



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

HON. JANET RENO, UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, February 19, 1998

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

QUESTION: Shall we have at you?

Ms. Reno, the Independent Counsel Act says you can remove an independent counsel for cause. And the Department, in the past, has said this -- citing the legislative history, has said that this means an independent counsel can only be removed in extreme cases. When you're talking about extreme cases, are you talking about cases of actual malfeasance as opposed to appearances of conflict of interest or other --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would ask Bert to give you anything that the Department has said publicly on the issue.

QUESTION: Well, I asked that. And what the Department says publicly on the issue is that the removal authority can only be used in extreme cases. What does "extreme" mean?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What is important is to look at any evidence, and then make a determination based on that evidence. And it would not be proper for me to comment further.

QUESTION: Are you currently looking at such evidence with respect to Independent Counsel Starr in response to Congressman Conyer's letter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're reviewing Congressman Conyer's letter and Senator Torricelli's letter.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is it common practice for the Justice Department and the FBI to tell a Senate committee that an American citizen is a foreign agent and then not charge that person with either espionage or violations of the law that requires foreign lobbyists to register?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Since I think you are referring to a particular matter, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on it. It is a pending matter.

QUESTION: What about the apparent intelligence failure to not notify? Or were they notified, the Vice President and the President, that the FBI had information that Maria Hsia was an agent for the government? Why did the FBI allow the Vice President to continue to associate and attend fundraisers organized by Maria Hsia if you had such information?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, it refers to a specific matter that is pending, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment, as you know, considering my regular practice.

QUESTION: Are you reexamining the entire process by which information of this type gets filtered up to the government and is conveyed to the White House?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I would not comment in the context of the particular case.

QUESTION: I'm not commenting on a particular case.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I know you're not commenting on the particular

case. You're asking me a question.

QUESTION: Do you agree with that description of Ms. Hsia, that is, an agent of China?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: All I have said is I am not commenting.

QUESTION: You're not responding to the question at all? You are not agreeing or disagreeing with the --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not commenting in any way. And you should not draw anything from my not commenting. Because I think these matters should be resolved in an appropriate forum; to wit, the court.

QUESTION: Senator Thompson says the information contained in his -- about to release in his report -- is information that the intelligence agencies have verified to him. Do you disagree with that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I haven't seen the specific statement of Senator Thompson, so I could not comment.

QUESTION: What is your understanding then, of what you have done as far as verifying the information they are about to present in their report?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I don't know what they're about to present in their report.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, three weeks ago, I asked you about an article concerning Director Freeh, statements regarding industrial espionage by the PRC. And you said you'd look into that, you hadn't read that. And, also, with regard to other investigations by FBI and CIA, the Charlie Trie matter, the Huang matter, the matter of Ms. Hsia. Ma'am, are we not seeing or hearing evil or speaking any evil about the PRC? Why the silence?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on any pending matter. As you know, we have an ongoing investigation, and I will not comment as to any action that we are taking, or whether there is a basis for the action. Because the matter should be conducted in an appropriate way, not in the press. And I'm going to do it that way. And if appropriate evidence is developed, then appropriate statements will be made.

QUESTION: Are you now satisfied with what Mr. Freeh has said about the

Chinese intelligence-gathering activities in this country?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I am not going to comment, because I have got an ongoing investigation. And it is important, as we have seen, that such investigations be conducted in an appropriate way, without comment in the newspapers, and that we make the appropriate judgments as we collect the evidence.

QUESTION: If I could follow up on that, isn't part of the problem that this has been in the newspapers, at least in respect to Maria Hsia? A story by Bob Woodward last year said that her raw FBI file identified her as an agent for the Chinese Government. If this woman is being accused of this in the newspapers or by Congress, isn't up to the Justice Department to say this is a true fact or this is one of the factoids that gets bounced around Washington every once in a while?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I am not going to comment. And it is important, as we conduct this investigation, that we not comment. And if there is an appropriate time, either through a court proceeding or otherwise, that any comment can be made, we shall do so.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, has the Treasury Secretary been in contact with you about the matter of Secret Service personnel testifying in the Starr matter? And can you give us a general overview of the complexities of this issue?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are in conversation with the Treasury Department on this issue. The matter is in discussion now. So it would be premature for us to comment.

QUESTION: Have you talked directly with Mr. Rubin about it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have just told him that -- confirmed to him that we were talking with the head of the Secret Service and the General Counsel for the Department of the Treasury. Bert, as you know I think, provided a statement of what we have been able to say to date. And as it is appropriate, we will, if it is appropriate, make further comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, are you similarly having discussions with people in the White House about possible assertions of executive privilege?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: With the agreement of the Justice Department, the White House has retained separate counsel to represent any governmental interest on behalf of the White House, including any question of privilege.

QUESTION: Isn't it normally the Department or OLC who would be providing the opinion on?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It depends again on the circumstances.

QUESTION: Is it possibly that, on this one, the White House did not like the opinion that you presented it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on any matter that we have discussed with the White House, other than to urge you not to jump to conclusions.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, who is the outside counsel?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You would have to check with the White House.

QUESTION: Congressman Hostra is holding a committee hearing today on the Ron Carey campaign. They are going to hand down some subpoenas. Does that interfere with your investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As with all matters such as this, we try to work with Congress in every way that we can to ensure appropriate exercise of their oversight function, while at the same time pursuing our responsibilities.

QUESTION: But does it get in your way?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will try to make sure that we do everything possible to make sure we don't get in their way and they don't get in ours.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- said that the U.S. Department of Justice is cooperating with Mexican authorities related to the attack against the journalist -- (off microphone) -- because of -- (off microphone) -- to the drug trafficking. May we know if it is true and what kind of cooperation and --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would ask Bert to tell you whatever we might say publicly on it. I do not think I should comment until Bert can confirm what might be said.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I want to ask you, according to recent articles in the newspapers, the Colombian drug smugglers are using Puerto Rico as a new base to smuggle cocaine to the United States. Is the Department of Justice taking

some precautions to prevent the flow of drugs coming up from Puerto Rico now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have had a significant deployment of agents in Puerto Rico to address the crime problems there. And we are working with the authorities in Puerto Rico, as we are in a number of other areas, and in all districts, to try to develop an effective working relationship, where we work together, exchange information, and take appropriate steps based on what is in the best interest of the particular case.

QUESTION: Back on -- (off microphone) -- the Temple was not charged -- was named an unindicted co-conspirator but not charged. Was the decision to charge them influenced by the fact that the Senate committee had granted immunity to most of their key officials?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the things I think, in whatever later life I have after this, it will be so wonderful to be able to talk to people and answer questions. But as you know, I just don't comment on pending cases.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as a result of the Justice Department's investigation of campaign finance, does it take away from other Justice Department investigations? What percent of the Department -- (off microphone)?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: In all that I have been doing, one thing I have not been doing is calculating the percent. But what we try to do on all matters is to prioritize and to make sure that we have appropriate resources committed, based on the importance of the case. And in this instance, I think -- and I continue to check -- I was there yesterday at the task force offices, making sure that we have the resources to do the job.

At the same time, I am constantly asking U.S. Attorneys and others, "What do we need?" We don't reach all of the cases that sometimes people would like to pursue -- small, criminal cases. But we try to do everything we can to make sure that the resources of the Federal Government are used, pursuant to principles of Federalism, to address the important crime problems. And I do not think we've taken away from that.

QUESTION: Have you had to enlarge any departments (off microphone)?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We haven't enlarged departments. What we have tried to do is to pull from various offices in the Department of Justice U.S. Attorneys offices and otherwise to support what the Criminal Division is doing.

QUESTION: Some members of the public expressed concern about the possibility of terrorism in this country if there is indeed hostilities with Iraq. Whether the public's concerns about that are justified or not, can you give any assurance about the extent of the counterterrorism effort to deal with things like that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I can't discuss the details of it, obviously. But what we have tried to do, regardless of the time or the circumstance, is to identify every lead that can be followed, pursue every lead, monitor every lead, and take appropriate precautions with the tools that we have.

I obviously can't represent to the American people that I can prevent everything. But I am committed to doing everything I can to look at what we have and make sure we're using it right to try to achieve the goal of making sure it doesn't happen in the first place.

QUESTION: Is there a heightened state of alert in this country from, let's say, Arab extremists, both Iraqi and others?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, we take precautions just based on common sense and based on the information that we have. We obviously don't discuss it. And it is important that we pursue every lead we can to prevent. And I'm not talking about now, I'm just talking about at any time, with the forces that exist around the world, to make sure that something like that doesn't happen.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on the issue of outside counsel for the White House on executive privilege, is the Department staying out of this to avoid the appearance of conflict on the issue? Could you talk a little bit about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I could not comment further than I have.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: On the why?

QUESTION: Just for the record, on the Maria Hsia indictment, does that make the fundraiser an illegal event that the Vice President attended?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The indictment speaks for itself, and I'm just not going to characterize or comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, could you give us an update on the pursuit of Eric Rudolph in connection with the Birmingham clinic bombing? Has there been any additional

evidence uncovered, linking him to any of the militia groups in the area?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I am not going to comment about evidence. What I would ask everyone is if they have any information -- let me get you the phone numbers, or ask Bert to -- do you have the phone numbers? Bert will give you the phone numbers. If you have any information concerning Mr. Rudolph's whereabouts, if you would call these numbers, it would be very important.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: He has not had a chance yet. Then we will come back to you.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in public testimony last year on several occasions, you described the strategy behind the campaign finance investigation as one of moving from the bottom up, that would go from smaller players to larger players. Does that still remain the strategy behind this investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are going to use every tactic we can that is appropriate and proper under the law. That always is one.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, again referring to your public statements on this, after both the Trie and the Maria Hsia indictments, you characterized those indictments as important steps. Could you relate that statement to your prior descriptions of the strategy of moving from smaller players to larger players? I mean, where do we stand on that spectrum which you yourself described?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not characterize any part of the spectrum by evidence that's currently available. Again, we are going to do everything we can to take any evidence where it leads us, regardless of where it leads us to.

Let me give you the hotline number: 1-800-575-9873 or 1-888-ATF-BOMB.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you believe Mexico is doing better in the struggle against drugs and corruption, and maybe, with the increasing effort of the U.S. Government, they are forcing the Colombians to get out of Mexico and look for some other routes to smuggle drugs?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we are working with Mexico in every way possible. And I think the Attorney General is pursuing a number of different initiatives that are very important. I think it is important, as we look at the whole issue of drugs, that we make sure that we don't concentrate just on one place;

that we are prepared, when action in one place produces trafficking in another and displaces the traffic, I think it is important that we keep up with it.

I used to look at the circumstances surrounding the Federal push in South Florida in 1979 and 1980. We had made some impacts in South Florida, with Federal assistance, but then it began to move up the coast and come back down through by ground transportation or it would come in the Gulf Coast. And so I think it is important, and we are trying to look at the whole picture and be prepared both in the Caribbean as well as on the Southwest border.

QUESTION: But are you satisfied, and do you think Mexico can be certified?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the State Department and the White House will make appropriate comments at the appropriate time.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what do you think about the certification process itself?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is important that we work through the certification process and that we recognize that it is just a snapshot at one time. The important thing for us all to do is to build an alliance with those nations that are committed to ending drug trafficking and drug abuse in their country, as we are in ours.

It is a major, major challenge. And what it basically is going to require is everyone working together, developing procedures for extradition that make sure that drug traffickers know that there is no safe haven, that they can't run to someplace and escape the sentences that fit the crime. I think it is going to require a sharing. We are going to have to address the issue of how we share together, without inappropriate disclosures.

And on all of these issues, I think we can make a difference if we work together. Most nations in the world are realizing what drugs are doing to their citizenry. And together, I think we can have an impact, make a difference, reducing the trafficking. And I think that is the focus we should have.

QUESTION: Do you think at some point down the road, perhaps when this Campaign Task Force is winding down, that you will lay out to the American people what you believe about these very serious allegations that have been raised about PRC involvement in American elections?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether I will be able to or not, because I don't know what will be classified information or not and what could be

released.

QUESTION: Does your Inspector General enjoy your confidence? He apparently is not terribly popular in your Criminal Division, according to a public statement that they made yesterday, responding to his audit report on the handling of the casino that was seized. Are you either disturbed by the public feud between your Criminal Division and the Inspector General, and particularly in view -- does the Inspector General enjoy your confidence?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: He enjoys my confidence. And I think what happens when you have one component that is trying to do its job, and inherits a situation, and another component, or the Inspector General, says, well, you could have done it better, there will always be tension. I have not had a chance to read the report, and I am looking forward to reading it and getting the benefit of both components, and taking whatever steps are necessary, based on the reports of both components, to address the issues raised.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, for the purpose of clarification not to discuss the specifics of the matter. It is unclear to me from what you said on executive privilege whether the White House said "We'll do it; no, thanks," or whether the Justice Department said, "We don't care to do it; you should go outside."

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have just tried to work this out, and I think it is a mutual resolution of the matter.

QUESTION: When was the decision made?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not have the exact time and place.

QUESTION: OK --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not have the exact time.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the Hsia indictment publicly alleges that false information was given to the INS in connection with the Temple. Could you give us some idea of whether the government is reevaluating decisions to allow anyone to stay in the country, deporting anyone, investigating any of those decisions?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think I understand your question.

QUESTION: The Hsia indictment alleges that, in connection with some of these campaign contributions, false information was given to the INS, which obviously

handles the decision on whether certain clerical people in connection with the Temple were going to be allowed to stay in the country. So if false information went to the INS in relation to some of the INS's decisionmaking, is the Department going to reevaluate whether certain people who were allowed to stay in the country really should have been?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My understanding is that it is being reviewed. I will ask Bert to give you whatever we can specifically say about it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, back on campaign finances briefly. Has the task force cleared Representative Dan Burton yet, or is that still an active investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on assisted suicide in Oregon, your staff has given you their opinion that the DEA can't use Federal law to block Oregon State law. Have you had any contact with the White House on that issue? And if so, what feedback have you received?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have received a report. I have also -- the DEA made a decision; I want DEA to look at the report, and I am waiting to hear from them so that I can be assured that I have heard from both sides.

QUESTION: Did you get a report from the White House on that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: Within the Department?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That's right.

QUESTION: Okay. But has there been any contact with the White House?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No. It is from OLC. And I want to make sure that I give DEA the opportunity to be heard. So I have not made any final decision.

QUESTION: Can you say when you anticipate making your decision?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would like to make it as soon as possible, consistent with giving DEA the opportunity to have any comments made that it would like to proffer.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what relationship would that decision have to the similar efforts that the Federal Government made in the marijuana decriminalization issues between Arizona, California -- (off microphone) -- and other States? Does the same logic carry forward, either a shift in policy overall, and have you discussed that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What is the shift of policy?

QUESTION: That the Federal Government cannot use its powers to -- (off microphone) -- State law in the Oregon assisted suicide case. The Federal Government has threatened, in the case of --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not made a final decision.

QUESTION: I am asking how would you review that if that's the OLC's view of this? Do you think --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not do "what ifs."

QUESTION: In this case -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What is the question? If the OLC says --

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- Federal Government, in the case of the Oregon assisted suicide law cannot override State law, can the Federal Government, in the case of the marijuana decriminalization initiative, override State law?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am going to have to look at all the issues with respect to the decision I make on physician-assisted suicide. And then I will make an appropriate determination as to how it applies in any other situation. But at this point, I am not prepared to say.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the FBI is investigating -- several of its top officials -- (off microphone). Have you been briefed on that investigation? And is the Justice Department's OPR involved?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will ask Bert to check for you and to see just what can be said.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, just to go back to Ron's question. Did the White House inform you that they might be invoking executive privilege -- was that why the

decision was made, or was this something that you have been discussing with your staff and --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the answer I gave to Ron is the answer.

QUESTION: And could you say whether this was communicated to the White House before or after Mr. Lindsey met with the Judge yesterday?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I could not discuss the timing.

QUESTION: Can I go back to the bombing in Birmingham. I want to ask if --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You can do -- try to do anything. I do not now whether it will --

QUESTION: Let's try the bombing in Birmingham a little more. Are you satisfied with the cooperation that the Justice Department is receiving from pro-life -- let's say, responsible pro-life groups and individuals -- are the pro-lifers coming forward with any leads? And I have just another follow-up.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it would be more appropriate for the investigators who are on the scene, who are following leads, to make any comment such as that. For me to make a comment from this distance could only muddy the waters. And so, in situations like this, I think it is better that the comments be made by those who are directly responsible at the scene.

QUESTION: I asked this question a couple of years ago. Let me try it again. Is it not the responsibility of all upstanding citizens, pro-lifers, pro-choicers, to bring these violent people to justice, to turn evidence if they have any?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There have been many people who disagree with positions taken by others, but who nonetheless uphold the law. Many people have come forward to assist in matters, whether it be clinic bombings or other situations. And I think it is part of a citizen's responsibility, particularly in situations like this, where lives -- a life was lost and a person was hurt. And so I would again ask anybody who has information to call 1-800-575-9873 or 1-888-ATF-BOMB.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is the Department of Justice conducting any investigation with regard to the fraud of hundreds of Mexican immigrants in New York announced recently?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have just seen reference to that. I think it would be better for the people on the scene to comment, so that I do not give you any misinformation.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, has Secretary Rubin expressed any particular position on the Secret Service testimony?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I just talked briefly with Mr. Rubin, and we did not go into the details.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if the national drug strategy lays out specific numerical goals that the Department of Justice has committed itself to achieving in reducing drug trafficking, do you favor that same approach to other forms of crime, in which law enforcement bodies will set out specific numerical goals for the reduction of criminal activity?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If you are referring to the national drug strategy that General McCaffrey released, I think it points out there that this is a plan that involves Federal, State and local initiatives, and that we must all work together to achieve those goals.

I think it is important to try to estimate what you can do and to develop goals. But I recognize as much as anybody else how times change. And, for example -- and I've told the story a number of times in this last week -- crime was going down in Dade County after a significant increase. It was going down, as I recall, in 1982, 1983, and I began to feel encouraged. And then I began to hear from people about some substance that was cocaine but really wasn't cocaine. And it was causing just real violence, and it seemed to be violence inciting.

And then I began to hear the name "crack." And then I began to see the homicide figures go up and the violence rate go up. And so I think it is important to recognize that there are going to be forces -- new forces, new developments. And that is the reason it is important that law enforcement plan not only for the present, for the crime problems of today, but that we try to share information to the extent possible, to telescope the problems of the future.

That is one of the reasons that we, early on, developed an amphetamine strategy, after listening to State and local law enforcement, meeting with them, hearing from U.S. Attorneys around the country, with the hope that we can respond quickly, so that methamphetamine does not become entrenched and wreak such havoc in communities across the Nation, as crack did.

It took the government a long time to begin to respond to crack and to understand the dimension of the crack problem.

Thank you very much.

(Whereupon, at 10:00 a.m., the press conference concluded.)