



WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY

GENERAL JANET RENO

THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Q Ms. Reno, Texas executed two people last night, one of whom was considered by many people to have been mentally retarded.

This issue has been around for years. The Supreme Court has allowed mentally retarded inmates to be executed efore.

Have you or anyone in the department addressed this issue? Have you looked at whether it's constitutional, or is it something that you really haven't been able to get into?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, federal law, as I understand it, does not permit it.

It has always been my practice before to take that into consideration.

I will ask Myron to check and see if we can provide further answers to your questions.

Q But there's -- but it doesn't permit it as a consequence of regulations. Have you given some thought as to whether executing a retarded personal is constitutional?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's why -- I haven't done it, because I have addressed it through the federal statute. But what I will do is ask Myron to see what he can provide you in terms of opinions or otherwise.

Q Oh.

Q Carnivore -- have you reached some form of agreement on a process?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we have. What we are doing is reaching out to major universities to try to retain such a university with expertise in the area to review the Carnivore system and provide a report on the findings.

I will approve the final selection of the university after consulting with the privacy and the law enforcement community.

The university review team will have total access to any information they need to conduct their review.

The interested parties will be briefed on the findings of the university review team, and those findings will be available for public comment.

The report itself, as well as any comments from interested parties, will be reviewed and analyzed by the Justice Department review panel.

And that panel would include the chief science and technology officer, the chief privacy officer, representatives of the Criminal Division, and the assistant director of the FBI Laboratory Division. It will be chaired by the Justice Management Division.

The department's review panel recommendation will be forwarded to me for my review and approval, and I think this will be an effective way to proceed in this issue.

Q But you haven't settled on one particular university yet?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No, we haven't.

Q Okay.

Q Have you approached any particular university?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I believe we have.

Q MIT? Cal Tech?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know the names yet. I'm waiting for the process to take place.

Q There's a published report that says you've been talking to the University of California at San Diego.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Yes, I saw that.

Q Is that accurate?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know. (Laughter.)

Q And how long is this process going to take now? You're still -- I mean, it's been weeks.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I would hope we could do it quickly, but as you know, I sometimes get frustrated in those hopes.

(Pause.)

Can I go? (Laughter.)

(Cross talk. Laughter.)

Q Congressman James Traficant has been a bit of a thorn in the side for the Department of Justice for some time, I guess.

The other night, he made some pretty outrageous allegations on television about you, involving substance abuse, among

other things.

I was wondering if you had, A, heard them or, B, had any reaction to them?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I just consider the source.

Q (Chuckles.) So there's nothing to it, obviously.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know where he got the information, and since he didn't present it, I don't know anything about it.

But people say all sorts of mean things that have no basis in fact, as these have no basis in fact, and I try to go on and ignore them.

When it -- you know, when it's -- as Lincoln said, if I were to read everything mean that people said about me, I might as well close this shop for business.

But those were some of the meanest things.

Q But can you tell us anything about whether or not there's an announcement forthcoming on charges against him?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't comment on pending investigations.

Q Thank you.

Q Ms. Reno, the reports have been very black lately about Haiti.

In fact, it's been portrayed in a recent article as a drug state, just as Panama was a drug state under Manuel Noriega.

Can you tell us about your concern about the diversion of cocaine from Colombia into Haiti at approximately about 100 tons a year, and then the transshipment to us?

ATTY GEN. RENO: This is a concern that is very important for us.

Q Ms. Reno, in terms of the Conrad recommendation about Vice President Gore, you have the Democratic Convention coming up.

Is there any concern that whatever decision you make now will have some potentially major impact on the upcoming election?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think any major decision that the Justice Department makes in any such situation, I imagine, is always a concern.

We've just got to call it like we see it.

Q How close are you to making that decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I hope to do it shortly.

Q Will you do it between now and the convention, or during next week, during the convention?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know the timing of it.

Q Is it conceivable that you would make that decision during the time the convention's going on?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know the timing.

Q Will you tell us publicly whether you've made the decision and what it is?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm going to try to do everything I can to keep you informed.

Q But would political factors such as the convention affect the timing one way or the other? I mean, if your decision was done next week in the middle of the convention, would you release it that day, or would you say, the convention

is going on, it would be best to wait a week or two weeks?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will make the determination as I think best when I am fully briefed on all the issues.

Q Are there any issues that you feel like you haven't been briefed on? And what are they?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I wouldn't tell you what those issues were, if they are.

Q Ms. Reno, on the Raynard Johnson case -- that's the young boy who was hanged in some fashion in Mississippi -- has the FBI briefed you yet on its conclusions from its investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I get regular briefings, but I have not been briefed on all the details for the last two days.

Q Do you know if they've reached any conclusions yet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not been advised that they have.

Q So it's still ongoing; they haven't yet issued their complete report, as far as you know?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's correct.

Q But if they've reached a conclusion yet -- they have not reached a conclusion yet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: To my knowledge, no conclusion has been reached. I have not been advised of one.

(Brief pause.) Thank you.

Q What of -- (soft laughter) -- I've always got one here for you.

What of the movement in this country -- advocated by Arianna Huffington, advocated by Jesse Jackson -- to

institute a system of rehabilitation for nonviolent drug offenders, rather than prison, to have some kind of alternate? Is that something that's gaining favor with you, or (you) have any comment about?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, I don't know what you mean by "nonviolent drug offenders."

Q People who have been selling drugs, that have done no violent crime.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Anybody that sells drugs, particularly people who sell drugs like crack, are conveyors of violence, and I think it's important to distinguish. We set up a drug court in Miami that has now spread across the country, to address the issue of nonviolent first offenders charged with possession of small amounts of drugs, who were users and abusers of drugs.

In that instance, you can do a great deal in terms of providing treatment, based on the carrot-and-stick approach.

Work with us in job training and placement, in treatment, stay clean, do it for a solid period of time that gives you a good track record, and we will work with you in job training and job placement.

But if you mess up during this period of time, and come in and test positive, then we're going to -- you'll face a more serious punishment every step of the way.

That carrot-and-stick approach has been effective, if we provide sufficient resources that ensure adequate treatment for these offenders and if the case loads are such that the judges can manage them.

Now, even for those with serious substance abuse problems who are also charged with crimes that lead to violence or a violent crime itself, we can do a lot while they are in prison to prepare them in the same way, with the carrot-and-stick approach, for returning to the community, and we can

do a great deal in terms of re-entry programs that give them after-care and support mechanisms in the community so that they don't start using drugs again.

But for the violent offender or for the offender who sells drugs and doesn't have a problem, I don't know any better punishment than to say, "You face prison for conveying that misery and that horror of drug abuse to others."

Q Would those who sell cocaine and heroin be in that category that would need to be incarcerated?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think if people sell drugs, they are conveying to others just prisons of despair, prisons of misery.

I would remind you of one of my favorite stories, when the man thanked me for arresting him and it turned out he wasn't thanking me for arresting him; he was thanking me because my prosecutors had gotten him into a drug program. He'd lost his family, he'd lost his job, he'd hit rock bottom, the world was awful and he couldn't afford drug treatment.

We got him into a program and now, for two years, he had been drug-free and he had his family back and he had a job. And that's the way the system should work, whether you're in -- if you have a substance abuse problem.

We should address it.

But for the person who is just calculating, greedy, and sells drugs to make money at the expense of others and puts others through the misery, the despair, sometimes the illness, the death that results, they deserve something more than just a chance at getting better, because they don't have a drug problem.

Q Ms. Reno, since the late 1990s, we've had some regulations on pseudoephedrine, because it's a precursor to methamphetamines, that makes it difficult to get in the U. S. What's being done to keep large amounts of it from being

legally imported into the country?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have just recently pursued this in an Operation Mountain Express, in which we made some announcements, and we're going to be making further announcements, as to steps that can be taken to properly control the use of this substance.

Q Ms. Reno, on former Chilean leader Pinochet, now that his immunity has been stripped by the Chilean Supreme Court, what impact does that have on your ongoing investigation here?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It doesn't have an impact on the investigation as it continues, except it -- we would have to see what the investigation produces.

Q Does it make it less likely that you would consider charging him here if he's more likely to be charged in his home country?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It would depend on the circumstances, and we would have to look at it, but our investigation would continue.

Q Ms. Reno, how concerned are you about violence in Los Angeles next week? And how much of the department's resources is being dedicated to law enforcement?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We have worked with everyone concerned, with the Secret Service, which is the lead agency in this matter.

We want to do everything we can to be supportive. And it is my hope that there will be a thoughtful, peaceful week in Los Angeles, that people will have the opportunity to express their views in a thoughtful, peaceful way, and that things will go forward accordingly.

At the same time, we will be prepared.

Q When you say "prepared," are you dispersing anti-

terrorism teams or swat teams, nuclear, biological, chemical --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't discuss what I'm going to do.

Q Ms. Reno, what's the status of the federal death penalty racial disparity study? There have been some reports that it's complete but it's not being released because the results are not entirely flattering.

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, that was the question last week. (Soft laughter.) I don't care what the results are, whether they're flattering, but I can't quite imagine that adjective used in the context of the death penalty.

I want the report to speak for itself, and I want it to be as complete as I can get it, and then release it.

Q Attorney General Reno, in terms of --

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

Q Certainly. Attorney General Reno, in terms of tearing down barriers for minorities, what comments would you have about Vice President Gore's selection of Joseph Lieberman as a running mate?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things that I promised the Judiciary Committee at my confirmation was that I wouldn't get into the political issues, and so I don't comment from that point of view.

I do comment, as I would comment about anybody, that I have a great respect for Senator Lieberman and have enjoyed working with him in the context, as attorney general to senator.

Q Ms. Reno, next week the INS is holding a special awards ceremony for the agents who participated in the operation to take Elian Gonzalez from the house in Miami. First, do you think that's appropriate, given the intense controversy surrounding that? And secondly, will this awards ceremony

be open to the public and the press? I think it's being held in Georgia.

ATTY GEN. RENO: You would have to check with Commissioner Meissner on the details. I have just learned about it in the last two days.

I will say that it is important -- leaving people's concerns aside and the various positions -- that agents who are asked to undertake initiatives like this and who devote so much time and try to do it so that people are not hurt -- it is very important that we understand what a difficult job they have and accord them the recognition of doing it without anybody getting hurt.

Q Thank you, Ms. Reno.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Thank you.

Q (Off mike) -- about your vacation plans yet to kayak?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Hopefully, kayaking. Hopefully, going home for a weekend and, hopefully, exploring more of this area before I leave.

Q All right!

Q Good day.

END.