what was important for us to look at, contrary to what the NRA was saying, was the number of combined federal, state and local prosecutions, which were up 22 percent. Why is it now that we are hearing how marvelous it is that federal prosecutions alone

jumped 25 percent last year?

Why was there such a huge increase?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Because what we are trying to do is to take each step -- as I indicated previously, we started with the major organizations. We looked at what we could do with them, taking them out. We've had success in that regard. We had success with the Boston Gun Project. The combined figures went up. And we have tried to take the resources we have and respond to what the Boston Project shows can happen, not just with going after the drug organizations, but going after the illegal possession of weapons. And with each step, I think we are making a difference.

Q But why in the last year was there this huge increase in just federal prosecutions?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Because we have been building on the federal -- I may be missing it, Beverly. But in Boston we had an excellent result. Other prosecutors went to Boston, looked at it, both state and local and federal. They have devised strategies that suit their jurisdiction.

In Richmond, it was Project Exile, where more prosecutions were handled in federal court. And in that situation, there was a combined determination that Virginia did not have some of the laws that might be as more appropriately handled -- if they had, there might be more appropriately handled in state court. Each case was designed around what was best for that community. Subsequently, Virginia has enacted some of its own laws. You see the signs concerning Project Exile.

And I just think we are trying to do everything we can. And one of the things that we can do is to increase prosecutions where the state is not able to, or whether there is a better reason for handling it in federal court.

Q It just looks like it's a response to NRA criticism; I mean, Project Exile and Boston have been going on for several years. But it was, last year, after all of this criticism came to a head that the federal prosecutions spiked?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think -- I'll check back on it. But I think

clearly, Project Exile is an example of how federal prosecutions increased in one district, especially there. As others emulated the Boston Project, they increased in their district.

But if you want to say that it's in response to the NRA, I don't care what it's in response to, I want to try to do everything I can to use the tools as wisely as possible, in a step-by-step, careful effort that will have a lasting impact to do something about violence in this country.

Q Ms. Reno, a lot of the gun prosecutions in Boston, Projects Exile in Richmond, are prosecutions for the use of a firearm in connection with some other felony. And the word is that if you use a gun to commit a drug crime or something else, you risk a federal sentence. One of the questions about gun prosecutions is why there aren't more prosecutions of people who attempt to make an illegal purchase under Brady. Will there be -- with these additional prosecutions, do you think there will be more of those, or will those always just be very low priority?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we're trying to do there -- and again, all of this is how you use your resources. ATF is instrumental in these gun prosecutions, and it's important to have their resources focused along with everybody else, and that's been part of the whole effort. I think if we work together, if we use the resources as wisely as possible, we can achieve something that it's really exciting to see it happen. Now, I may be missing your question.

Q Mine is a very simple question. One of the criticisms about the lack of federal prosecution for gun crimes has been a very narrow issue, and that is, when someone attempts an illegal Brady sale, someone who has a prior felony or something like that --

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we would do there, and what we will do with additional ATF agents, is try to develop a priority, if it's a person who had an offense a long time ago and didn't remember it or something like that, but if you have a person who's been charged previously, is an armed career criminal, you would start with them. Our hope is that with the additional state and federal prosecutors, with additional ATF agents, we can use the resources in a planned initiative that has been developed in each district to make the most effective use of the resources and to let people know that with

respect to the illegal use of guns or the attempted illegal purchase of guns, there will be appropriate action.

Q Ms. Reno, when the Clinton administration comes near the close and the last year, how would you assess the federal role that you embarked on in 1993?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things that I have said again and again is I don't assess as we come to the end; I still have things to do. And I'm constantly trying to assess what works and what doesn't work, constantly recognizing that that -- the answer to that question is going to differ from district to district.

But let me just try to convey the excitement that I had the other day, because this is now not one visit to Boston or two visits to Boston, but there were a number of visits to Boston over the last seven years. And there's a community in which the federal, state, and local officials have come together, law enforcement and otherwise. They have looked at crime in a bipartisan way, so that I have sat with the Republican district attorney and the Democratic U.S. attorney, and nobody has talked about party. We've talked about how we can do it together. The faith community is there -- the mayor's office, human service personnel, community center personnel. And it's a balanced project between punishment and prevention. Nobody's being soft on the people who commit the crime, but we're giving alternatives.

We have watched it work and continue to work. And now we're trying to build on that, trying to let people know that there are going to be consequences at every step of the way for anything that may contribute to violence. I had the opportunity to talk briefly with the mayor about what we could do, working together, to bring people back from prison with a chance of getting off on the right foot, instead of committing further crime.

If we continue our efforts, if we don't become complacent, if we look carefully at these issues and don't get spun up in political rhetoric, I think we can truly, truly, truly make a difference, not just for today, but in a lasting way, against violence in America.

Q Ms. Reno, let me ask a question away from just guns for a moment. Looking at the big picture, as you travel around the country, seven

and a half years of a declining crime rate, do you get the sense that Americans feel safer?

ATTY GEN. RENO: In some communities they feel safer. In others they don't. And I think that's one of the most interesting things to look at. I think that this goes to the issue. Clearly people seem to feel safer in Boston, the way they talk about it. And I haven't measured it scientifically, but I'm talking anecdotally.

In other jurisdictions, they may not feel as safe, and part of that is the police involved in problem-solving. I think that's the next step we have to take with community policing so that the community police officers, not just the person there on the streets providing protection or providing enforcement, but he is there as a problem-solver for problems that generate crime, and that he's developing trust with the people he serves. And that gives people a real sense that they are safer.

I think it is important, if we are to really address the issue of violence in this country, that we address not only a reduction in crime, but a sense of community security, because I think that contributes to less violence.

Q Ms. Reno, there was another indictment unsealed this week in the Algerian terrorist network, and I'm wondering if you're being kept briefed and well informed about the situation and what you can tell us about the big picture here. I know you can't comment on specifics that are in the court, but what you can tell us about the big picture, understanding and help us sort out a bit what this group seems to be all about and what we know about it so far, what the current status of things is?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: If you followed your question very carefully, you would realize it's impossible to answer because, as you point out, I can't comment on specifics on a pending matter. If I comment on the big picture, I inevitably have to comment on the specifics to paint the big picture, and this is one of the reasons why it is important, when we file charges against a person, that we let the matter be tried in the courts and not in the media beforehand.

Q Can I revisit the Elian Gonzalez with one more question?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: You know we have a standing rule around here that anybody can revisit anything. (Chuckles.)

Q Now that it's entered the federal court phase, is this about one little boy, or is there something larger at stake here?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I always try to put things in terms of the human beings involved, and right now this is about one little boy. It is also about the bond between parent and child.

It is also about people's strong feelings against tyranny. We have said that in this instance, the bond between parent and child is what must control. It is based on the facts of this case.

But it is so important that we address the human issue of a little 6-year-old boy, of his father that wants him back. And I think the law should proceed with all deliberate speed to address that issue.

Q Your director of the Bureau of Prisons is, any day now, probably going to set the first federal execution date in more than 30 years. Would you expect that a federal execution would take place in the next few months, and would you expect that that would have some deterrent effect on crime?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I do not know the date it will take place.

I have inquired for most of my adult life, about studies that might show that the death penalty is a deterrent, and I have not seen any research that would substantiate that point.

Q Do you have any reservations about the Justice Department's proceeding with a federal execution?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Before I authorize anything such as that, I make sure that the facts and the law justify it.

(Pause.)

Q Thank you, Ms. Reno.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you, one and all.

Q Thanks -- (inaudible).

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