



**WEEKLY MEDIA AVAILABILITY WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON, D.C.  
9:32 A.M. EDT FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2000**

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Q Ms. Reno, issue one: overnight stays at the White House for political donors. Is there ever a circumstance when such overnight stays might constitute a violation of federal law? And has the department investigated this issue in the past?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think you'd have to look at the facts of a specific case to make a judgment like that.

Q If there were some specific --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: You know I don't do "what ifs." (Laughter.)

Q Well, with all due respect, I mean, you are the chief law enforcement agent of the United States government.

We're talking about an issue that's seemed to become prominent in a political campaign. One of your charges, along with the courts, is to tell the American people what a violation of the law is. Are overnight stays at the White House for political donors ever a violation of a federal law?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: If I invited you to my house and you stayed overnight and you gave me a contribution, we'd look at it on the facts of that case; if there are other circumstances. But I don't think it would be a crime.

Q Well, the private residence of the White House is the private residence of the president and the first family. Is there any circumstance under which an invitation to a private residence could be a violation of a federal campaign law?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: If you give me facts specifically -- but, I think, as I've told you on many occasions before, to do a "what if," to suppose something without having the actual facts before you runs the risk of making an inappropriate judgment. Just think about it. This is somebody who has tremendous burdens. It is their private residence, but they have all said that this is the people's house. You've just got to look at the particular facts, and if somebody -- if the president of the United States wants to invite somebody to stay at what is, in effect, his home for a four-year period or an eight-year period, he ought to be able to do it.

Q Issue two. (Laughter.) Speaking of visits to the White House, we understand from the White House that you are going up to meet with the president privately on the Wen Ho Lee case.

First, can you -- and that you've already spoken with him on the phone about it. What can you tell us at this point about your conversation with the president and whether the Justice Department and the White House still have any different perspectives on how the case was handled?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We didn't go into detail, but we had a good conversation and I look forward to meeting with him this morning.

Q Can you say any more about what made that conversation good? I mean, did he explain what he had meant to say in any way?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we had a chance to discuss it, and he was thoughtful and supportive.

Q Ms. Reno, were you surprised at the president's remarks?

And secondly, in your conversation with him, did you have a chance to clarify why the government took some of the steps it took?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's important as we clarify that we do so in detail. And I told him I'd look forward to the meeting to do that. And I think anybody who looks at this case and doesn't know the circumstances of it is going to say, "Why?" And I think that's what the president kind of naturally asked.

Q Well, didn't he know the circumstances?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The important thing is that the president of the United States has taken great care not to infringe in law enforcement decisions so as to avoid a political charge that it's politically influenced. He has been very good about that and has -- really I can't think of any case in which he has interfered in any way that I consider inappropriate. He was doing his job.

Q You said he was thoughtful and supportive. He didn't sound all that supportive last week. Is that to say his position, his concerns have changed since talking to you? When you say he was supportive, what does that mean?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You'd have to ask him about a shift in position. But as I read it, he, like everybody else, said, how do you go from here to here, and why did it happen? I think he's had a chance to -- we had a chance to talk and I think we'll talk this morning, and I think he'll understand.

Q Is it your position that there's no need to review the Wen Ho Lee case and how it was handled?

ATTY GEN. RENO: My position is that we review and review and review to see if there's anything that we would do differently, try to learn from it. What I want to try to do is make sure that everything is as open as possible, that I can make available to the public as much as I possibly can so that they can understand exactly what happened and what

the issues were.

Q Ms. Reno, is the White House aware -- were they aware of the Bellows report, which to a degree already examined how the allegations of Chinese espionage were looked at?

Does that play, in terms of what the Justice Department is able to say to the White House, "Look, we've been looking at how we address this issue"?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't want to go into that. That's part of the effort that I'm undertaking, to try to make sure that as much as is there is available.

Q Are you going to be able to report to the president that it appears -- or, does it appear that Wen Ho Lee is coming clean? Is there an indication that that is happening?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: The debriefing has not started yet.

Q Oh, it has not started?

Q (Off mike) -- bring up any concerns to the president about the way he made his remarks in public? I mean, having any sense of, you know, letdown from your end or concern about that?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I wasn't let down. I understand how somebody can ask a question, "Why?".

MR. MCCURRY: Ms. Reno, the president's commission is looking into why Wen Ho Lee was kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day. Do you plan to investigate why Susan McDougal was kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day for eight months?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I'm not familiar with the commission that you're talking about.

Q Back on the Wen Ho Lee matter, Ms. Reno, next Tuesday there's a congressional hearing on how this matter was handled by the Justice Department. I think it's the Senate

Judiciary Committee. Are you planning to testify? And do you have any concerns? I've heard that the Justice Department does have concerns that that hearing is taking place before Dr. Lee is debriefed.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think it would be best if we could have the debriefing and try to make sure that we did it without premature release of information that might in any way interfere with the debriefing, but if Congress wants to go ahead, we will be available.

Q Will you be circumscribed in what you can say?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: What I want to try to do is be as open as I possibly can, but I don't want to do anything that would interfere with the debriefing.

Q Ms. Reno, is there anything else you can share with the public for why the government did take the steps it took in terms of the conditions of his detention?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Do you have a specific question other than what I -- (Quiet laughter.)

Q I guess the question is, the conditions, the critics say, were pretty harsh in terms of his limitations on communications with outside persons, and the question would be --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, I mean, the question, quite clearly, there is What happened to the tapes? If he destroyed them, did he tell anybody? Did he have other copies? Where was the information? Where had it -- if it had been relayed to someone, who had it been relayed to? If the tapes were still in existence, where were they?

Who might be able to pick them up and dispose of them?

We felt that we had to limit his communication with people that might impair our ability to locate the tapes.

Q (Off mike) -- point in the Wen Ho Lee case, that when the

FISA -- (inaudible word) -- was turned on a couple of years ago, afterwards you expressed concern that perhaps you didn't have all the information you should have had and needed to have, and perhaps Mr. Freeh didn't either. Do you think that in this last go-around, at the point where this was nearing trial, charges were brought, do you think you had all the information you needed to decide was he a national security risk, should he be kept in solitary, should 59 counts have been brought? Did you have all the information this time?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, take specifically the issues that you raise about the 59 counts. That, again, is based on taking each of the tapes and perfecting a charge with respect to each of the tapes. I think we had the information there. But what we will do is review everything to determine just what we could have done differently.

Q What form will that review take?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will continue to look at it and, as people ask questions about it, look at it and try to respond to those questions.

Q Ms. Reno, there have been a lot of editorial post mortems on the end of the Whitewater investigation. Now that it is over, do you have any second thoughts about how it was begun or your own evaluation of how the investigation proceeded?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will leave that to you-all to comment on.

Q Well, this is just the latest in a number of what at the time were extremely high-profile investigations which damaged a number of people's reputation, none of which proved fruitful for the original targets. The Vince Foster investigation. The so-called "Filegate" investigation. The Travel Office firings. Looking back on all of this activity -- you say you review and review and review something -- do you think that the mandate of the Whitewater independent counsel may have been expanded too much over the last six years?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that there are issues that I'm not privy to that it's better for the independent counsel to comment upon. I did -- the president asked that I appoint an independent counsel. I appointed Robert Fiske.

And that's where I think the Independent Counsel Act was then reenacted. I think really, in terms of the act, the persons appointed under the act should comment.

Q Do --

Q Miss Reno -- go ahead. I'm sorry.

Q Do you have a view as to the propriety of Independent Counsel Ray releasing statements of conclusions prior to the court authorizing the release of a final report?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think he was trying to do what was right under the act, while at the same time trying to properly advise the American people.

Q So you have studied it and decided that his interpretation of the law is accurate?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I didn't say that. I said I think he was trying to do what he thought was right under the act.

Q Well, do you think he was doing what was right under the act?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think, in this situation, there is a responsibility to the people, and I think he has tried to meet that responsibility and his responsibility under the act.

Q Miss Reno, you came to Washington, you know, eight years ago as somewhat of an outsider, not a person of this city. In retrospect, do you think that the culture of Washington has produced a situation where calls for an investigation are used as a political tool too often?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Being a prosecutor in Washington and being a prosecutor in someplace else are two different jobs.

Q How so?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There is -- in Washington, the function of a prosecutor is at the front edge of the forces of government and how government is utilized.

The prosecutor, the attorney general, and the people who work in the Department of Justice have an executive responsibility, but in some measure they have a quasi-judicial responsibility because they have to determine what cases to charge and to present to the grand jury. Congress is there in an oversight role. And so when you bring all the branches of government together, inevitably there will be charges of politics.

I have tried to take it as I see it -- call it as I see it; make the best judgments I can. And then, as you know, I have been asked to, invited and summoned to come respond. I think, as I have told Chairman Hatch and Chairman Hyde, I find a good oversight hearing to be challenging and a positive effort I think that we can all benefit from. I think Chairman Hatch sometimes thinks I'm a little bit crazy when I say that, but it is at the height of government, of the executive responding, of trying to be responsive, of trying to respond to legitimate questions, and I've appreciated that. I think there are other times that perhaps in other situations it's a little bit excessive.

Q Ms. Reno, I wonder if you could clarify the record on the business about Texas trial lawyers and Mr. Gore's involvement. There have been some front-page stories suggesting that Mr. Conrad's unit is doing some sort of a supposed preliminary investigation, but we've also heard that there is no such investigation. With the election this close, I'm wondering whether if in fact that's true. If there is no investigation, can you just confirm that for us?



ATTY GEN. RENO: I understand that there is not.

Q There is no investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's my understanding.

Q Could you tell us about the decision in the Los Angeles Police Department, how you finally reached an agreement, short of a lawsuit, with Los Angeles?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we're still trying to work through the final issues, and it would be better for me to let the negotiators work out their understandings before I commented.

Q Have you studied at all the issue of the Prince George's County Police Department and whether the actions taken yesterday, will that obviate the need for expanding the Civil Rights Pattern and Practice?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think we're reviewing that. I think it's too early to tell.

Q Ms. Reno, going back to the question about Mr. Gore and whether there's an investigation, given your answer, do you have any idea how a story like that could get moving?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Pierre, I'd ask you all that. (Laughter.)

Q Well, was there a preliminary investigation over the last few months that -- has the investigation been closed?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: My understanding is that the issue came up, they looked at it, didn't see a basis for proceeding.

Q Can you say when that was?

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

(Pause.) Thank you.

Q No! No! (Laughter.) We're all writing! You can't slip away while we're writing.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Well, while you're writing, let me just make a brief comment. In just eight days, the authorization for the Violence Against Women Act grant programs will come to an end. This historic law, passed in 1994, will expire next Saturday unless Congress acts quickly to extend and strengthen its protection for victims of domestic violence, stalking and sexual assault.

I remember well -- and it's not that long ago -- when representatives and participants in the criminal justice system looked at a domestic case and said, "That's a domestic," and just turned their back on it. I also remember the study that I did in Dade County of those that had been killed in the 20 years before in which the cause of death could be determined. Forty percent were related to domestic violence.

Through VAWA we have come a long way. We've strengthened our criminal and civil justice system's response to domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Since 1994, the administration and Congress have provided \$1.5 billion in funding through VAWA to support victim services and the work of police, prosecutors and the courts.

Violence against women by intimate partners, including husbands and boyfriends, fell by 21 percent from 1993 to 1998. We all know that there are many factors that have contributed to this decline, but I think the passage of the act has been a significant contributing factor.

It has made it possible to fund shelters, to fund centers, to fund outreach programs that can truly make a difference.

Now is not the time to turn our back on this problem. I think it is important for the American people to understand that this is still a priority for this nation. Both Houses of Congress have worked hard on a bipartisan basis to draft the legislation that would reauthorize and strengthen VAWA. What we need now is final action on legislation before VAWA

expires and before Congress adjourns.

This is another example of something that is working that we can't let die. We can't become complacent and say because we've reduced domestic violence by 21 percent that we can now stop and turn our efforts to other areas.

Now is the time to continue the efforts that have proven successful, and I hope it will be reauthorized in these next eight days.

Q Do you know how many prosecutions have been brought under this act?

ATTY GEN. RENO: In federal prosecutions?

Q Yes.

ATTY GEN. RENO: A limited number, I think -- some 200-and-something. But I'll ask Myron to get you the exact figure.

Q So how has it had effect then, do you think?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The grant program has been extremely important in terms of, as I indicated, funding for training, funding for shelters, funding for particular court programs or one-stop shopping centers for victims of domestic violence. I have seen the results across the nation, and it really is encouraging. At first I thought it was becoming an intractable problem, but I think we've really made some progress.

And the federal prosecutions have also been important, because you take, for example, a state like Kentucky; Kentucky is bordered by seven states, and if somebody evades the law by going back and forth or saying well, it didn't happen here, it didn't happen there, federal prosecution can be a tremendous force for holding people accountable.

Q Could I ask you about the decision on the part of Walter Smith, who has ruled that the Davidians that were in the

compound were responsible for the 1993 tragedy, says that those Davidians, plus Koresh leadership, was responsible for the death of the children and the innocents. And I would ask you, I understand this report -- this judgment mirrors the Danforth report that's come out. When do we expect the last Danforth report, so this issue can be laid to rest? Or can it be laid to rest?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you should check with Senator Danforth for the timing of the report. But I was very gratified by Judge Smith's judgment.

Again, some brave agents were killed; other agents, equally as courageous, put their life on the line to save people's lives. It shows you again the difficulty that law enforcement faces. It is one of the most difficult jobs I know. You put your life on the line, you put your reputation on the line. These agents have been subjected to lawsuits and hearings for almost eight years. And yet, that's perhaps as it should be in this country. We are accountable to our people. And in this instance, I think the people have had the opportunity, both in the courts and in the Congress, to see just what went into the decision, what was done, and that these agents acted correctly.

Q Ms. Reno, what's your view on the deterrent value of capital punishment? There's a new study out today that says that states that don't have capital punishment may have lower homicide rates.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have always heard that there were two states similarly situated; one had the death penalty and one didn't -- I've been trying to find out which states it was -- and the one that didn't have the death penalty had a better record than the one that did.

As a deterrent, I have never found a study that shows that the death penalty is a deterrent. I think that -- I'm going to be interested in this Time story.

And I think we need to look carefully. I think it is important, if we are to continue in this country to use the

death penalty, to make sure that we have proper factual foundation for the reasons we give for supporting the death penalty.

Q Ms. Reno, in regard to the House's efforts to develop legislation for e-mail wiretapping, where do you see the bounds right now between the Department of Justice concerns and privacy concerns?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think in all these situations there has got to be a clear adherence to the law. I think the surveillance of telephones as it has taken place, which require a careful application to the court showing probable cause to believe that the phone will be used and that there will be evidence of a crime available, is very important.

I think one of the great challenges that we're going to have in these next 25 years is how the law and technology keep pace with each other. John Marshall, the chief justice that set this country's course in terms of the third branch of government, viewed the Constitution as a living document. And I think that the Constitution will do well in the cyber age, but it's going to require dedicated men and women making sure that it does.

Q One question on the INS, please. A couple of days ago, the Coast Guard brought nine Cubans to the Keys for medical treatment, and with an expectation now that they are likely to be allowed to stay in the United States.

In your interagency discussions about what to do in this case, did you get any sense that the administration had a desire for a kind of a payback to the Cuban community following the Elian matter, or that there were any other political or other motives involved in the decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: My understanding is that the Coast Guard made the decision out there in the Florida Straits. A plane had gone down. One person was dead. There were people there. And they made the decision that they needed medical care and made the decision to bring them in. I know of no political consideration whatsoever.

Q Okay. Then the next step is, since the government brought them ashore, now that they're here, if they're allowed to stay, would that be consistent with past practice, or would this -- what factors would go into whether they're allowed to stay?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It would be consistent.

Thank you.

Q (Off mike) -- have some fun this weekend. You know, are you going to get to have any fun this weekend?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I always have fun.

Q I mean aquatic-type fun, because it's getting to the end of the season.

END.