



**WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO**

**THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**THURSDAY, JANUARY 27, 2000**

**9:30 A.M. EST**

Q Good morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Hi.

Q Ms. Reno --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, sir?

Q -- I know you don't do "what ifs" -- (laughter, cross talk) -- but as a form of reassurance, a lot of people in Miami say they're worried that somehow Elian Gonzalez is going to be snatched from the home of his great-uncle before a ruling by the court. Can you envision any scenario under which U.S. marshals would take the boy from that home, other than if they were absolutely ordered to do so by a U.S. judge?

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

Q Can you reassure them that --

ATTY GEN. RENO: -- I do "what has been." And if anybody worried about that, all they need do is look at the circumstances of yesterday.

Q What do you know about the meeting yesterday and how well it went?

Q (Off mike.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Hm? Excuse --

Q What can you tell us about the meeting and how well it went?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I wasn't there, so the people who were there should comment.

Q Can you tell us -- (off mike) -- federal government is ready to -- (off mike) -- and would in fact consider something like that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No. The federal government yesterday made clear that they were not trying to alter the arrangements, and people of good faith sat down, worked out a plan where he could see his grandmothers, and yet there was no attempt to take him and to alter the arrangements. Actions speak louder than words.

Q Ms. Reno, would you like the president to say in advance if he would veto citizenship or green card legislation for the child?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's not how we do those things.

Q Does the Justice Department have a position on that legislation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There's no formal position that's been taken yet.

Q Have you been speaking to members about it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There has been conversation with members of Congress on the issue.

Q But not urging them to act one way or the other?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There's been discussion and a discussion of the implications.

Q What, in your view, are the implications?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The -- if we got into a situation where, if American children ended up abroad, and American parents wanted them returned, and a foreign country made them a citizen so they did not return, I don't think people in the United States would be very happy about it.

Q Ms. Reno, let's say -- I know this is another "what if," but if this child is given citizenship, would it have any real legal effect on the INS ruling that only his father speaks for him, in terms of custody or in terms of immigration matters?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We would see what the legislation said, if it passed.

Q Ms. Reno, let me ask about --

ATTY GEN. RENO: You can ask anything you want.

Q Thank you. Thank you. (Chuckles.)

The decision by you to try to facilitate this meeting between the grandmothers and Elian, which followed your meeting with them last Saturday, can you just take us back to that and let us know why you decided this was the right thing to do?

ATTY GEN. RENO: He has been paroled in under the authority of the attorney general. His grandmothers very, very much wanted to see him. We had made the initial arrangements with the relatives here. And I didn't see why two grandmothers who loved him shouldn't be able to see him.

Q Does what Elian say -- what he says -- is that -- have any weight at this particular time? because after the interview with his grandchildren (sic), he was heard to say that he was going to be a citizen soon.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you put yourself in the shoes of you, when you were 6 years old, and think about how changed your mind about -- or maybe you never changed your mind. (Laughter.)

Q That's entirely possible.

Q Ms. Reno, a lot of this -- what your decision on the INS is based on the father's wishes. But how are you a hundred percent sure that

the father is saying what he wants to say? I mean, he does live in Cuba, which is a documented totalitarian state; it's a nasty place. How do you know that he hasn't been threatened, or that his family hasn't been threatened, by the Cuban government to say what, you know, we want him to say or, "You are going to prison," or, "We'll take your son away"?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The INS has interviewed him twice and has reached its conclusions.

Q But how does that explain --

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things you say, "How can you be a hundred percent sure?"; no one can ever really be a hundred percent sure. We have interviewed him, have pursued it on all circumstances. I have not made extraneous decisions. But from what I have seen, I think he wants to be with his son.

Q Can you summarize the argument that's made in your filing in the court this morning?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I'd let it speak for itself.

Q Has that been filed yet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Myron would have to give you the time of filing. I don't know whether it's been filed or not.

Q It's being filed this morning?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes.

Q Are you asking for an expedited and a speedy result for this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll let it speak for itself.

Q Why there was so much police outside yesterday, outside the house where the meeting was held? There was any particular concern about security?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You would have to check with the police and the

people who provided for the security.

Q Can you tell us how you came to reach out to Sister O'Loughlin? And did you do that yourself, or did you just suggest that she be contacted? Can you walk us through how that worked?

ATTY GEN. RENO: INS asked what I thought of the idea. I said it would be a very fine location. Commissioner Meissner and I called Sister Jeanne.

Q So it was originally INS's idea?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know whose idea it was originally, but it was communicated to me by Commissioner Meissner.

Q Ms. Reno, can you recall any time in our history when Congress has enacted legislation to take away custody decisions or decisions about a child from the child's only surviving parent, which is apparently what some people are proposing; and whether this type of legislation would pass muster in the most superficial challenge, court challenge?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, again, it's going to depend on just what the legislation says, but I think what we've got to -- we've had a number of issues raised in hearings before Congress with respect to circumstances where one parent will take a child to another country. I think it's important that we recognize that what is at stake here is a bond between a parent and his child, and that that, in almost every legal system I know, certainly in ours, is something that that bond is interrupted only in rather extreme circumstances.

Q Did you chat with Sister --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm sorry?

Q Did you chat with Sister O'Loughlin yesterday after the meeting?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, I did.

Q And were you satisfied that this was an appropriate venue and that this meeting went successfully?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would let the people who were on the scene be the

judge of it, but it sounded like it went as anticipated, that it gave the grandmothers a chance to spend time with Elian, and that the family members were there and that everybody could be assured that it was done right.

Q Would you consider doing it again in the same place?

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

Q Ms. Reno, a group of eight law professors, from NYU, Yale, Hastings, Pittsburgh and so on, have written to some Democrats in Congress saying they think that a citizenship bill would be unconstitutional. Has the Justice Department taken a view on whether the legislation would be constitutional?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're reviewing everything as it develops.

Q And do you have, or will you have, any meetings with the Miami relatives of Elian, or have you ruled that out?

Apparently, many of them are going to be in Washington.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't do what-ifs. What I've tried to do, whether it be with the mayors or the grandmothers is when somebody really wants to talk to me, I'm -- who is immediately and directly involved --

Q If they requested a meeting with you, you would consider it?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I would consider it. It, again, depends on the circumstances.

Q Have they requested a meeting?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Not to my knowledge.

Q Can you tell us how long the conversation was with Sister O'Laughlin and what you talked about?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know how long it was, and we just talked about how it had gone.

Q Do you think the actions of the Miami relatives in parading this little boy around in front of the exile community has been appropriate? Is that in his best interests?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I can't comment with respect to Elian, but if my great-nephew, who is only about a year or a couple of months younger, had that happen to him, I sure wouldn't like it.

Q There were some problems with the initial attempt to set up a meeting earlier this week. Do you trust this family, the family down in Miami, to turn over the boy, if and when the time comes to it? Or, do you see some sort of reluctance on their part, based on what happened earlier this week?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think they love the little boy very, very much. I also hope with all my heart that everybody involved in this tragic situation recognizes that we live in a country that is governed by the rule of law and that if we work through the issues of the law and through the facts, that when the law is defined, people will honor it. That is the difference between us and Cuba, and it's something that I think we have got to keep in mind.

I think we also have to keep in mind that here is a little boy who is separated from his father, who has gone through an ordeal that was staggering. I mean, it is just amazing to think that he could survive the time he spent on that little raft in the Gulfstream. I just think it's important for all of us to think about the human life involved, about the people involved, and about the law, and honor what the law says should apply in these circumstances.

Q Do you think that this level of review, both judicial and through public opinion like, this should apply to every child who washes up on shore without his parents, or is this an exceptional case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Has anybody ever heard of such a case as this?

Q Is it of concern to you that the grandmothers are now staying with Cuban diplomats or officials, having their schedules arranged by Cuban diplomats or officials, consulting them, and getting their security from the Cuban officials?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that is something that they have got to deal

with.

Q Ms. Reno, the issue of citizenship -- again, legislation for citizenship -- is this something that the Office of Legal Counsel is examining, or is somebody in your office? At what level are you reviewing possible action?

ATTY GEN. RENO: This affects a number of different -- both INS and the Civil Division, and we're all looking at it, and we'll make an appropriate determination.

Q Ms. Reno, apparently most of us are spending all of our time dealing with this story, this issue. Are you? What is your -- are you able to deal with other issues, too, or is this really dominating your time?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have been dealing with a number of different issues.

While the government was closed because of the snow, we had a wonderful meeting with the Indonesian attorney general, who's a member of the new cabinet. It was exciting to hear from him and from his colleague, the minister of Justice, about the steps that were being taken in Indonesia to build democracy and to hold people accountable for transgressions that have occurred over previous years in Indonesia.

Then we had the new Argentinian minister of Justice come to visit, and we talked about what we have and can do further to streamline the processes so that things are done promptly in terms of extradition and mutual legal assistance. And it was very gratifying to hear him pledge continued support of the new administration.

Then we had the chance yesterday to meet with the Latvian minister of Justice and to talk about the Baltic states and the cooperation that we were engaged in there.

In all of these situations, it reminds you of the fact that we cannot take our democracy for granted. To see these people work so hard to make democracy a fact of life in their countries makes you realize that we have got to commit our efforts as well to preserving it in this country.



I had a chance to meet with law enforcement colleagues. So these two days of government closure because of the snow have been productive days because I didn't have any mail and not that many phone calls. (Laughter.)

Q Ms. Reno, there is news this morning, however, that a suspected terrorist was arrested in Senegal, who may have at least, if nothing else, family ties to Osama bin Laden. Is there anything that you can tell us about that this morning?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I cannot comment on that.

Q Have you asked for extradition to the United States?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I cannot comment.

Q Do you have any thoughts on President Clinton's last State of the Union address tonight? Are you going to be there?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I expect to be there, and I look forward to hearing it.

Q Ms. Reno, there is a story, one of these periodic stories, this morning in the Wall Street Journal, that says you are a disappointment as attorney general, that you don't get respect from your law enforcement colleagues, that you haven't been able to rein the FBI in, and that you're a terrible manager. (Chuckles.) Other than that -- (laughter) --

ATTY GEN. RENO: And that I am too polite. (Laughter.)

Q That's right. (Laughter.) Do you have an overall response to the article?

And secondly, what do -- it's not new for people to criticize your management style, your management techniques. Do you consider that criticism to be justified? How do you feel about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I sometimes consider the sources and consider whether they have had any involvement in the management decisions that I have made.

I think the more I see of it, the more I think people want -- people being the media and others -- want you to engage in fierce confrontations and do it all in the press, and make sure that everybody hears about your fierce confrontations.

I prefer to try to run an office where it's done by mutual respect, where there is a recognition that there will be disagreement, and that if I had "yes" people on my staff or in various leadership positions, I wouldn't want them there.

I believe that you can conduct yourself and make management decisions that are low-key, that don't surface, that are based on how we get from here to here in the most effective way possible.

And then, I was at Mount Vernon this Sunday, and there is a wonderful line that says: If I were to worry about memoirs or what people said -- a variation on Lincoln -- my feelings might be hurt; I prefer just -- said Washington -- to let myself drift down the stream of life and let posterity make its own judgments about what I've done.

Everybody that worries about -- anybody that worries about what others are going to say about them is ultimately going to pull some punches and shape what they do based on what they think their reputation will be. Sometimes the way you do things is not the way people think is the way it should be done; but they usually don't have all the information.

Q (Off mike) -- officials have given their country extremely high marks on their anti-drug effort. Do you have any comment on that?  
(Off mike.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not seen the comments. I just heard about them just before I came in. So I really couldn't comment. Besides, Beverly, is it wrong to be too blunt?

Q I wouldn't know. (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you. (Laughs.) (Laughter.)

Q (Off mike) -- there's a way to make a deal with the Cubans on Elian, a way that he can visit his relatives in Miami and he can be

with his father, even perhaps immigration someday. I know you say that's the father's choice, but this matter has involved everybody, in North America and beyond. And we would all, I think, like to see a compromise.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, why don't you work on it? (Laughter.)

Q (Off mike.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: My hope is that people of goodwill who love the little boy can come together and reach some conclusion. I think, again, we cannot forget that what is at stake here is a six-year-old boy, and he should not be caught up in other issues that may not have direct bearing on his life.

Q Thank you.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you.

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