



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, December 17, 1998

9:28 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:28 a.m.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning.

VOICES: Good morning.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, first of all, our condolences to Governor Chiles. Do you have anything you want to say your friends?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think I would. Because yesterday was an extraordinary day in Tallahassee. Colleagues from many years spoke. Buddy McKay spoke. The Republican President of the Florida Senate spoke of how they had worked together to achieve so much for Florida's children, for Florida's schools. His children were absolutely eloquent.

And you thought back to 40 years of public service, of a man who was so highly regarded by so many people, loved by so many people. And there was a spirit of bipartisanship that was wonderful. You could almost reach out and touch it.

And then I woke up this morning to Senator John McCain's beautiful statement about Moe Udall. And he said at the last, Moe's humility, grace and joy are all too rare in today's acrid political climate. May his passing, like his life, rekindle the higher virtues that should light our way, and characterize how we conduct politics in a free society.

I think Moe Udall, Lawton Chiles, John McCain, others, are examples of what we should be

about as we face the great issues of the world today.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you've talked about a number of principles embodied in Lawton Chiles and Moe Udall. Do you find any of that principle in Washington today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I know it's there. And I think it's important for us, Democrats and Republicans, to follow Senator McCain's suggestion, and hope that their lives will illuminate for us how we deal with democracy. It is the best of all governments. It is a very difficult process, but one that requires our better nature.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in the wake of the military attack in Iraq, many folks around town are saying that security is being stepped up. What is the reason for that? Is that strictly a precaution, or is there some specific threat that we are trying to meet?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What we try to do in all of these instances is take what precautions we can to ensure that we do whatever is possible to protect the institutions and the people of this country.

QUESTION: What level of concern is there that sympathizers to Saddam Hussein might try to lash out in this country? Is there some level of concern about that sort of thing?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're just trying to take common sense precautions.

QUESTION: Do you know how this level of security compares to, for example, after the Oklahoma City bombing or during the Gulf War?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Is there a specific threat from Osama bin Laden to attack targets either overseas or in Washington or New York, as reported by Time Magazine?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment. I would let any comment be made by the National Security Council.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I asked this question last week, and I understand all the reasons why you feel you cannot answer --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: But you are a good, good journalist and you're persistent and you keep at it. And you do it with grace.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Well, thank you. And you declined to answer with grace.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: The Justice Department has researched this issue, presumably, on a bipartisan basis, on an institutional basis. Wouldn't it be good for the country, particularly at this time, if you just came out and tell us what the Justice Department thinks an impeachable offense is?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I have said before, I referred this matter to an independent counsel. That matter has been handled by the independent counsel. And I do not think I should do anything that comments on that, since it was an investigation conducted by them.

QUESTION: Do you have any comment on a related matter concerning what Congress -- whether it's -- it's the 105th, I believe we're at -- the 105th Congress takes the vote before the swearing in of the duly elected Congressmen, and if that vote will stand in the new Congress, or does another vote have to be taken? Or do you have anything to advise us about that confusion?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I do not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I do not know if you watched any of the coverage of the bombing beginning in Iraq last night. What went through your mind as we embarked on that mission?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I fully support efforts to protect this country from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Any time you undertake something like that you do so with thought, with regard, but with the ultimate responsibility for protecting our institutions and peace in the world.

QUESTION: Were you given any kind of an early warning from the White House that these strikes were about to take place, in order to beef up security at installations?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We were appropriately advised.

QUESTION: How much beforehand were you advised?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm not sure of the exact timing.

QUESTION: Do you think Myron can get that for us maybe?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Hm?

QUESTION: Can Myron get that for us?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: He would be happy to do so.

QUESTION: Myron.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, can you give us an idea of the extent of this stepped-up protections around town today and around the country?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think everyone is just trying to take common sense precautions.

QUESTION: Just to make sure I understand what you're saying, common sense as opposed to -- the logical kind of thing that would seem prudence would dictate rather than a response to some specific new threat?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Whatever the response is, we're trying to use whatever resources we have, within the law, in an appropriate, common sense way, that protects our institutions and our people.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, when last we met, the Criminal Division was still reviewing allegations against House Majority Whip Tom Delay two months after they were first raised. Is that still at the review stage, or have you dismissed the allegations, or has it moved to an active criminal investigation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I understand it, it is still at the review stage. I will ask Myron to confirm that for you.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, in recent years and months, you've taken some steps, like the Infrastructure Protection Center and some of the new capabilities at the FBI. Can we expect those kinds of institutions to be a little bit more involved and active during this sort of situation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think in all of these situations what we have tried to do with respect to the FBI's capacity is to be prepared with respect to traditional means of terrorism, with respect to new and evolving means such as infrastructure protection for our cyber infrastructure. We want to use modern technology, which is incorporated in the National Infrastructure Protection Center, to do everything we can to protect the institutions and the people of this country.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, has anything come out of this video summit that you had the other day with the G8 counterparts? Was anything specific talked about in anticipation of a confrontation with Iraq?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There was nothing specific with respect to that. And for those of you who are not familiar with it, it was really exciting. The Ministers of the countries composing the G8, which are the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Japan, met by way of a video conference. I had to be there at 6:30 to make it work, 6:30 in the morning, and the Japanese had to stay until 11:30 to make it work. And so you had a sense not only of time but of space, of the geographical differences.

It was a very good discussion. We discussed the issues of cybercrime and high-tech crime, and how borders were rendered meaningless in many instances by cybercrimes and the tools used by cybercriminals. We talked about how important it was to make sure that there was no safe place to hide.

But I think all of us were tremendously impressed by this capacity we now have to communicate without having to fly halfway around the world, at far less cost than flying halfway around the world, and with the same personal directness that I find so beneficial in these meetings.

QUESTION: Some of us had to leave there about 7 o'clock when the doors in the meeting were closed. And as we understand it, you went on for another two or three hours. What specific things can you tell us that were discussed, if you can talk about it at all? Because the opening statements that we were privy to were quite general, talking about the agenda and the need to work together, and so forth. Were there any new proposals or --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What it is important for -- there were not new proposals, because when you have ministers working together, that many ministers, there has got to be a lot that works up to it. But what we discussed is how we work together to ensure that when a cybercrime is committed in one country that affects another country, how we work together, how we reconcile the laws of the two nations, how we respect the sovereignty of both nations, to effect an arrest, to effect a conviction, and to effect a just and an appropriate sentence.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, there was a meeting, a high-level meeting, of Mexican and U.S. officials here in Washington this week. I believe you were a party to that. And if so, could you tell us what progress -- what substantial progress has been made from this particular meeting?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It was a very interesting day in that regard, because I went from the video conference to the meeting with my Mexican colleagues.

The Mexican Foreign Secretary was here, along with my colleague, Attorney General Jorge Madrozo. We had a good, fruitful discussion. I had the opportunity to talk with Attorney General Madrozo about ongoing matters that I really cannot discuss. And I continue to be very encouraged by the steps that Attorney General Madrozo is taking. And I --

QUESTION: Was there concern -- or was there concern by the Mexicans, for that matter -- about the accusations that Mario Nueva Madrid, the Governor of Yucatan State, has created basically a narco-state in Yucatan? Is this accusation valid, or can you comment on it?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, why did you feel the need to read a statement, supporting the President's action? Isn't that a given? On Iraq.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There are some things that are not -- in all the discussion that goes on, there are some things that need reaffirmation, to make sure that people understand.

QUESTION: I mean, what is it that people need to know about this attack -- it wasn't timed to coincide --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think what is important is that when you deal with issues affecting the foreign policy of this country, that we come together. If we disagree, we talk about it internally. But that we try our best to present the best American policy, based on all the facts that we know, and that we then do everything we can to back up our troops.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, that didn't happen this time. That's what made this so different. Given the Majority Leader's statement and some other statements from the Hill and from past officials, past Republican officials. And I'm wondering if that disturbs you?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would think that what we might do is remember, frankly, people like Lawton Chiles and Moe Udall, who served in the Senate. I think it is important -- there will always be a disagreement as to how to conduct foreign policy -- but that we should sit down, work together, to come up with the best policy, and then present a united front to the world.

QUESTION: Doesn't it trouble you that a lot of people don't believe what the President says about the timing of the strike?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it is important to look at the issues with respect to Iraq, make the best determination as to what can be done, which is in the best interests of this country's foreign policy and the best interest of this Nation's defense. If there be disagreement with respect to the substance of that, discuss it, work it out -- you can't always agree on everything -- and then come up with support for what we're doing, particularly for our troops around the world.

QUESTION: I guess, Ms. Reno, what we're really asking you is, is there any doubt in your

mind that the timing of this attack had no connection to the timing of the impeachment vote or the impeachment process?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There is no doubt in my mind, based on all that I know, that there was no connection.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, pardon me for a political question, motivated by some of our readers and myself. I'm interested to know, as a judge, when a person is erroneously arrested and charged, that person looks forward to his day in court, in our American system, to produce facts that will exonerate that person.

Now, if I may move to the impeachment matter. The President of the United States has no desire whatsoever to have a day in court. And though they say he's wrongly accused, he's not taking advantage of that to clear the record. And I wonder what that says to you.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I have noted, I am not commenting on the impeachment process.

QUESTION: From a law enforcement perspective, are you concerned about the distraction that would be caused by a Senate trial at this point?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not commenting on the impeachment process. But what I think is important, separate and apart from that process, is that we understand the issues that confront this country, and that no matter what happens, that Republicans and Democrats work together in a bipartisan, thoughtful, constructive way -- that does not always mean agreement; there can always be disagreement -- but that it be done in a thoughtful, constructive way on both sides, Democrats as well as Republicans, to try to continue to move forward in every way possible to address the issues that are of great import to this country.

QUESTION: Related to preparing for terrorism, were there any specific meetings that you were involved in since this attack, or are you following some standard operating procedure that was considered before this attack?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not been involved in any specific meetings that address the issue of precautions taken. We have just long and regular understandings with respect to what needs to be done.

QUESTION: Do you have any SIOCs up and running just for this kind of situation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would let the FBI describe just what they're doing, to the extent that they can. But I understand that it is.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, a lot of minds have been changed over the past couple-three weeks about support for the President. As a member of his cabinet, can you describe whether or not there has been any movement, at least in your mind, about the President's credibility? Is there any doubt in your mind that this President is less than somebody that you can trust?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think he has been an effective leader on the issues that I have dealt with him on. I feel like he is addressing in the best way possible the issues that are important to us today, in terms of terrorism, in terms of crime, in terms of civil rights issues. And I have admired tremendously his efforts on the issues that I have worked with him on.

QUESTION: Are you confident of his integrity and truthfulness?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think he has said that he has made a mistake with respect to the American people. And that is before the Congress. But on the issues that I have dealt with him on, I have been impressed with his leadership, impressed with his grasp of the issues, impressed with his commitment to solve real problems that confront the American people.

QUESTION: Clearly you don't think he should be impeached?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I am not commenting on the impeachment process. That is a process that is now underway with respect to Congress. I am talking about my experience with him as a leader of this country.

QUESTION: Your plea for constructive discussions between Republicans and Democrats and working together prompts me to ask this. You were -- at least I believe you met regularly with Orrin Hatch, Senator Hatch, some years back on a regular basis to discuss issues and so forth. Are you able to continue to work as closely with Senator Hatch and other Republican leaders who deal with your issues on the Hill as you did, say, a year or two ago? Or do you find this lack of constructive discussion between Republicans and Democrats spilling over into your own dealings with them?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Senator Hatch and I have disagreed on some subjects. I have been at his oversight hearings on a number of occasions when he has pointedly disagreed with me. But he has done so with the greatest degree of civility and thoughtfulness, of kindness to me personally. And I have not seen anything but examples of what Lawton Chiles and Moe Udall represent to me with respect to Senator Hatch and to Chairman Hyde.

QUESTION: Do you still meet with him --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I've never met with him regularly in that sense, like once a week or something like that. But I have always felt free to pick up the phone and call him to discuss matters of mutual concern. And it has been, I think, a tradition in this Department.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, speaking of Congress, where does the Department stand now on the Burton subpoena? And could it be that the way this ends is simply the clock runs out? And will the subpoena, or the plan to have the subpoena, expire when this Congress does?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know. All I know is that I am committed to trying to do everything I can to honor the oversight function of the committee, while at the same time ensuring the structure that has existed from one administration to the other within the Department of Justice, and to ensure that the process is as independent as possible.

QUESTION: Are you expecting to have 60 days on the Harold Ickes independent counsel?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would like to resolve it as soon as possible, consistent with doing it the right way.

QUESTION: On the request from the White House for your views on clemency on Pollard, have you sent that letter over yet?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, we haven't.

QUESTION: How about a meeting -- you've said you would give some more thought to meeting with the families of Ronnie Moffat and Orlando Letelier --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're still in the same position as we were. I'm waiting for a report back on the issues that I asked to be checked into.

QUESTION: What issues are those?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: With respect to the MLAT, what had been provided, what needed to be done, the status of the whole matter.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, when you resolve the questions raised by Carol Bruce, will you make that public?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I can't answer that, because I do not know what my findings will be and I do not know what the court would let me do or not do.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, is the Justice Department considering any kind of investigation into this Salt Lake City Olympic Committee bribery allegation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My understanding is that the Criminal Division has that under review.

QUESTION: Where are you heading for the holidays?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm going home to sit on my front porch and walk in my grass and work in my woods and see the people I love. I hope everybody has wonderful, safe, happy holidays, and that the new year is a good one for everybody.

QUESTION: When are you coming back?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm leaving on the 23rd and coming back on the 30th.

QUESTION: Can you bring us something?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What would you like?

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Some Florida oranges.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, my understanding is that you all and Myron worked out the schedule. So, at any rate, happy holidays to everybody.

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