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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

PRESS CONFERENCE

on the

Branch Davidians 4/19/93 Crisis

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

Monday April 19, 1993

5:27 p.m.

Conference Room B
Department of Justice
Washington, D.C.

P R O C E E D I N G S

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have tried throughout the last week to avoid further loss of human lives, whether those of group members or Federal agents, if we could delay the terrible tragedy of today; there was no reason to think we could eliminate the risk of mass suicide at any point Koresh chose.

There was increasing in the meantime to the life, health and safety of all concerned, but particularly the children within the compound.

I therefore approved the plan which had been developed by the FBI, after very careful study, and discussion with people in the field, a unanimous representation from the field, that this was the best way to achieve a resolution of this matter without further loss of life.

The plan was designed to induce serious negotiations, or the evacuation of the compound, with extremely limited risk that agents could harm any of the occupants or be harmed themselves. We announced repeatedly to those within the compound that there would be no attempt to enter the compound by Federal agents.

We repeatedly encouraged them to resume

communications with us, and were attempting to accomplish that objective when they appeared to intentionally set the compound on fire. I think the Federal acted professionally and with remarkable restraint.

These are the hardest decisions in the world to make. My heart goes out to the families of the agents killed, the agents injured, as well as to those children and the families of those who perished in the compound today.

We must all reflect on how we as a society can in the future prevent such a senseless, horrible tragic loss of human life.

QUESTION: Could you talk a little bit about the authority for the operation? Because a question arose, because of the President's remarks. Did he approve the plan and not the timing? Did you approve the plan without his go-ahead?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I approved the plan and I'm responsible for it, and I advised the President, but I did not advise him to introduce it.

QUESTION: Did you consider, in approving the plan, the possibility of this outcome? And if you did, were there any particular precautions that you should or could have

taken to avoid the fire?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We considered every possible potential, every possible option. We realized that we would be in the best position in this situation, with everything set as it was, to possibly control a mass suicide such as this.

We realized that there would be other circumstances where we might not be in as much a position to take action, but we knew that in certain situations it would not be possible.

We moved carefully. We at first -- we constantly tried to shrink the perimeter around the compound. We tried to move the cars away, and saw no response from them. Even bumped up against the compound, with no return fire of any kind. Removed the cars yesterday, with no response. Continued to move in this morning, with no reaction, other than return of fire. No indication of any kind of suicide.

It certainly was something that we considered, because this was carefully thought out, and all the risks were weighed. As I indicate, these are the hardest decisions to make.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, why did you decide today to

make this move? What factors went into the timing? Because for 51 days the agents in place down there have been saying they had infinite patience, they were going to wait for as long as it took. Why move today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We made some judgments based on the fact that experts told us that the hostage rescue team should not, and could not, remain in place for any permanent period of time without being relieved.

We made a decision today -- there is no perfect timing, there is no perfect day, and there is no trigger -- that we would increase the pressure today, but today was not meant to be the day, or the days. We were prepared to carry it out tomorrow, and the next day, and do everything we could to effect a peaceful resolution of this matter.

It was not today; this was just a step forward in trying to bring about a peaceful resolution by constantly exerting further pressure to shrink the perimeter.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, have all of those who did survive been arrested? And if so, what will they be charged with?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know the answer to that. I don't know what the circumstances are with respect

to the critically injured, or the circumstances, but we will review the evidence, and make the best judgment possible.

QUESTION: Has anyone been arrested who exited today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know.

QUESTION: Did you ever think of the possibility of mass suicide, or was that not thought about?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That was the question that was asked just previously, where I indicated that we reviewed all possible options, where we had heard that there might be the possibility of that.

We carefully considered that, but we came to the conclusion that, based on everything that we had seen, there was nothing to prevent Koresh from doing it, or prompting the people who were in the compound to do it at any time in the future.

Our experts, and we talked to the experts in the field, said that they were totally frustrated, that they had not been able to negotiate anything with Koresh, that they did not think that he would ever come out.

We were told that he had more than adequate supplies to last an extended period of time, so we had

thought that perhaps we could resolve the matter by water, but the water supply continued apparently to be maintained on all the inspections that we were able to make.

We felt that we had to continue to move the pressure up, while we were in control with the hostage rescue team in place, so that we would, to the extent we could, realizing that there were some situations such as what happened today, where we could not, if he chose to persuade or force, or really persuade his followers to commit this mass suicide.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you said before that you made the judgment that the hostage rescue team should not and could not stay there without being relieved. I'm not sure I understood what you meant.

Are you saying there wasn't a backup to this team that could have taken its place? And why couldn't they have stayed there for a longer period of time?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The experts advised us, advised me, and I talked with them, that in those situations where you had to be constantly on the alert that it was in the best interests of everybody concerned, including the safety of the agents and others involved, to provide for,

really, time off, and that, as -- what I was told was that there were no backups that could ensure the safety of the perimeter.

I said, why can't we extend something around the perimeter, and it was pointed out to me that they had the capacity to fire weapons over an extended period, or the area, that could endanger the safety of those that might come onto the property during the extended period of time.

QUESTION: Did the Federal lose its patience?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I think the FBI in this situation has shown remarkable restraint. I think they did not lose their patience, I think they carefully thought this out, developed it as part of a coherent and continuing plan, with the certain knowledge that, in some instances, these issues are the hardest decisions to make in the world.

I think they made the best, most informed decision they could under the circumstances.

QUESTION: How long ago did they make this plan? When did they bring it to you? And when did you take it to the President?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The plan has been evolving, ever since it started, with the effort to gradually compress

the perimeter, gradually compress the people who were in the compound into a smaller and smaller area, make it more difficult for them in the compound, so that we could try to effect an negotiation that produced a peaceful resolution, or that prompted the people to come out.

In terms of the plan that was initiated today, as part of this continuing effort, that was first submitted to me approximately a week ago.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, under your plan, if you were concerned about the mass suicides inside, how did you think they would respond, and what was the next step under your plan after today's events?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We were going to constantly try to compress the area through the use of gas, because I had been advised again and again -- I personally talked to the doctors, it was nonlethal, and would have no permanent effect on any of the residents of the compound -- and we were going to just gradually increase the pressure, day by day, until -- we hoped that through negotiation, or through them walking out, that they would walk out.

Obviously, if I thought the chances were great of a mass suicide I would never have approved the plan. Everything

that we were told, every indication of the reactions to the pressure up to that point, was that there would not -- that would not occur.

QUESTION: Secretary Bentsen has been quoted as saying that the President had told him his chief concern was that this situation would become a Jonestown type of mass suicide. In view of that, did he ask for, or did you give him, any assurance that this would not happen?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, because I could not give anybody assurance that this would not happen, because this has been a prospect that was -- could have occurred ever since this happened. We had been concerned that that might be a possibility.

Nothing in the future would have prevented David Koresh from doing that, and leading his followers into a mass suicide, so I could not give the President that assurance, nor could I give anybody else that assurance.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, could you tell us what the President said when you advised him of the plan, and what his reaction has been today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What he said when I advised him? He said, have you carefully considered it, have you

looked at everything, and do you feel that this is the best way to go, and I said, yes, sir, and it's my responsibility, and I think it's the best way to go.

QUESTION: Has he said anything to you today about the matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not talked to him today.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what about the preparations for the fire? Was the possibility of mass suicide through fire taken into account?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What I indicated to the FBI was that we should be prepared for all eventualities, including either accidental or specifically set explosions that could cause serious injury or death to substantial numbers in the compound.

QUESTION: Are you satisfied that that occurred, and that the plan was as good as it could have been in that regard?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am told that it is absolutely as good as it could have been. I obviously could not have foreseen it.

QUESTION: Senator Specter has said that the Senate

Judiciary Committee may investigate this. What's your reaction to that? And, in light of how events turned out, do you think that it was mishandled?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't think it was mishandled, I think the FBI has acted very professionally, very ably, and with remarkable restraint.

In any situation in which something like this occurs, everyone has questions, and I think the best way to address this is to be as open, candid and as forthright as possible,

And I look forward to responding to anyone and everyone who had questions, because the bottom line is, there are no easy answers to a question like this, that was posed in this situation, and it's something that we should carefully consider with the point of view of being accountable, and I'm the one to be accountable, in seeing how -- what do we do in the future to prevent such a senseless loss of human life.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in the one week that you had this matter under consideration, did you direct that there be any changes made in the plan? Did you ask that anything be done differently?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I asked question after

question, and I met with experts; I talked to as many people as possible, and asked questions, and essentially the plan was exactly as it had been presented to me.

I think the FBI very, very carefully thought it out. They talked to medical experts, they talked to others, and everything that we did to review their careful planning indicated that they had planned it very carefully.

QUESTION: General, what was Plan B? What would have happened if the gassing today had not brought them out, but they had not set a fire? What was going to happen tomorrow?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We were going to wait, and continue to increase the pressure, and be as patient as we could.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, given his fascination for fire that he had mentioned in other letters, and talked about, and obviously those sorts of things in the Bible that he's made reference to, what was the contingency plan, in case of a fire? I mean, surely that was among the range of options that you considered.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My understanding was that fire engines were available. They could not be immediately

available to the compound because you had the 50-caliber ammunition that was capable, I was told at the time, and it has subsequently been confirmed, could fire up to 3,000 yards.

QUESTION: So there was really no way to stop a fire then?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't see how you could get a machine, a vehicle, that close to the compound. Again, I don't profess to be the expert, but in terms of all the inquiries that I made concerning what we understood to be the ammunition and the capability in that compound, I think they did everything they could to be as prepared as they could.

QUESTION: Does that include airborne fire fighting equipment, such as helicopters and forest fire type equipment?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You have again the problem of sending a helicopter in with a 50-caliber bullet right there. I think again, in terms of trying to protect the agents, they did everything that they could.

QUESTION: General, are you concerned that there was a 10-minute delay, at least, between the time the flames first appeared and when the Waco fire department said that they received a call for assistance from the FBI?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm not aware of that, and

we will certainly check into that.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, since you say it was your responsibility to go ahead with this operation, what was your reaction, your thoughts, today when you saw the compound burst into flames?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it's an extraordinarily tragic and horrible situation.

QUESTION: Did you feel -- did you start to second-guess yourself, think perhaps this wasn't the right decision?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the things that one does in this position is make the best judgment they can, based on all the information that they have, take that judgment and move ahead, with the understanding that I'm the person who's accountable, I'm the person who answers the questions.

I always welcome reviews. If there are ways to do it better for the future, I welcome consideration of all of those.

QUESTION: Do you have any report as far as where the children were, and what efforts were made to get them out?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We had -- that's one of the first questions that we asked when the plan was submitted --

what have we done to see if we could get the children out. We talked to the negotiators, we had tried to negotiate the children out, I was told, and we had been totally unable to persuade him to send the children out.

We were told that they were in a certain area, we tried not to gas that area immediately.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is there any doubt in your mind -- we've heard the evidence that Special Agent Ricks indicated why he thinks the fire was set from inside -- at this point is there any doubt in your mind, or the Justice Department's mind, that the fire was set by the cult members?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have absolutely no doubt at all that the cult members, based on all the information that we've been furnished, did it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, were you presented with a set of options from which you chose one, or were you just presented with one plan? And also, did you present the President with just one, or with a set of options?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We were presented with a range of options, which was to do nothing, to pull back, to build walls, to go in -- I mean, there were a variety of options. We considered each one, discussed it, analyzed it

and thought about it, and kept coming back to the plan that that had ultimately been concluded by the Bureau was the best plan on which to proceed.

QUESTION: And did you also present the President with just this final plan? Or with some of the other options?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I presented him -- I told him in general terms what the alternatives were.

QUESTION: Has David Koresh's death been confirmed?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: When I came down here it had not been confirmed.

QUESTION: General, there appears to be what looks like a studied effort to distance President Clinton from this action, the suggestion that you are accountable, that this is a Department operation.

Is that an intentional effort on your part, or on the part of the White House "spin doctors" to make this look like your problem and not Mr. Clinton's?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I made the decision, I'm accountable, the buck stops with me, and nobody ever accused me of running from a decision that I made based on the best information that I had.

I don't do spin stuff, and I'm not distancing

anybody from anything -- I'm telling you exactly what happened.

QUESTION: Well, my only suggestion was that Mr. Clinton sought and obtained the office, and he is the head of the executive branch. Is this not his problem also, even if you are his agent in this operation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think President Clinton probably feels as bad as I do about what happened, and I think he feels as I do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you said at the beginning that we should all reflect how we as a society can prevent such a senseless loss of human life in the future. What kind of reflections will you make? What do you have in mind?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will analyze everything, I will look back to it, I will ask that we further review what can be done in other situations. I will look at whatever information is available in terms of other groups that might do something like this.

I will carefully consider everything for the future, and review it based on what was done here.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, who are you dealing with at the FBI, and when did you last speak to them?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have talked with Director Sessions, with Floyd Clark, with Larry Potts, with Doug Dow, and there are other people whose names I do not know.

QUESTION: Ma'am, in a strategy of constantly compressing the pressure and everything, how did you understand driving a tank up to a place, and punching a hole in it and throwing tear gas bombs, fit?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It fit in terms of what had been done up until that date, of restraining people from leaving the compound, of all the work around the area. We looked at what was the least intrusive measure possible of further limiting the compound.

We talked to doctors, who told us that the tear gas was not lethal, that there would not be permanent injury. I personally talked to the doctors, I talked to people who had been gassed themselves, I looked at what could be done, and how the gas should best be inserted in the building.

I looked at what had been done up until that point, with the tank clearing cars away from the building and coming up to the building, and I made the decision that that would be the least obtrusive manner possible of trying to resolve this matter without a frontal assault, without the FBI having

to return fire.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you mentioned that you told the President what the options were. Did he indicate a preference, or did you say, we have options one through six, but we're going with number one?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I told him generally what the options were, I told him that I had carefully studied it and reviewed it in detail, and that I felt that this was the best way to proceed.

QUESTION: And he said what to that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: He said okay.

QUESTION: When did he give the okay? When did he actually give the okay?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know whether he gave an okay or not. His statement to me was, well, okay.

QUESTION: When was that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not remember.

QUESTION: Over the weekend?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Over the weekend.

QUESTION: Have you had enough, or would you like a few more?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I'm trying to --

QUESTION: Could I ask you about the D.C. stalker case? Your reaction to the arrest today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not really had a chance to review the details upon it, and I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment without being more fully informed.

QUESTION: You commended the FBI's handling of this. Does that constitute an endorsement of Director Sessions? And what's his future, now that this is over?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I have told you on numerous occasions, Waco is an entirely separate matter from that. I am reviewing that matter, and will make a recommendation to the President as soon as I can, consistent with a thorough, objective and fair review.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, did the FBI, in discussing this plan with you, cite any precedent? Did they say this kind of thing had worked in the past? Is this standard practice?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't think we've ever had a situation really like this before.

QUESTION: I may be thick, but I really don't quite understand why you couldn't rotate people on this shift. I didn't really understand your answer to that -- why the

simple fatigue of this team meant that you had to do something right now.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It was not simple fatigue, it was retraining, and what we were told was that there were no other groups as equipped to go in, to maintain that perimeter, protect the perimeter, over a long period of time.

Thus we made a decision that we could delay it for three weeks, possibly send the people out, but this was the best time in terms of the control we had, knowing that it was not perfect control, because we could not tell, over a six-month period, or a year period, just what would happen.

And we were advised that they had supplies sufficient to carry them on indefinitely. I asked exactly the same question, and at first I thought I didn't understand, but I talked with the experts, I talked with the head of the team, and I felt that this would be, considering everything else, the best time we could possibly begin to increase the pressure in the fashion we chose.

QUESTION: How long would it have taken to retrain a replacement team?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know.

QUESTION: How many, roughly -- ~~six~~ months, a year?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know.

QUESTION: Do you know how many people are on the team?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I don't.

QUESTION: Would you have done anything differently than how this went?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I said in response to the same question over there, what I do in all these situations is make the best judgment I can. I try to ask all the questions I can possibly think of.

I try to consider every eventuality I possibly can, and then I try to make the best judgment I can, based on all the information available. After that, I expect to be accountable for my decisions, and I expect to have my decisions reviewed, and I expect to look at them myself, and try to see whether there is anything that can be done to prevent such a loss of human life in the future.

QUESTION: Based on the intelligence you have received, do you believe that there are any other groups or cults in the country right now that are capable of the behavior of the Branch Davidians?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not received any

such information, but I have not sought -- I have not received any information.

QUESTION: Were there any other factors that were bringing particular urgency to acting right away, such as any information or intelligence that the children were being abused, or that there were any plans for any mass suicide or action by Koresh -- proactive action by Koresh?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think that's what -- and I apologize, because I think that's what has to be put in perspective, in the sense that this was a cause for the first effort to go into the compound -- the reports that the children were being sexually abused, and that subsequently we received information that infants were being slapped around and beaten.

Under those circumstances, it was our earnest hope that we could try to negotiate without endangering human life, to get these children out as soon as possible. It comes 51 days, the sanitation in the building is deteriorating, we're hearing information concerning problems with disposing of human waste.

We don't know what the circumstances are with the children, and we don't know how long it's going to go on. We

were told that it could go on indefinitely, and we have to make the best judgment we can as to what is in the interests -- the best interests particularly of those children.

Again, it is one of the hardest decisions that anybody could make.

QUESTION: But did you have information that the children were being beaten since -- during the time the seige was going on?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We had information, and I'm not sure of the timing of the information, that the babies were being beaten. I specifically asked, do you really mean babies? Yes, that he's slapping the babies around. I -- again, this is information that is furnished, but these are the concerns we had.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, how did you weight the possibility that putting pressure on these people would increase the chances of this kind of mass suicide?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We carefully considered it. We looked at what they had done. We knew that it might be a possibility, that it might be a possibility today, that it could be a possibility next week if we withdrew and left him to his own devices, that it could be a possibility for the

future, and we made the best judgment we could, with all the facts that we had, as to what the most appropriate time to try to do something would be.

QUESTION: But you still considered it highly unlikely?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We considered it highly unlikely. Obviously, if we had considered it likely, that would have been a different situation.

QUESTION: Since Koresh had repeatedly like to negotiators, and broken promises time and again, including recently the idea of producing whatever manuscript he was going to work on, had you really, in effect, given up on the idea of human, one-on-one, or team negotiation with him?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the things that we did was talk directly to the negotiators, who said they had not been able to successfully negotiate with him, and they did not think that they could be successful in the future, and that they did not think he would come out.

QUESTION: You said you considered suicide a possibility if you withdrew and left Koresh to his own devices. Was that ever an option seriously under consideration, to just move out of Waco?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, certainly not, because these people were here, they had killed four agents, they had wounded others. When I say, "left to his own devices," just with a general perimeter around, but one of the things that countered against that was the fact that it would be very difficult to secure that perimeter at a distance far enough from the compound not to make the people securing that perimeter exposed to the fire, particularly from the 50-caliber.

QUESTION A: Ms. Reno, may I pick up on Nina Totenberg's question again here for a moment?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well --

QUESTION B: Was this the first time that the FBI had recommended increasing the pressure, a week ago?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: They have come to us saying that they were gradually increasing the pressure. They got the cars out from around the compound, and they put constantina wire around the compound, and they kept us advised before they were going to do each step, so that this was a step, one of gradual steps, to increase the pressure on the compound, with the hope of getting the people to come out peacefully.

QUESTION: But nothing before being this dramatic?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: Is there a weakness do you think in the law enforcement system when there's only one hostage team that needed to be replaced, and that you did not have trained people to do that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: This would certainly be one of the issues that we considered.

QUESTION: In what way will you address that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: By addressing whether there should be other resources available in situations such as this.

QUESTION: Do you believe there should be?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know.

QUESTION: You mentioned that team, and also perimeter security. Was that a team that was specially trained to go in and rescue hostages, or was it a team that was intended to stay back and protect the perimeter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It could be both, as I understood it, but you should talk with him about the details of what it was specifically trained to do.

MR. STERN: These folks have to file somewhere

here. Is that enough?

QUESTION: Thank you.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very much.

[Whereupon, at 5:56 p.m., the press conference was concluded.]

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