



**WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO**

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2000**

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

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

(Chorus of good-mornings.)

(Cross talk, laughter.)

Q Ms. Reno, what did you do to your finger?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I cut it.

Q Well, don't do that. (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: (Laughs.) I am going to try not to in the future.

Q You did that preparing food?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I was taking a picture out of a picture frame. And I remembered exactly what my mother told me, which is to keep the knife moving away from you. And I did that, but it didn't work. It ricocheted. (Laughter.)

Q Well, at least it's -- we hope it's better this morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: It is. Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, a lot of people in this building are concerned about the budget being advanced by the Congress. I am told that you specifically have some concerns about the effects of this budget on department operations.

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have worked so hard over these last seven years. We have worked with Congress. And Congress has been a great partner in trying to address the issues of federal law enforcement so that we can be a good partner with state and local law enforcement across the nation.

As we know, crime is down, seven years in a row. A reduction of this magnitude in the budget would be devastating to the department. The number of FBI agents would be cut by 900 below the president's level, DEA personnel 850 below the president's level; and Border Patrol agents, 430. Or there would be no funding for the president's plan.

I really would like to work with Congress to address these issues because I have found both our subcommittees' chairmen -- Rogers and Chairman Gregg -- very attentive to law enforcement issues. And there are so many issues that we have got to address.

Last week, we spent the whole half-hour talking about cyber-crime and how important that was for the future. Issues of terrorism are critically important, and white-collar crime. There are so many issues that we have got to address, and so I hope that we will be able to move on, beyond this, and address it.

Q Ms. Reno, one of our favorite episodes from the past has surged back into public view, Mr. LaBella's report from 1998. For those of us with tiny little attention spans, can you --

ATTY GEN. RENO: You all "with tiny little attention spans"?

Q Yeah -- well, no ---

ATTY GEN. RENO: You --

Q -- it's our bosses. (Laughter.)

Q It's on the transcript. (Laughter.)

Q Can you refresh our recollection on the reasons why you made the decision you did in what's called Gore two and the decision not to seek an independent counsel, to investigate whether the vice president had lied to the FBI?

ATTY GEN. RENO: For your bosses, the Notification to the Court is here, and it is rather lengthy.

But I think it's clear that, in that case, what was at issue was whether, in a statement given in the fall of 1997, the vice president provided incorrect information.

We went through it carefully and could show no instance where he knew that what he had said was false. We also found very clearly that he had no motive to give a false statement, and if there was no purpose in it and that -- the innocent explanation was what would be satisfactory. I think in this instance the notification as you read it -- and you can give this to your boss -- (mild laughter) -- lays it out and makes it very clear why.

Q Ms. Reno, there's also been some questions raised in that report about why the Public Integrity Section took that case away from Los Angeles. When the independent counsel law was in effect and a local U.S. attorney, whether in Little Rock or Los Angeles, received an allegation against a covered person, was it matter of law or discretion that it be deferred to a Public Integrity Section?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: In that instance, the Public Integrity Section was assigned to make a recommendation as to whether an IC was appropriate. In order to do so, the matter was forwarded to the Public Information Section for analysis, as is routinely done whenever we are assessing whether an appointment of an independent counsel would be appropriate.

The reason this is so important is, as you will recall, the Independent Counsel Act as it existed at the time prohibited the use of grand jury subpoenas or provisions of immunity or anything such as that, so we didn't want anything done that might affect the Independent Counsel Act. Eventually, the task force took the case and its work resulted in the recent conviction of Maria Hsia.

Q There are also some people criticizing -- because the vice president was not interviewed in that case. Was there any reason to interview the vice president in the case? Was there any evidence that he knew of any -- that he solicited any illegal donation or knew of any illegal donation?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I can't comment on any of those matters, because, as I have indicated in the past, the investigation continues and we will continue to pursue every lead.

Q Are you going to respond to the subpoena from Congressman (sic) LaBella and has the time come --

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, it's Burton.

Q Burton.

Q -- oh, it's Burton, Congressman Burton -- (laughter) -- on the LaBella memo? And if so, has the time finally come to make that public now?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have tried to work with Congress in every way possible to recognize and to honor their oversight function, while at the same time maintaining our ability to properly prosecute without political interference.

We are reviewing it carefully now. We've -- I've not received a recommendation from the department, and expect one very shortly, because, as always, we feel strongly about our position, but we want to be as open to any new suggestions as to change of circumstances. And we're reviewing it with that in mind.

Q Ms. Reno, one of the --

Q Why not just put all of this stuff out? Why -- at this point in time, why not just let the public see the LaBella report, the Radek response, just let everybody judge what's in there?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I often wake up in the morning thinking that, or wake up in the middle of the night thinking, "Yes, that's what we should do."

But I have come to realize more and more that there are institutional concerns that are extremely important. There are some very wonderful lawyers in this department, who I want to make sure will continue to give their best advice, without the thought that it will be spread all over, everywhere. I'm the one responsible for the decision. They can ask me about the advice I receive. But the line lawyers, who do so much and who give me such candid advice, I think, expect the fact that their deliberative memos will not be released, and I want to make sure that future attorneys general are not hampered by precedents that I might inappropriately establish.

Q If the vice president had said that he did know about the composition of the DNC media fund, that it was composed of hard and soft money, that he had paid attention to the meeting and that -- when that came up in discussion, would that have been incriminating?

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

Q Ms. Reno, you said a moment ago that one of the concerns you had about discussing the logic at the time and the evidence was that the matter was still under investigation, or "these matters," I think you said. Surely there's no investigation under way about fundraising in the White House, is there?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: What we said at the time was that we were going to pursue every lead. If the lead took us in a direction, we would follow it. I don't want to foreclose

any avenue down the road, but at this time, I do not have specific and credible evidence that any violation by a person who was a covered person at the time of the Independent -- when the Independent Counsel Act was in effect.

Q Ms. Reno, when you first got that memo, how did you take it, reading language like "intellectual dishonesty" and questions about integrity that were raised by Mr. LaBella? Not just saying that this is a matter that should go before an independent counsel, but questioning, really, the motives and integrity of some of your aides?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I read in the light that I read all the memorandums that I receive. I realize that positions are very strongly held in this department and I try to consider each point raised. As I have pointed out to you before, I've been in conferences in this room with 10 lawyers around the table and 10 very strongly held positions. I want those lawyers to be able to debate, to discuss, to be able to use, if they so choose, language that they think might make their argument more effective.

Q But Ms. Reno, almost everyone I've talked to, at least, says that the language in this particular memo was astoundingly intemperate; that it was quite off the scale, that it was different from anything people normally say.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, since I don't comment on what people have said to me, I won't characterize it one way or the other, except to say that people choose different means of advocacy. Some are more effective than others, and I want them to feel like they can choose their form of advocacy without there being a chilling effect of what people are going to say about the quality of it.

Q Ms. Reno, shifting gears for a second to some of the comments made by the NRA about the president; blood on hands and that there's a certain level of violence accepted in the country. What's your response to that criticism?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have heard an awful lot in the last seven

years, but that's about the worst rhetoric that I have heard. I don't know of any president that has worked so hard to make this a less-violent nation, a more peaceful nation, a nation where its children can grow in a strong, peaceful, safe constructive way. From the time I first met him, he was talking about what we could do about domestic violence, about youth violence.

We have seen a nation come together in so many ways; Republican governors standing with me and with Republican sheriffs and Democratic U.S. attorneys, working together without political rhetoric, to bring violence down in communities, using the 100,000 police officers that have been funded and those that have now been on the streets, getting the Brady Act passed, working together.

And I think the time has come to say this: Nobody wants somebody to get hurt. If we can prevent somebody from being shot, let us prevent it. Let us not focus on prosecuting afterwards. Let us do what we can to prevent it. But most of all, let us bring this nation together.

I believe that even the NRA in its most intense version, doesn't want people to be killed; it doesn't want guns in the hands of people who don't know how to use them; it doesn't want guns in the hands of felons. Let us work together to prevent it, wherever we can, but let us not continue this horrible rhetoric that serves no purpose whatsoever.

Q Ms. Reno, on the subject of prevention, the Brady report that came out yesterday from the department, has a number of anecdotes in the back about specific cases where people who shouldn't have bought a gun, were then prosecuted, fugitives who were discovered because they were trying to buy a weapon, people with domestic-violence restraining orders and so forth. So obviously, the department thinks that's an important thing to note.

As you know, that's also one of the criticisms of the NRA, that that doesn't happen more often. Given that the department's own report highlights some of these facts as a

useful effect of the Brady law, why aren't there more of these kinds of prosecutions?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the issues that any federal prosecutor faces is how to use their limited resources as wisely as possible. We began in 1993 and 1994 saying, with the resources we have, we should go after major drug organizations, major violence-producing organizations, street gangs that were particularly violent, recidivist three-time offenders; really focus on the people who were conveying the violence and get them off the streets, with the longest sentences possible.

We had some real success, and I think that that was one of the first steps that was instrumental in getting people out of the community who had contributed to the violence.

As we continued, we then looked at what other steps could be taken, focusing on those that have gun offenses, that were in possession of a gun illegally, used a gun, or sold a gun illegally. And we have, as with the Boston project, as an example, developed procedures where we worked with state and local officials to see who could do it best and how it would best be done. It's not necessarily a case that should be brought in federal court.

As a consequence, gun prosecutions for just gun offenses, as opposed to major organizations or the like, have gone up -- the combination of state and federal gun prosecutions has gone up in the last seven years.

We're trying to use our dollars as wisely as possible to address the issues of violence, of terrorism, of the matters that are a priority to this nation. And we will continue to do that.

With respect to the people who lie on a Brady act application, what we're trying to do is prioritize them and identify people. If they're fugitives and we catch them, usually the crime for which they are wanted may be a greater crime than the false statement made on the Brady act. But we want to try to apprehend those people and take

action against them for the most serious crime for which they are eligible for prosecution. It is a matter, as always, of taking the resources and using them as wisely as possible, not just with the federal government alone, but in a partnership with state and local governments, so that we use our resources together as wisely as possible.

Q Well, is this -- just to follow up on that, if I may, the NRA keeps coming back to this as a huge problem with enforcement of the gun laws. Does anybody -- has anybody ever done any research, that you know of, of how many people who get a gun illegally or who fail a Brady check, who are denied a gun, then turn around and commit a violent crime?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's a very interesting subject to pursue.

Q Thank you. (Chuckles.)

(Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll let you know if we can get a test like that designed.

Q Ms. Reno, based on all your knowledge of the Waco matter, how instructive do you anticipate this re-enactment to be this weekend?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As you know, I have appointed a special counsel, John Danforth, and I don't think it would be appropriate for me to comment on his pending investigation.

Q Ms. Reno, two questions on the LAPD corruption matter. This week the police chief, Bernie Parks, said that he will not work with the DA, Gil Garcetti, and he'll turn all materials over to the U.S. attorney's office from now on, which is a fairly unprecedented move by him, which many city officials are objecting to. Will the federal government go along with that maneuver? Will it -- it's now been sort of thrown in the middle of this. How will it respond in working with the LAPD and/or the DA's office in

LA?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will try to work with everybody concerned, to make sure that the investigation is conducted the right way, and that the appropriate leads are pursued, either in the state prosecutor's office or in our office, and that we will try to do this not based on turf, not based on who gets the credit, but on how it should be done.

Q But what if the LAPD says it will not work with the DA's office? Will the U.S. attorney's office go along with that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't deal in what-ifs.

Q Well, that's not a what-if. He's already said that.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, I still want to work with all the people involved, to make sure that we put misunderstandings or disagreements aside and do it the right way.

Q Just as a follow-up, on the civil rights side, with the pattern of practice investigation, your people, Bill Lann Lee and Steve Rosenbaum, were out there this week, talking to the folks there. Where do you see that going? Do you see the need for a consent decree or civil injunction? And has that investigation, which has been going on for over four years now, been aggressive enough before this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am waiting to talk to Bill Lee, who I understand will be back today, if I'm not mistaken. I'll ask Myron to confirm that for you and get his report.

Q Ms. Reno, the United States Border Patrol yesterday in El Paso captured about a dozen Mexican soldiers that had crossed into the United States, and held them for a time for questioning. There was also reports of a shooting by Mexican soldiers that may have been in the direction of the Border Patrol. Have you been involved in talking to the Mexicans about this matter?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We are getting reports on it, and we will take whatever action is appropriate.

Q Do you think that, basically, both sides are on the same side in this situation?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think we should review the facts and see just what the circumstances were.

Q All right. Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, may I ask a Waco-related question? There was a great deal of attention paid after both Waco and Ruby Ridge to revising the way the Department and the FBI handle so-called "hostage" situations. The new policy was on display in the Freeman standoff, for example. In the years since then, when this got a fair amount of attention, have there been further revisions in the way these things are handled or commanded? And can you think of any examples where this new approach has paid off?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, I think you have cited one. I think Director Freeh brought real insight into the issue into the Freeman case. People pressed him and he carefully, thoughtfully, patiently, worked through the issues, and I think that is probably a classic example. I will ask Myron to check with the Bureau and see if there are other instances that come to mind.

Q Let me ask just one other question on that. One of the things that came out of that was a recognition that the FBI should talk more to militia groups and outsiders who might offer advice. Has that worked itself into any kind of continuing, for want of a better term, dialogue with those groups when there isn't some kind of hostage situation?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think the FBI has thoughtfully pursued those areas of discussion. I think it appropriate for them to comment, but I think what is important, if there is a group that disagrees with the government, that does not advocate violence, does not advocate criminal conduct, there can oftentimes be very thoughtful, useful discussion, because they don't want criminal conduct any more than the government does.

Q Ms. Reno, if we can get back to the Brady Act very quickly before the topic gets too cold, you say there is a priority on resources. If someone is refused a gun purchase under the Brady Act, why shouldn't that information be referred automatically to state and local authorities?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it should.

Q What's preventing the transfer of that, the referral of that information?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think there are different issues with respect to different dealers in different states. And I think again, there are just priorities within state government. If you talk about people with limited resources, local prosecutors, local police again, have limitations.

But all of this requires that we make sure that we exchange information. The classic example again, is what was done in Boston, as we figured out who could handle which cases best, according to the best interests of the community.

Q But the federal government has this Brady information now. Why isn't it, as a matter of routine, referred to state and local officials? Is it against the --

ATTY GEN. RENO: In many instances, the state and local officials will be involved. But it is again, a matter of who can handle it best, who has the information, who has the prior charge. For example, Pete suggested, "Do you have instances where fugitives have been picked up?" It's going to depend on who is in the best position to handle it.

Q If I were a local sheriff or a local prosecutor, even if I am not prosecuting this crime, I'd like to have this information. Why isn't this information, as a matter of routine, referred to state and local authorities?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll be happy to check and see whether it isn't or it is.

Q Ms. Reno, on the Diallo case, do you expect to make the call personally, whether to pursue the "color of law" charges or the pattern-and-practice down the road? And do you have a timeline for it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We are reviewing it with the U.S. attorney in the Southern District of New York, who I know will make a very informed decision and that we will certainly discuss it. And I don't have a timeline because I never know what we will find.

Q Mr. Holder said weeks, rather than months, in his meeting with the police organizations. Do you think that's accurate? Do you expect that to --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would hope that it would be.

Q Ms. Reno, on the pattern-and-practice thing in the New York City Police Department, is it correct that the Department and the police department are now in negotiations on this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I won't discuss it.

Q Ms. Reno, two quick questions.

There was a report that Mary Jo White would ask for the death penalty for one of the defendants, in connection with the bombings in East Africa. And there was an inference that you have -- I believe you treat these things on a case-by-case basis. So I don't think I should make any inferences about what you would do.

But can you give us some guidance on where that process is? I don't want you to talk about anything confidential, but some guidance on where that process is, and any other insight that you can offer.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not received it. And I will ask Myron to give you whatever information can be made available publicly.

Q But you've received no request -- are you aware of any intention to seek the death penalty?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will ask Myron to give you whatever statement can be made. I have received nothing on it.

Q Okay.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Meaning me, personally.

Q Okay. And would it come directly to you, since you have to make the decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will let Myron make any comment because I do not want to comment in any way that would implicate what Ms. White may or may not be doing.

Q Understood. One follow-up question, non-factual question related to Waco. It's been almost seven years since that occurred, and I know that you have taken yourself out of the loop on this in terms of turning things over to a special counsel for investigation. But at this stage, seven years later, how painful or difficult is it for you to -- personally -- deal with the tragic outcome that occurred there in terms of the deaths of men, women and children inside the compound?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I hope all questions expect a factual answer. And the answer is that it was extraordinarily painful then, and it continues to be.

Q Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, there's been a lot of attention about the violence in sports. What's your position on prosecuting people involved in violent acts either on playing fields or in the hockey rinks, like we've seen in the last couple of months?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you have to look at each case and see just what the facts are. I don't think you can generalize.

Q I mean, even when the acts are as blatant as they have been on the ice? I mean, there's been some hesitation by --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think every case -- I don't think you can generalize, and I think you have to take every case -- if there is one extreme case, somebody may determine that prosecution is warranted. But you've got to look at the facts of each case and make a judgment.

Q Ms. Reno, there's been a flurry of rumors that you're planning to retire or resign.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm going home at the end of this administration.

Q Are you going to stick it out to the end? Is that your plan?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's my plan. (Laughter.)

Q That's the plan?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things I have always said, though, is I want to do the best job I can.

And if there comes a time where people don't think I can do a good job, I'll go home. But until then, I plan to try to carry forward so many of the good things that the people in the Department of Justice have done and try to make sure that until I leave here I try to do it the right way.

Q Coming from Miami, you should appreciate the fact that this latest spate of rumors that you are quitting came moments after the announcement that Dan Marino was quitting. (Laughter).

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think there was a connection. (Laughter.) It's interesting, because some people call me Ms. Ma-reno. (Laughter.)

Q Is there anything to that? (Laughter.)

Q Ms. Reno --

Q If we show up on your porch in 2002, are you going to talk about all these things that you wanted to talk about over the years, but --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Two thousand and two may be too soon. (Laughter.) But I hope you all -- I'll have to invite you all to come sit on the porch in February.

Q Lemonade and cookies.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Lemonade and cookies?

Q Do we need to bring sweetheart roses?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Those are two challenges I have when I finally get home. I've got to get a gardenia bush. My father had -- he brought gardenias and he brought sweetheart roses all wrapped in tissue with a little rubber band around them, and he brought them to the dispatchers and the secretaries and all the people who provided marvelous sources for him. So Pierre, what do you do to get all your tips?

(Laughter.)

Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, the University of Florida is one of the 64 teams in the NCAA basketball tournament. Does that mean they're your favorite?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, that's not the reason for the color of this splint. No, I have a very objective view of my three Florida teams, the Hurricanes, the Seminoles, and the Gators. I take each game where they play each other on a case-by-case basis -- (laughter) -- and I decide who's the underdog, who's fought hardest for it, who's been the best sport, and then I make a decision as to who I'm supporting. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you. Have a good day.

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