



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, August 6, 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.

VOICES: Good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, it doesn't seem like Thursday morning.

QUESTION: That's right. They must be on vacation. It's that time of year.

QUESTION: Monica went in at 8:30 today.

(Pause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, did you speak a little while ago with Chairman Burton and Congressman Waxman about their subpoena?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have been in conversation, and we are continuing our talks, to see what we can work out in terms of an accommodation.

QUESTION: You say you're continuing your talks, but they are scheduled to vote you in contempt in about half an hour. Are the talks still going on now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I indicated, we are continuing to talk, to see if we can reach an accommodation.

QUESTION: Are you still holding out hopes that there could be a last-minute agreement, before this vote?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I feel that it is very important that the two branches of government talk in the best of good faith. Because I am convinced that people who want to do their job, Congress in its oversight function, the executive in its prosecution function, can reach an accommodation.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are having discussions with Chairman Burton, and I think I should just discuss it with him.

QUESTION: Have you already briefed him yourself, personally, on this -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think I should just discuss it with him.

QUESTION: Can you say, over the last several days, whether there has been progress? Do you feel closer to an agreement?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we will just let time see what happens.

QUESTION: Are you talking specifically with regard to the matter that we discussed in your news conference on Tuesday about briefing the committee chairmen, the relevant committee chairmen, a little more fully about the memos? Is this the substance of the talks basically?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, we are having conversations, and I think I should deal with Chairman Burton.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, regarding this matter, have you had any conversations with anyone at the White House about this?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I have not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, as you know, the committee has said it does not want grand jury information, 6(e) material, if you take that out and you take out the prosecution strategy, would there be anything left? Is there anything in those memos that you can sanitize?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, I would not discuss what we can and cannot do at this point, because we are having conversations. And I think it is best to deal with Chairman Burton.

QUESTION: I guess that is my way of asking the same question that you addressed on Tuesday, which is, why can't you send something up there?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we will -- we are in the process of making decisions. And I think it is important that those decisions be made without any interference, based on the law, based on the evidence. And then let us see what we can do to provide the information that the committee needs for its oversight function, without in any way impacting the criminal investigation.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, this 3-week decisionmaking process that you have laid out --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It is a longer decisionmaking process than that.

QUESTION: What will happen between now and 3 weeks from now? Are you consulting with --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I explained to you, the preparation of the memo by Mr. LaBella took some considerable time. I want people who have been involved in the issue, and others, to look at it, to address all the issues very carefully, to make sure that they understand all the arguments that are made, to look at it with an open mind, afresh, and then prepare any response that they want, either in agreement or disagreement. And then I want to be able to read those responses. And I want to be able to consider, after discussion with all concerned, with anybody who wants to be heard, I want to consider what the correct result should be.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Mr. LaBella and Louis Freeh and Mr. DeSarno stood very, very strong as your loyal defenders, defenders of your integrity as Attorney General. Yet their recommendations were adamantly and solidly that the IC should be appointed in this particular campaign case now. They said that the AG has a mandatory conflict of interest, both Mr. Freeh and Mr. LaBella.

So, how do you look at it now, after the testimony of Tuesday, regarding the recommendations of your loyalists?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think what was reflected in that hearing is something that most Americans understand: that people who have great regard for and great respect for each other can disagree, and disagree without calling each other names.

At this point, I am reviewing the memorandum to make a judgment. I have not reached a conclusion. I may or may not agree with Director Freeh and Mr. LaBella. But I have the same regard and respect for them that they have indicated they have for me. And whatever decision we reach, it is going to be reached based on a thorough review of the facts and the law. And on those issues, people can disagree.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is it an option to assert executive privilege for the memoranda?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not going to discuss what we are trying to do. I think it is important -- again, when you have the two branches of government, each with its own responsibility, I think we can work it out. And I think we are going to be able to.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, how do you react to criticism from conservative commentators and prominent Republicans on the Hill who say that Principal Associate Deputy Attorney General Bob Litt has had an unduly powerful behind-the-scenes role in advising you not to ask for the trigger -- the appointment of an independent counsel?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Mr. Litt is one of the fine lawyers in the Department. He has had no greater or lesser role than others. One of the wonderful things about this Department is that there are some really great lawyers in the Department, both career and non-career. And it is really an extraordinary -- people who think that this is a monolithic department that makes all the decisions in total agreement, with nobody disagreeing, should see some of the meetings that are held around this table. There is good, respectful disagreement, discussion and debate.

Look at the Supreme Court. Even amongst the Justices, you have good, respectful discussion and debate, and disagreement. And I think it is important to put in perspective just what this is about. People can disagree -- disagree without impugning each other's motives.

And what we have got to do is to work through all the understandings, all the arguments, and make sure that we have made the best judgment we can based on all the facts involved.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if I could follow up. Why do you think they might be singling him out, though? Could it be that he was up for Criminal Division Chief and that never happened and there might be still some lingering concern?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: The motives for why people impugn each other is beyond me sometimes.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is there a danger in your mind that you might lean over backwards not to be influenced by this kind of pressure in making this judgment? Does that concern you at all?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the things that I try to do is to make sure that I do not let pressure push me over backwards or push me over frontwards.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: What would be your reaction if the committee -- if there is no agreement this morning and the committee does vote a contempt of Congress citation against you? What is your thought about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I will think about that when that happens.

QUESTION: Well, just let us say that it happened.

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

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on the FBI lab. It is obviously very much in the news. And three of the lab people who were harshly criticized in the I.G. report have been punished very leniently. They apparently have a slap on the wrist -- letters of censure. How can there be confidence in the lab when punishment of this sort is meted out?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As you are aware, the Inspector General brought in experts who have made recommendations. A new lab director has been hired. He is doing a wonderful job. The Inspector General has had the chance to review

what is being done. They are in continuing conversation. And the last I talked with the Inspector General with respect to the progress that had been made in the lab, he was very positive about it.

QUESTION: Whenever you go to an oversight hearing you are quizzed and criticized for the drop in Federal prosecutions in various areas. Given the overall drop in the crime rates, are prosecutions still a valid barometer of how well you are doing to fight crime?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, first of all, I do not think the number of prosecutions has ever been, by itself, a barometer. If I take 50 prosecutions of serious gangs and major criminals and put out of business whole organizations, I accomplish far more than if I prosecute 500 tiny drug cases. So numbers are not the factor. What is at issue is what are you doing to the crime problem by what is the action being taken. And that is the way we try to address it.

In our community initiatives and our regional initiatives, we try to understand what is fueling the crime problem. Is it drugs? Is it a youth gang? Just what is involved?

We try to work with the State and local law enforcement officials to determine who should do what, based on principles of Federalism and based on what is in the best interest of the community -- not on who gets the credit and who should have the turf. And I think we have made real progress in these efforts that we have developed and we are developing.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I am -- (off microphone) -- with UPI.

A couple of days ago you said that, in terms of what you are dealing with right now with Chairman Burton and his committee, that you would not let issues like this become a political football for Congress. But what they are telling the American people is that this is exactly what this is, and you are playing with the political football, that you are not appointing an independent counsel to investigate the Democrats' campaign finance abuses. How do you convince the American people that that is not the case?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, first of all, the issue at stake right now is whether I should release a report. And what Congress heard the other day was from Director Freeh, from Mr. LaBella, from Mr. DeSarno, who said that to release that report would have a dramatic and adverse effect on the pending investigation that everybody cares a great deal about.

I would refer everyone to their testimony, which certainly indicates that it is not a matter of politics; it is a matter of what is in the best interest of the investigation.

With respect to the claim about independent counsel, as I have told them, I am reviewing it anew and afresh, looking at any new information, revisiting old information, and I will make a decision. And if they want me to do the right thing -- they certainly do not want me to rush into a judgment after reviewing a memorandum -- they want me to do it in the right way, and that is what I am going to do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on this same subject, within the last week, the PRC, that is the People's Liberation Army especially, of China, has warned the United States against providing a security umbrella for Taiwan and providing any weapons for Taiwan. This is just since Bill Clinton's visit over there.

Now, is justice being delayed or possibly denied as the core group identified by Mr. Freeh on Tuesday scatters and hides throughout the world, especially in the PRC, in China, and some take the Fifth? Is there a political gain for the core groups that is identified as Mr. Clinton, Mr. Gore, Mr. Ickes, people in the White House who are under some suspicion in this matter, as there is a delay before the election, and the truth is withheld before the fall election?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am sorry, but I do not begin to understand your question.

QUESTION: Okay. I have too many questions, but let me just ask, is justice being delayed and denied for those people who may have colluded with the PRC in the incursion of the United States political system in the 1996 election?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Based on my regular meetings with the Campaign Task Force, I feel very comfortable with the direction in which they are proceeding. And I ask them regularly whether they have sufficient staff, whether they have any limitation, is there anything I can do. And I will continue to support them in every way I can to make sure that they have the resources necessary to pursue any appropriate avenue.

QUESTION: And some say there is a political gain for the White House and the Clinton administration in not exposing this matter through an independent counsel proceeding rapidly, exposing it through the Congress and the committee, Mr. Burton's committee, because there is an election coming up, they want to delay this. Are you concerned that justice is being denied or delayed here?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I cannot speak for Chairman Burton's committee and what he can or cannot do. But I can say that based on the Task Force and my meetings with them, they are pursuing everything in the fastest possible pace, consistent with doing a thorough investigation.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the House last night passed this board, this proposal for an ethics board, that would apply State ethics rules to U.S. Attorneys around the country. What are you all doing to try to prevent its passage in the Senate?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We will be working with Senators and others. Six Attorneys General have written to indicate their concern about such a bill. And one of the things that I would like to say, in the course of House debate, there was criticism of prosecutors.

But I wish the people of America could hear from the people of Oklahoma City about their reaction to Federal prosecutors in the Oklahoma City bombing case. I wish the people of the United States could see the hours and hours and hours those prosecutors spent with agents, going over everything in detail, preparing, to see that justice was done.

Talk to the victims and the survivors in the World Trade Center case, and see what they think of Federal prosecutors. Talk to victims of telemarketing fraud, who have watched Federal prosecutors pursue boiler room operations. Talk to people who watch Federal prosecutors handle car-jacking cases that cut across city lines. And you will find that Federal prosecutors, along with their colleagues in State government, are doing extraordinary things to protect the American people.

QUESTION: And how would that be affected? How would it be harder for them to do their jobs if this legislation passed?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: If you, for example, had a case that cut across three or four States, they would have to be checked to make sure that they were complying with the different ethical rules that might vary from State to State. There would be a misconduct review board that could interfere during the course of the pending prosecution that might attempt to micromanage the prosecution or stop prosecution or encourage a prosecution in the wrong way.

We have a system that has worked extraordinarily well. There is a process that is ongoing that I think everyone has seen operate that can truly police it. And I think it is very important that we stand back and think what Federal prosecutors have done in these 5 years to protect the American people and to see that justice

was done after tragedies such as Oklahoma City.

QUESTION: Ma'am, DOJ is one of the sponsors of this current meeting on economic development on Indian lands now ongoing. What can DOJ do there on that scene?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I spoke yesterday to the conference, talking about the issues that should be addressed by those wanting to engage in economic development in Indian country. There are issues with respect to taxation. There are issues that anyone wanting to pursue these avenues should understand in terms of tribal law, in terms of tribal courts.

I spoke of what we were trying to do to encourage and promote tribal justice. And particularly, I spoke of law enforcement concerns. Because to have sound and vigorous economic development, you need to have safe communities.

We are engaged in these efforts. And I think that the need for economic development is one of the critical areas that we face.

I had a wonderful opportunity to visit the Wind River Indian Reservation, in Wyoming, last week. This was one of the key topics that people raised -- that it is fine what you are doing in law enforcement, but how do we engage in economic development? That is one of the bottom lines.

There is new thinking and real commitment on the part of so many people that I met on the reservation that day. And tribal traditions, the traditions of Native Americans, are very important to this land and we can learn a great deal from them.

(Pause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very much.

QUESTION: I have another.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Not another long one.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: No. Another short one. A relatively short one.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: It is about Mr. Clinton, the scandal. Ma'am, you are the head of the Justice Department, which is the world's leader in corrections, that is setting the standard. And I asked a question similar to this once about 6 months ago.

Do you believe that it is incumbent upon you to advise Mr. Clinton to seek treatment, to seek correction of the obvious problem that he has, whereby he would then become a leader of the American people in these types of matters? Do you think he needs to overcome his denial, which is basically when he doesn't even know he is lying?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the question was far too long.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno -- (off microphone) -- Justice Department -- (off microphone) -- any efforts to push back -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think any matter such as that should be discussed in the court.

Thank you.

VOICES: Thank you.

(Whereupon, at 9:52 a.m., the press conference was concluded.)