

NBC "TODAY" INTERVIEW WITH: ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO
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KATIE COURIC: On Close-up this morning, Attorney General Janet
Reno. As the chief law enforcement officer of the land, it's her job
to develop crime policy as well as enforce it. Crime is on the mind
of her boss, President Clinton, who travels to Ohio later today to
address law enforcement officials there. This morning Attorney
General Janet Reno joins us from the White House.

General Reno, good morning. Thanks for joining us.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Good morning, Katie.

MS. COURIC: The president said in the State of the Union that he
wants Congress to hurry up and sign a crime bill ASAP. But you say
that there's still work to be done. And one of the provisions that
you think needs work, as I understand it, is the so-called "three
strikes and you're out" idea. What is it about that that you find
troubling?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: There's no work that needs to be done to really
get this crime bill passed. We just need to agree on language. And
what the president will be stressing today is that it is very
important to get it passed as soon as possible so that we get the
police to the streets where they count. "Three strikes and you're
out" is a very important provision, and it just simply needs to be
tailored to focus on the truly violent criminal, the three-time armed
robber, the people who really hurt other people and should be put away
and kept away.

MS. COURIC: Are you concerned that in its current form it may
not be focusing enough on hardened criminals and it may, in fact, cast
too broad a net?

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ATTY. GEN. RENO: The president will be addressing that today, telling the nation how important it is to focus on the bad guys so that we have enough prison cells to house them for the rest of their crime-producing lives. While we understand that there are some nonviolent first offenders who may have substance abuse problems, who need to understand that there is certainty in punishment but that are given a chance for treatment and an opportunity to come back into the community with the chance of not committing further crime.

MS. COURIC: In fact, General RENO, a New York Times editorial over the weekend urged you to better explain what it called the, quote, "consequences of Congress's unrelenting demagoguery, the doubling and tripling of mandated sentences in order to pose as heroes in the war on crime." Do you think you could do a better job of expressing some of the down sides of these so-called harsher penalties, particularly in light of this Justice Department report that recently surfaced that found severe mandatory sentencing laws to be costly, ineffective, and a chief cause for prison overcrowding?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I'm going to continue what I told the Senate Judiciary Committee, what I've said since I was a prosecutor in Miami, that we've got to make sure that we focus on the truly dangerous people and get them put away, while at the same time recognizing that our prisons have in them a lot of people who are serving minimum mandatory sentences for nonviolent first offenders; they could be better returned to the community with the chance of success if we provide them treatment through a carrot-and-stick approach, which is in the crime bill, which is provided for in the drug court provision, and get them back to the community with the chance of success. I think that's what's going to work, and I think that's what the president will be stressing.

MS. COURIC: Do you think, you yourself, do you feel that these minimum mandatory sentences can sometimes have the wrong effect?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think if you sentence a person who has a drug problem to a minimum mandatory sentence on his first term out, that doesn't make too much sense. I'd rather be focusing on the truly dangerous offender, the three-time armed robber, and make sure that we develop programs throughout this country that get those people put away. I think what the president is going to be stressing and what I'm going to be stressing is we need a common-sense approach to crime. We need to get rid of the politics on these crime issues. Nobody, neither Democrat nor Republican, likes crime. And if we work together, use common sense to get this bill passed, I think it can have a real impact.

MS. COURIC: General Reno, of course, your deputy, Philip Heymann, recently resigned and left the Justice Department. That seems to have given some people within the department an opportunity

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to criticize your management style. They've said things like that you're scattered, you need a chief of staff, that there are still, what, something like 100 Justice Department posts that remain to be filled. Are you going to reassess the way business is done at the Justice Department and change your style in any way as a result?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We have -- in terms of appointments filled, in terms of U.S. attorneys, we're well ahead of schedule of past administrations. And I feel very good about those nominations. I'm always trying to do better, Katie, at anything I've ever done. And I welcome criticism. I welcome the opportunity to focus on a wide variety of issues. If people call me scattered because I'm concerned about prisons, about immigration, about the FBI, the DEA and Immigration & Naturalization issues, I'm going to be scattered. But I'm going to know what's happening in the Department of Justice.

MS. COURIC: All right. Attorney General Janet Reno, thanks so much for joining us; always good to see you.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Thank you.

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