



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, January 14, 1999

9:30 a.m.

P R O C E E D I N G S

(9:30 a.m.)

VOICES: Good morning.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Good morning. How are you?

QUESTION: Pretty good. Do you have an announcement for us this morning?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: How soon can we expect you to make a recommendation to President Clinton about the prospective clemency for Pollard?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We're going to do it just as quickly as possible.

QUESTION: Has the Department written up an opinion? Are you just at a first draft, or just that's still in the process?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We are in the process.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you know the deadline for the recommended request date for an answer was January 11th. Has this been a difficult question for the

Department?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I wouldn't comment on the process. We just want to make sure that it is as thorough and as comprehensive as possible.

QUESTION: There is a press report that you will meet with three proponents of Pollard's release to Israel. Has this come to past? Or is this correct?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There has been no decision made. We would be willing to hear from Mr. Pollard's representatives.

QUESTION: Would you meet with them yourself?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would have people who have been handling the matter meet with them.

Where did you get that awful cold?

QUESTION: I do not know, but I'd like to give it back.

(Laughter.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Don't give it to me.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what factors will go into this? What types of things have to be weighed to make a decision like this?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment on the process. It's a recommendation we make to the President. And it should speak for itself to the President.

QUESTION: Are you in any way swayed by the decisions or the recommendations coming from the Defense Department and the State Department and the CIA, I believe which are saying Pollard should stay and finish his term?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Mr. Ruff asked us to concentrate on the Justice Department and not reach out to the other agencies.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, someone in authority yesterday told me that these are

dangerous times -- speaking in reference to the impeachment trial. Again, the Justice Department has researched all this information. Do you still believe that the Justice Department should not inject itself into the process unless it is asked to do so by one side or the other?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the matter is now before the Senate. And the Senate and the Chief Justice will handle it.

QUESTION: In other words, there is no institutional role for the Justice Department, even in terms of an opinion?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not do "what ifs" for the future. But at the present time, there is no basis for us to intervene.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, I was wondering what you had to, in 1999, what you would say the priorities of the Justice Department were for juvenile justice programs?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think we have made real progress. The progress has been made in communities across America. This past Monday, I was in San Diego for the announcement of the Comprehensive Community Strategy, which is focused on how a community comes together to reweave the fabric of community and order around children and families at risk. I think that we need to continue that effort in every way possible.

I think community policing has been vital to the initiative. And we will be talking about that this morning, later on.

I think America must do everything it can to give its schools the resources necessary to prepare our children for the next century and for the technology of the next century. To give you an example, a year or so ago I went to Birmingham. I asked the young people who were in high schools what could we do about youth violence. And they said we've got the violence part taken care of. What we need are computers. And then we need people who know how to use the computers to teach us how to use the computers.

And young people have tremendous wisdom. In San Diego, I listened to a young man who tutored elementary school students. I think he will be a governor of California some day. He was very impressive.

And young people want so to be involved, to contribute, to make a difference. And I think we've got to give them greater service opportunities.

There are so many initiatives underway. Because raising a child, giving a teenager a chance to grow, requires an awful lot of pieces to fit the puzzle. And I think communities are engaging in that. And our responsibility in the Federal Government is to give them the technical expertise, the assistance, the knowledge that we have, and serve as an effect partner with them.

At the same time, I think we have got to let young people who commit crimes know that there is going to be a certain punishment, that it's going to be fair, that it will fit the crime, and that when they return to the community, there will be after-care and follow-up. Because, as I've said time and again at this table, it makes no sense to send a young person back to the apartment over the open-air drug market, where they got into trouble in the first place, without some support mechanism.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, during your tenure as Attorney General -- now the longest of this century -- there has been a marked decline in the crime rate. However, as you said yourself, it's still higher than it was, say, a decade ago.

Is it realistic to think that the crime rate will continue to go down? Or is it, in your best sense, sort of plateaued out now?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know where is the reference to a decade ago. I would ask Myron to give you those figures. The crime rate is clearly down.

What I have said on many occasions is that that is a factor of a number of different initiatives -- the community policing initiative, professionalism in policing, communities coming together, prevention programs being developed, sentences being carried out. There are so many pieces to it. Some of it may be demographics. Some of it may have been the end of the crack epidemic. But it is happening

On prior occasions, when we saw good news, we tended to become complacent. What I want to try to do is to focus the Department of Justice on the issue, so that we can do something to end the culture of violence in this Nation, that we do not have to accept high rates of violence, that we do not have to think it's going to budget up and down and up and down, but that we can keep it down and keep it going down.

To do that requires that we analyze the crime problem in particular communities, and develop strategies to fight it. We have got the expertise now to collect that data. We have got the technology to collect that data so that it is current, useful,

and in a form that policymakers can make informed decisions.

Are the homicides in a particular area from a drug gang, or are most of the homicides domestic violence? How do we allocate our resources? Where is most of the crime occurring? How can we respond? What can the Federal Government do because of the problem of cross-border criminal activity?

There are so many things that we can do to keep it going down. Domestic violence is another area. We have seen again and again that that is a major contribution not only to the immediate crime statistics, but to the future because of the fact that children who see domestic violence come to accept it as a way of life.

I just firmly believe that if we keep at this, if communities work together, if we continue our partnerships between Federal, State and local officials, we can really keep it going down. And we can have a significant impact on the culture of violence. And that is spoken as a prosecutor, who used to see it go back up because people were kind of split and each were doing their own thing. We really have a chance.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, how much of that effort falls to the COPS program, and what is the future of that program in light of the President's announcement today?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think there will be some comments today about that. But I think the COPS program has been instrumental in helping to spread community policing across this Nation. With the COPS program, but independent of it, has also come the professionalization of police departments and sheriff's offices.

You look at what these departments and offices are doing. You look at the burdens and the responsibilities that are placed on them, the preparation for the technology of the 21st century. And these are just -- there are so many fine police agencies and sheriff's offices across the country, I think that has contributed.

I think one of the contributions to the effort has been also a return to the community. I have said before that with the Depression, I think communities began to look to Washington to solve their problems. With World War II, they were even more reliant on Washington.

In the fifties and sixties, they looked to Washington for civil rights and civil

justice. In the seventies, they looked to Washington for money, for grants.

In the eighties, Washington started shifting programs to the States, without the dollars. And the States starting shifting programs to communities, without the dollars. And communities across America, one by one, have joined together, the public and public sector, the different governmental forces, State agencies are involved, the faith community, and they are really coming together to solve problems of school dropouts, of youth violence, of dysfunctional families, of drugs.

It is exciting to watch, as I have observed firsthand in San Diego the other day.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the FBI Director is going to Mexico later today for a couple of days of meetings. You have been there. How serious is the problem of U.S. fugitives in Mexico? Are you getting cooperation with trying to locate and find U. S. fugitives or, for that matter, other issues with Mexico?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have received excellent cooperation. There are issues that we work through. But in the last month or so, the Mexican Government, for example, has sent us a person charged with the murder of a Border Patrol agent, who was also engaged in drug trafficking. And I think that is a signal step forward.

And I will ask Myron to give you a breakdown, so that you will have it, of some of the cooperative efforts in which we have seen success between the Governments of Mexico and the United States.

QUESTION: Okay. And also, tomorrow your INS Commissioner and your Deputy are going to be at the Mexican border. What is the issue that they are going to be dealing with?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That border is a fascinating place. It's miles and miles and miles long, and each part of it is different. You have two proud nations, with each proud of their own sovereignty. But then, there is so much cross-border connection. It's almost as if it were another country onto itself.

And there are tensions that develop along that border, as people try to do their job, as police on both sides and the Border Patrol try to do their job. And what the Deputy and the Commissioner will be doing is meeting with Mexican colleagues to see what we can do to build harmony and partnership across that partner, as I think should exist between two such great nations, and which I have seen exist on so many occasions.

QUESTION: One of the concerns is that some desperate acts have been taken by people trying to get through what is a tighter border now, right; is that a focus of their meeting?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: There is going to be how we work together peacefully along the border, how we enforce our immigration laws the right way, how we do everything we can, in conjunction with Mexican authorities, to make sure that people don't come across and expose their lives to danger. The Border Patrol has done some heroic work in saving lives. But if we can work with Mexican authorities to warn people of the dangers of trying to cross the desert, we can do so much to save lives, while at the same time enforcing our laws.

QUESTION: Will you be going to Mexico before, during or after the President's trip?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not have any plans to go to Mexico in the near future.

QUESTION: Will you be meeting with the Pope when he comes to the U.S.?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm not scheduled to do so.

QUESTION: Have you yet begun an OPR investigation of questions surrounding Mr. Starr?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have no comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on that subject, for weeks, when we asked about this, we were told that some allegations have been dismissed and the Department was making inquiries about other allegations. When last we met, all of a sudden it was no comment.

We read the tea leaves, and everybody is trying to guess what is going on. Can you at least give us some indication as to whether there has been a change in status or whether this is just a procedural move?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: All I can tell you is last week I decided the better part of valor would be not to comment.

QUESTION: It's a little distressing, though, to us when --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not mean to distress you.

QUESTION: -- we try to eke out as much as we can possibly get on this matter that people are intensely interested in, it's distressing for you to go backwards, in our view, in terms of providing information about something. And it makes us a little nervous as to a harbinger of other things. Is there going to be clamping down on information in other areas, as well?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, I am not clamping down on information. I'm just not commenting on it.

QUESTION: I'm not discerning a difference there. When you had previously said you were reviewing a matter, and now you say no comment, that is --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: And I can't comment on why I am not commenting, except to reiterate what I have said.

QUESTION: How is the investigation into the Olympic allegations in Salt Lake going? What can you say about what the Department is doing now? Is there anything you can say about that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, it would not be appropriate for me to comment.

QUESTION: In a few days there will be a very vigorous campaign by the State Department to offer a \$5 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Osama bin Laden, and I think one of his lieutenants is named on this. Would you care to comment about this man, the threat he poses to the United States, especially the interior, the homeland of the USA? And, secondly, I would ask, shouldn't this fellow, Osama bin Laden, be public enemy number one for the FBI?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment except to say that we are working with the State Department and other government agencies to do everything possible to see that he is brought to justice.

QUESTION: On the Olympic matter, to come back for a second. Can you at least say how the Federal investigation will differ from those of local and international bodies that are looking at this? And is the Justice Department working with local and international --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We want to work with everybody to make sure that we don't stumble over each other and that we do it in a professional and orderly

way. I cannot comment on the difference, because I do not know the details of the other investigations.

QUESTION: Well, what is the focus of yours, then?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, we would not comment.

QUESTION: What are your feelings on the importance of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency -- the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think it's important that we structure legislation to give communities the opportunity to provide prevention programs, early intervention programs and enforcement programs, punishment that fits the crime. That authorization should also include support for after-care programs, to bring the young person back to the community with a chance of success.

But on the up-front side, it should give flexibility to communities to use different resources as they think best, with us providing the technical assistance, learned from what other communities are doing, that can make a difference.

Again, one of the classic examples was the effort that I saw in San Diego. We were given some credit for developing the strategy and providing some of the seed funds. But so much of the effort was undertaken because the community now had an idea, a blueprint if you will, of how it might succeed.

And it knew its needs and resources better than we did. It was a perfect partnership. And it was also vastly encouraging to see that the State of California was involved -- that partnership of State, Federal and local officials -- to see the business community there, as well, to see the chief of police, the juvenile court judge, the sheriff all there, the supervisor who has spearheaded the initiative there -- it really was so encouraging. But, more than that, it was encouraging to see what they had already accomplished.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, if I may be so bold.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: You can always be so bold. I do not know whether I will be bold back.

QUESTION: All right. Let me try this. It would be very much of interest to us if you would share your personal impressions with regard to the impeachment. And professionally speaking, do you believe that this process, as you have seen it so

far, is a fair and just legal proceeding?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As you know, I have not commented on the impeachment since it arises from an independent counsel investigation. And it would be inappropriate for me to offer my personal views.

QUESTION: Are you going to watch the trial at 1 o'clock?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know.

QUESTION: Have you read media accounts of the process so far?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Yes, I have.

QUESTION: (Off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: Thank you, Ms. Reno.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you, all.

(Whereupon, at 9:51 a.m., the press conference was concluded.)