



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, July 16, 1998

9:35 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:35 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

VOICE: Good morning.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, a couple of days ago Senate Majority Leader said he discovered new and compelling evidence that absolutely required an Independent Counsel investigation of 1996 campaign finances. Have you received a letter to this effect or do you know what type of evidence he was referring to?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: All I have seen is the statement that he made. I do not know anything more about it than that -- from his perspective.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what can you tell us about the current status of the appeal of the Secret Service's request by Starr?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That matter is now under seal, so I can't discuss it.

QUESTION: With regard to the PRC's alleged participation in campaign contributions, has there been any progress from the other side coming out of it, the Clinton summit with Mr. Jiang and his visit to China, on the extradition of some of these people who have dropped out of sight and allegedly are hiding in China?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As you conduct an investigation and as you try to locate people and try to make sure that they are brought to justice, the worst thing you can do is comment about it publicly. And for that reason, I have tried not to comment, as you know.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you have a reaction to the release of the memo by Senator Thompson yesterday, which --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated yesterday, our arrangement was, and we understood the arrangement to be, that it would be confidential. That was the reason it was briefed to such a limited number of people.

QUESTION: But now that that genie is out of the bottle, the memo basically says there is a fundamental misreading of the independent counsel law here in the Justice Department. What is your view about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, we have reviewed, as we do all points of view within the Department -- there is discussion back and forth, and the career lawyers who have interpreted the Independent Counsel Act from one administration to administration have their views, other people have their views, and I make the best judgment I can based on everybody's position.

QUESTION: But as Senator Thompson pointed out yesterday, Director Freeh is not a career lawyer within the Justice Department. He's a former Federal judge and a former Federal prosecutor himself.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That is the reason I have just great respect for him.

QUESTION: Are you upset with Senator Thompson for revealing what he did yesterday? And to what he revealed, is that accurate as far as you could --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on it. Because what I am trying to do is, as you remember from the hearing before Chairman Burton's committee, I am trying to make sure that people -- it is wonderful to have a Department like this, with great lawyers, with differing opinions, feeling free that they can come to me, state their views, have it out, have good discussions, and let me make the best conclusion I can. For that reason, I want to continue that.

And I am going to be very careful in how I brief so that I can enable the lawyers to speak frankly and enable investigators to speak frankly. I do not want "yes people" around me; I want people that give me their unvarnished opinion of what the law and the evidence are.

QUESTION: Are you upset with Senator Thompson, and that you believe that he was sworn to keep that confidential?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have the greatest respect for Senator Thompson. I just want to do everything I can to make sure that the opportunity that I have had to get the best, most honest advice I can from the people within the Department continues unabated.

QUESTION: So you are not challenging the content of the memo as he described it? I mean --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not commenting on the memo.

QUESTION: Do you think the FBI, under Director Freeh, has increasingly become sort of a renegade operation, going about on their own, and intent on embarrassing the Justice Department and yourself?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not have any sense at all that Director Freeh has done anything to try to embarrass me.

QUESTION: According to some wires, three members of the group, Republic of Texas, were apprehended under suspicions of preparing a plan to kill President Clinton. Can you tell us something about it? According to these wires, your office have received some messages, threatening the FBI agents. Can you tell us something about it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will ask Bert to give you whatever is available for public record.

QUESTION: May I go back to the Secret Service issue?

You said at the hearing yesterday that the reason you are fighting the subpoena is because the Secret Service knows best on this issue. Are you convinced that you need to fight it this far? I mean if it weren't for Mr. Miletti's insistence, would you have fought it to this level?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am relying on Mr. Miletti, who is the head of the Secret Service, and the Secret Service, who has had vast years of experience in the protection of the President. I think they know best what is necessary.

And I want to make sure that we do everything we can to properly pursue this issue. What's at stake, based on what the Secret Service has advised, is the safety of the President of the United States now and for years to come. And I think that's too important not to pursue in every way possible.

QUESTION: And are you convinced of that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Convinced of Mr. Milette's --

QUESTION: Pardon?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: From everything that I have heard and from what he has told me and the information that he has presented to me, I think he makes a very forceful argument.

QUESTION: But, Ms. Reno, if I could follow up on something you just said -- you wanted to pursue in every way possible. I understood you to tell the committee yesterday that the Department hadn't made a decision about whether, if it was unsuccessful in getting the en banc hearing in the Court of Appeals, it would appeal to the Supreme Court. Has that decision been made?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Not at this point.

QUESTION: If it's such an urgent question, that the safety of the country depends upon it, why wouldn't you immediately go to the Supreme Court?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the things that the Supreme Court has done and what is very helpful is to try to work through these issues and to take it so that we make sure we have every opportunity to present it to the Court in the most complete way possible.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if we could return to kind of an old issue. Has OPR begun its review of complaints against Judge Starr?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, it's not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on the Secret Service, how would you depict the Department's relationship with the President and the White House given it is a legal matter, and also with OIG as the prosecutor against your client? Can you just walk us through how those relationships now stand in this litigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, the White House has made clear that the decision in this matter is that of the Secretary of the Treasury and the Justice Department. And we are working with them to try to pursue every avenue that we can that's right and appropriate. With respect to the Independent Counsel, it is important that I do everything I can to ensure his independence, while at the same time

taking the appropriate steps in this matter.

QUESTION: How important is it for the Justice Department to -- like, is it important for the Justice Department to place a legal marker on this Secret Service issue for the future? Is some of it that, since it's never been debated before?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know what you mean by a "marker for the future."

QUESTION: Just the fact of your position on this for the future, even if it doesn't go through this time, even if you don't win this time.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What I think we want to do is to pursue the legal remedies, be it remedies that may be available through litigation; and as I indicated to Senator Hatch and others yesterday, pursue legislative remedies if that be appropriate. But it is an important issue, and I think the American people recognize it as such, and it is something that we have got to consider in the context of the whole.

QUESTION: Can you talk a little bit about the search for Eric Rudolph? How much of a priority is it right now to find him?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, obviously it is a priority.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, given the fact of the importance to the American people, is the Department giving any consideration to trying to get some of these basic motions, in terms of whether you are going to appeal or not, open, so that people will know, basically, the sequence of events much more clearly?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I understand it, it relates to grand jury matters. So there are fine lines to be drawn. But I would ask Bert to keep you briefed as much as possible.

QUESTION: You all mentioned yesterday that the United States is awaiting the possible extradition from the Amasqua brothers from Mexico. But, on the other hand, Mexico is awaiting the possible extradition of -- (off microphone) -- former assistant Mexican attorney in Mexico. We know that this week -- (off microphone) -- Carrerra Fuentes, which is detained in Mexico, was allowed by the Mexican Government to travel to Texas to testify in this case.

Do you believe that soon Mexico can hear about the extradition of --
(off microphone)?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are working with Attorney General Madrozzo in every way possible to achieve that.

QUESTION: And what about the arrest I believe in San Diego, of one of the leading capos in the Arrellano-Felix family. Are you encouraged by that? And where are the Arrellano-Felix brothers? Why aren't they under arrest?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We want to pursue every lead that we can. In this instance, I think this step forward is very important, and we will continue unabated our efforts in this regard.

QUESTION: What about the Martin Luther King assassination probe, is that still coming soon?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are continuing to review that, to make sure that we consider all the points that have been raised. And I hope we will make a decision soon.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, just to make sure I understand, even if the Secret Service agents are compelled to testify today or at some future time, this will not moot out the dispute; you are still going to pursue the case through the courts?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We shall have to see what happens when the events take place in this whole matter.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you talked about legislative remedies at the hearing yesterday. I think the Senators started to ask you whether you support legislation that would recognize a protective function privilege. Do you support such an idea, and does the Department as a whole?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated to Senator Hatch, we will of course pursue all appropriate remedies, and legislation would be a very important step.

QUESTION: Yesterday the Senate quizzed you on technology funding, especially distribution. I wasn't aware there was a problem there. Is there?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Let me give you some different examples. Currently, just at the outset, there are States and local labs that are overwhelmed. Cases are being delayed, investigations slowed down, because they do not have enough forensic capability and laboratory capacity. That's just for current technology in crime fighting.

We are developing whole new capacities in the area of DNA testing. We are moving into the information age, where cybertools are critically important in detecting crime, but also in matching wits with criminals who use cybertools, who use computers, who evade detection through methods that are based on new technology.

What I think is important is that we have a capacity throughout the country, at the State and local level and at the national level, to deal with all these wide-ranging issues that we will confront, I think, within the next 100 years. It makes much better sense, rather than somebody having to develop a very expensive capacity in a lab that may be infrequently used -- it makes much better sense to do that on a regional basis, and then for the very unusual and very expensive type of equipment or expertise, do that on a national basis.

And all I want to do is to make sure that we work together to avoid expensive duplication, to ensure that at every level of government we have the tools necessary to fight crime and we do it in a coordinated way, so that it's done without delay.

To give you an example, there were times when I wanted, as a local prosecutor, for the FBI to test something at Quantico. Sometimes it happened and sometimes it didn't. I think the public is entitled to everything that we can do to ensure that police officers and local labs, and local medical examiners have the tools they need to do the job.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you say it's a high priority to keep the Secret Service from testifying about the President's activities -- they're the ones closest to him. You also say you have not appealed to the Supreme Court. You were rejected by the Court of Appeals. What is preventing them from testifying this morning, as they were supposed to?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, the matter that is pending is under seal, so I can't discuss that.

QUESTION: But you've already discussed it.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I've discussed what has come before.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the White House says it's not their issue, it's the Justice Department's and the Treasury Department's. And yesterday the White House press secretary, the President's press secretary and the two lawyers to the President spent their time denouncing Mr. Starr over this issue. And I was wondering how is it no longer the White House -- it's not a White House issue?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm not aware of what they did. I did not hear about that.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, can we get back to whether they're going to appeal the D.C. Circuit's decision on the Windows 95 case?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know what the position is at this point and what the status is. I will ask Bert to check and let you know.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as the Nation's top law enforcement officer -- and recognizing Mr. Starr's role as a prosecutor -- how difficult a decision is it to pursue the Secret Service matter, knowing that he's trying to gather the facts, as you normally do, in a criminal investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Every prosecutor has situations where it's going to take time, where a court says, no, you can't do this, you can't do that; you take an appeal, you wait. We all face that. And I think what I'm faced with -- I can't speak for Mr. Starr -- what I'm faced with is how we make sure that important issues, important questions are litigated without inappropriately delaying any other proceeding. And that's what we try to do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, there seems to be, however, a very large difference of opinion between yourself and Judge Starr on this matter, given that you announced your intent to pursue the legal issue. He is working very hard to get those Secret Service agents into court even as we speak. You know, you are both prosecutors -- can you address that divergence?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not think it's appropriate for me to address the divergence, other than to discuss my position. Because I do not want to do anything -- he has a role -- and I do not want to do anything by my comments that would impact on what he is trying to do. I have my responsibility, and I'm going to continue to try to perform that in every way I possible can.

QUESTION: Well, how do you feel about the fact that he is pursuing very aggressively a policy of trying to get these agents into court when the Department has stated publicly that its intent is to pursue an appeal of that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated, I can't speak for Mr. Starr, because I do not know what information he has or what his strategy is or anything about that. And it would be inappropriate, even if I did, for me to comment.

QUESTION: Why didn't you go for a stay earlier in the process instead of at the last minute? The Department has had ample opportunity, previous to now, to get a stay on the subpoena.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, it would be inappropriate for me to comment while the matter is under seal.

QUESTION: Do you have any comment on the New York Times reporting that the administration has already asked Chief Justice Rehnquist to block Secret Service testimony?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I do not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is the Justice Department going to look in any to the charges that were made in the New York Times last Sunday and Monday regarding the Cuban-American National Foundation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not aware of it. I will be happy to check and have Bert make any comments that we can.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, following on the question of the Arrellano-Felix in Mexico, we know the Mexican authorities last week have apprehended one of the most important people of this organization, known by -- (off microphone) -- or "the boss." Have you been informed by the Mexican authorities, and do you plan maybe to seek his extradition?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, may I follow up on Roberto's question?

How does it work normally if one part of the Justice Department is doing a criminal investigation of some government entity and another part of the Justice Department is trying to preserve the independence of that entity and perhaps

resist the investigation? How are those things normally resolved?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It depends on the circumstances. What I will do, so that I do not do "what ifs," is ask Bert to give you some examples that may have been public over time about how the Department handles such situations.

QUESTION: Well, is the Department still negotiating with Starr or his aids over this issue? And when was the last time you or your aids met with Mr. Starr on the Secret Service issue?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, your Inspector General issued a rather scathing report against members of the Border Patrol -- Border Patrol agents who are members of the union. And he said that their arguments and allegations of very serious wrongdoing by the INS were absolutely without merit. And the INS was given a clean slate. Can you take action against the Border Patrol agents who made these serious and false allegations?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: First of all, you made a statement, if I understood you correctly, that the I.G. had issued a scathing report on the Border Patrol.

QUESTION: No; on the Border Patrol agents who made the charges.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Okay. Because he certainly didn't do that. And the Border Patrol is doing some very excellent work up and down that border.

We're in the process of reviewing the report, and I would not have a comment until we completed the review.

QUESTION: But can you take action against the people who made these charges of illegal actions?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not completed my review of the report, so it would be premature for me to comment on anything that I did with respect to it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno you have mentioned that you were going to take some actions in the border, the South border, with Mexico, to prevent the abuse of

the crossing cards in the border. Can you comment on that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yesterday I simply commented that I would check on that for the Senator, and that I talked about the larger effort to accumulate information that is helpful in terms of stemming problems such as alien smuggling and drug smuggling along the border.

QUESTION: The new cards will be part of these efforts?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, in the context of yesterday's question, let me just check and report back.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, yesterday Chairman Hatch -- who is always a gentleman, first of all -- strongly implied that if you did not appoint or seek the appointment of an independent counsel on campaign finance, it might kill the independent counsel statute when it comes up for renewal next year. Several months ago he strongly warned the Department against indicting Haley Barbour in the campaign finance investigation.

Have you had any private conversations with Chairman Hatch about the propriety of some of these statements or the fact that you may feel a bit pushed by these things?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not had any private conversations with him. As I have told Senator Hatch, whom I respect so very much and who I have a great regard for, I am not going to be pushed into anything except by evidence and by law. And he and I may disagree, but you cannot always agree on everything.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, do you stand in total solidarity with Barry McCaffrey's allegations, charges, evidences, that he will be taking to the Dutch today that the liberal Dutch drug policies are a crime-ridden disaster, and he would bring such evidence to the Dutch; are you with him on this?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not seen any statement, so I could not comment.

QUESTION: What is the last day for the head of the campaign finance task force that Mr. Labella -- what's his last day on the job? There seems to be a widespread perception that the investigation is very badly stalled. I take it you are not going to agree with that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am just puzzled by it. I obviously cannot comment. But considering the indictments that have come down, the work that is being done, there is nothing stalled about it.

QUESTION: Are we any closer to knowing whether members of the Clinton-Gore campaign evaded campaign laws or whether the Chinese tried to improperly influence the election?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I am obviously not going to comment prematurely on something that could affect the investigation.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) -- to Mexico -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on it other than to say that the public record speaks for itself in some measure.

QUESTION: Can you outline for me the issues on the Martin Luther King assassination probe that you're currently going through in trying to decide whether it starts or not?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, that would be a premature comment.

QUESTION: Do you have anything about the three men who were caught off the coast of Florida, who claim they were on their way to assassinate Fidel Castro in Venezuela?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will ask Bert to give you any information that we might have. I'm not quite sure which incident you refer to.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, has Mr. Labella given you his report this summer yet?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, he hasn't.

QUESTION: Any thoughts yet on whether you will make parts of it public?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know what it will say, so I cannot tell you yet.

QUESTION: When is his last day, do you know?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are trying to ensure a smooth transition, so I do not think there is any cutoff point.

QUESTION: What can you say about the NRA's challenge to the City of Philadelphia to enforce existing laws in order to drop the violent crime rate in the city, and I'm curious to know -- it's based, as I understand it, on the project based on a model in Richmond, Virginia. And my two questions are, first, does the administration in fact support this NRA-endorsed challenge to the City of Philadelphia? And, second, is it necessary -- the NRA is saying that they have told the Mayor of Philadelphia that they absolutely need the administration supporting this -- is that true, or can a city just do what Richmond did and implement a program like this on its own?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, what we have tried to do is form partnerships with State and local law enforcement on violence initiatives. In one instant it may be the local prosecutor deciding that they want to handle the gun cases and that they can do so as effectively as the Federal prosecutors. In other instances it may be that the Federal prosecutor has an advantage through sentencing procedures that make it more effective for them to proceed.

Each jurisdiction will have its own particular set of needs and resources and laws. And it is our hope that the U.S. Attorney will work with State and local law enforcement, as they have done on the anti-violence initiative that has been in place now since March of 1994. And with respect to guns, with respect to drug organizations, gangs, major traffickers, domestic violence, law enforcement officials will meet together and decide who should do what based on what is in the best interest of crime in that community.

So it will differ across the Nation, but we will try to cooperate in every way we can in Philadelphia.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Mr. Burson is about to leave his position as U.S. Attorney in San Diego. Can you tell us something about what he has been accomplishing in San Diego and who is going to take his position?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Mr. Burson has left, has been the superintendent of schools in San Diego for some time now. He did a splendid job as U.S. Attorney. He brought together Federal, State and local law enforcement. I think crime is down in San Diego as a result of a strong partnership that was formed. He was a great ally of the INS and the Border Patrol and what they have done in terms of Operation Gatekeeper. He was of great assistance to me in coordinating all our efforts along the Southwest border.

I think he is an example of what we hope for in U.S. Attorneys. And I'm going to miss him. But I think the school children of San Diego are very fortunate to have somebody like him.

QUESTION: In regards to the Singleton case. I know that the Court itself is going to be rehearing this en banc. But what I want to know is has the Justice Department weighed in any way? Have you done any kind of a survey on how many cases might be affected across the country? Or have you prepared some kind of brief for the Court in making their decision on whether Singleton should stand or not?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will be heard in the everyone banc rehearing. The Court has withdrawn the opinion.

QUESTION: Who will take over the position of Mr. Burson? Mr. Labella?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Mr. Labella has been appointed the Acting U.S. Attorney. The administration will receive a suggestion for nomination from the United States Senators and take appropriate action.

QUESTION: But he is still working in the investigation of the financing?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes, he is.

VOICE: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: Have you any plans to take a vacation and get away from all of this?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I hope to go down the river again

and expand my rivers. I haven't been down the Shenandoah yet, so I'm anxious to do that.

Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 10:04 a.m., the press conference concluded.)