



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Press Conference

THE HONORABLE JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL

Thursday, January 28, 1999

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.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, you're approaching one of those damned if you do and damned if you don't decisions, whether to ask for an independent counsel. Are you any closer to telling us what you're going to recommend to Congress when the independent counsel law comes up for reenactment, either on the trip wire for naming one or on the control of finances?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: As I have indicated, I have tried to apply the law as it exists, without overlays of what other people or anybody thinks should be the law. I think I've got to apply it as Congress intended that it be applied. And that's what I'm about now.

The Deputy Attorney General has put together a small group, since this issue will be coming up, and he is reviewing the experience to see what changes might possibly be suggested.

QUESTION: Who is in the group?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know. I'll ask Myron to check for you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Have you suggested that they look at any specific areas?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: Okay.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Except the one that I have I think consistently told you that I've expressed concern about -- that everybody in government has to live by a budget. And I think it's important that there be budget provisions for independent counsels.

QUESTION: Do you know what they're looking at -- the criteria under which you asked for an independent counsel --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not discussed with them what they are considering.

QUESTION: Are you concerned about who is a covered person? Are you concerned about limiting that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I've got one concern right now. And that's to apply the law based on the way Congress intended that it be applied.

QUESTION: Speaking of that, the Harold Ickes matter. Two months ago, we were told that it could not possibly take two months.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: One of the things that I have most of all consistently told you is that I do not speculate on what happens during an investigation, and I want to make sure that I have considered everything and done it the right way.

QUESTION: Can I just finish --

QUESTION: Haven't you already made the decision? Has a decision already been made? In your mind, is it just a matter of dotting the "i's" and crossing the "t's"?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not made a decision.

QUESTION: Have you had any discussions with Carol Bruce about the matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I haven't.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, why has the Ickes decision been such a difficult one?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: To comment on anything like that would be to comment on the issues. So I wouldn't say whether it's been difficult or not. And I would not comment on it.

QUESTION: If I may follow up. Should you decide not to seek an independent counsel, are you prepared for the Republican attack that's sure to come?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not assume that people are going to attack. I think they're going to ask questions. And what I can say and do is really governed by what the court permits me to do, in terms of releasing information, either in terms of an application or a notification. So, what I try to do in all of these cases is look at all the evidence, make the best judgment I can based on the evidence and the law, and, as I do that, answer the questions that come up in any of these investigations so I can be prepared to be as accountable as possible.

But attack -- I mean you all have got to start thinking in terms of how do we conduct a free and vigorous press review of government. And how does a two-party system work together without attacking, but at the same time holding people accountable. And I think it's possible.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, on that subject, I mean isn't that attacking?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'm suggesting that there are ways to do it. But I'm prepared, and was prepared then and indicated, that I was accountable for what I did, and would be happy to answer any questions. They didn't invite me to ask me any questions.

QUESTION: I just meant in the sense of wouldn't you call somebody threatening to hold you in contempt or threatening any number of issues, wouldn't you call that an attack? I mean that's not exactly a friendly discussion.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think the American people are saying, look, there are so many complex issues in government today; how do we address the issue of social security, how do we keep the crime rate going down, how do we give our children a future, how do we resolve the issues of terrorism, how do we

protect this Nation? There are so many extraordinarily important issues that require the best of good faith amongst all sorts of people. And I think the American people are saying, let's move forward.

And I think the suggestion that there will be an attack -- I do not assume it until it comes, but I'm prepared to answer questions, whether they be in a constructive form or an attack form.

QUESTION: If the attack comes, do you expect it to come from the Republican or the Democratic position?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know.

(Laughter.)

QUESTION: On that subject again, how do you navigate? I mean people try to hold you in contempt. That was an issue. Some Republicans called for you to step down. How do you personally deal with those suggestions?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I came here to do the best job I could. As I have said before and said this morning, I try to make the best judgment I can based on the evidence and the law and what's right.

The only time I'm uncomfortable with myself is when I think I've not been as thorough as I could in terms of trying to understand what the issues are and trying to be prepared to make the best decision. But once I've satisfied myself that I've explored every issue, that I've considered all points of view and that then I've made the best decision I can, I go home and get a good night's sleep and decide that if people don't want me, I'll go home to Florida and be home again.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the harshest critics of the Independent Counsel Act or the independent counsel system would say it's probably ironic that you need a nonpolitical Attorney General in order to honor the trip wires inherent in the Independent Counsel Act. But, over the years, the Independent Counsel Act has been used as a political hammer by one party against another, or against individual people.

Are you going to -- when it comes to Congress reenacting this thing, are you going to address the political implications of this thing, whether the independent counsel is truly independent?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: When it comes to that, I will be prepared to make appropriate comments. But as you pointed out, I've got to make a decision now, and I'm focusing on what the law says.

QUESTION: How much of your time in the last couple of years would you imagine independent counsel matters have taken up? And has that been a real distraction or a drain when it comes to other issues you've got to oversee?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: It's amongst the many issues. I've not calculated the time. Obviously there have been a number of cases, and we've tried to devote the time that the issues require.

QUESTION: Maybe a little off the subject. There's been a trend with putting police in schools, sometimes with guns. And I was wondering what is the stand of the Justice Department on that trend, and will we see funding going into that area?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I think some of the communities now use grants for police in the schools. And I think that I'll ask Myron to give you the experience that the Justice Department has had in implementing those specific grants.

A good police, who knows how to relate to young people, who knows how to treat them with respect but give them guidance and provide some limits for them, is I think one of the truly great people in the community. I'm always impressed when I go into a community or into a school and watch the kids looking up to the police officer as somebody they respect, as somebody who helps them navigate through their day, as somebody who makes them feel better about themselves.

And when a police officer does that, in many instances, she or he is keeping that kid out of trouble for the future.

You can have other officers who may not be as good at it and that may not be as successful, but I haven't seen that many -- I do not think I've seen an officer like that in the schools. Different officers have different talents. And those officers who know how to relate to kids and to expect of them and to hold them accountable are really some of the extraordinary people in the community.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, off the topic again. Is there any plan to open an investigation in Japan regarding the Nagorno Olympic bidding committee?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Regarding the what?

QUESTION: Regarding the Olympic bidding committee scandal. Are there any plans to open an investigation into wrongdoings by the Nagano Olympic bidding committee?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would ask Myron to check for you and see if there is anything that would be appropriate to be said. But I'm not quite sure of the connection.

QUESTION: Is there anything else new on the Olympic investigation that you can tell us about?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No.

QUESTION: Can you give us a rough idea of how many people have been assigned to that investigation, the number of prosecutors and the number of FBI agents?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I can't.

QUESTION: Could you have Myron check on that for us?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I'll have Myron check and see if it would be appropriate for us to comment.

QUESTION: Can you say if you are now looking at the possibility of investigating the IOC members as opposed to just the U.S., or Salt Lake?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, Paul Waggoner, with WTOP. I wanted to ask you a question of local significance.

Can you tell me where you are with the plan to help the D.C. police force with the issue of deadly force and the investigation of the police shootings cases? You had mentioned a couple of weeks ago that you were going to take a look and help out the D.C. police force. Can you tell me where that is right now? And I would like to ask you a follow-up.

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: My understanding is that we will be meeting with city officials either today or tomorrow. And I think it's ongoing. And I think it will be thorough, thoughtful, objective and, I hope for everybody concerned, a

productive working relationship.

QUESTION: One of the criticisms that I'm getting from a lot of the law enforcement community in the city is that the Justice Department, through the U. S. Attorney's Office here, has already looked at these cases and that here the Justice Department, main Justice, is going to look at them again. And, thirdly, they're saying Eric Holder, having already looked at a lot of these cases as the U. S. Attorney, will be overseeing this as Deputy Attorney General.

Do you see a conflict of interest there? And what's your thought on that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, we don't. We've looked at that. And the investigation will be conducted by the Civil Rights Division. Bill Lee will head that effort. That will be done in the usual context of the Civil Rights Division's Special Litigation Unit, which has not reviewed these cases.

And Mr. Holder will coordinate different aspects of the investigation. But I do not see the conflict with respect to the investigation itself. And what I do see are a lot of concerned people who want to achieve a positive result for the community.

QUESTION: And if I could also follow up. Chief Ramsey wanted to go back as far as 10 years to look at some of these cases. Do you know whether or not you'll go back that far?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That would depend. That would be up to the people conducting the investigation.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, several cities have filed for or are considering filing lawsuits against the gun industry. Have you discussed this with the mayors this week, meeting in Washington?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not met with the mayors yet. I meet with them, I believe, tomorrow. I do not know whether that subject will come up.

QUESTION: Do you think this approach (off microphone) gun industry?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment, because I have not gone in to sufficient detail to understand the cities' theories, to really respond.

QUESTION: And is the administration considering a similar approach?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We would always look at everything that we can do.

And we are in the process now, in terms of legislation and in terms of prosecutive strategy, in terms of any other strategy that we think will be successful, and I will be receiving recommendations some time soon.

QUESTION: What is your plan for tomorrow with the mayors, are you going to meet them?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, I think I should tell the mayors first.

QUESTION: When you say you will look at any strategy you think would be successful -- successful in doing what, succeeding at what?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: What I want to do -- I just think it is really exciting. We've got the crime rate down six years in a row for the first time in a long time. And a lot of different factors have caused that reduction in crime. But one of the common denominators of continued crime and violence are the availability of guns in the hands of people who don't belong to have them.

How can we address that issue? How can we make sure that people who should not have guns don't have them, and people who use them illegally are effectively prosecuted?

These are the issues that we are talking about. We have surveyed the best practices in terms of efforts against guns in communities. And the issue is, how do we make sure that people don't possess, sell, distribute, use guns to hurt other people?

QUESTION: So, is it possible that there could be a Federal lawsuit against gun manufacturers?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have not received any comment that would support that.

QUESTION: Is that one of the areas that's being explored?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know. I'm waiting for the report.

QUESTION: Can you say what kinds of issues are being reviewed? Is it all legislative, or --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Just what I indicated, prosecutive strategies,

strategy in the community, enforcement strategies, legislation. Those are the issues that I'm looking forward to hearing comment on.

QUESTION: Has the Department received a request from any of the cities or -- (off microphone)-- or obtained some information about the lawsuit?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I do not know whether they have or not. But I have not.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, what's your assessment of how the Campaign Task Force has performed thus far?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have been very impressed with their thoroughness, with their ability to bring together different pieces of the information, to work together. And David Anunzo has I think been -- he's just a very thoughtful, very dedicated person, who I think is doing an excellent job of leading it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, a few weeks ago there was a break-in at a Washington pollster's office who serves as a consultant to the leader of the opposition in Israel. The Washington police have been aided in this investigation by the Washington Field Office of the FBI. This break-in has become an issue in the upcoming Israeli election.

Is there any sense within the Department that a decision should be made fairly soon either to leave this on the table as far as the elections or to say that this is just a routine burglary? Any thought about kicking up to a national security matter?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would think it would be appropriate, if any comment were made, for the FBI to make it.

QUESTION: Ms. Reno, the three federal judges yesterday issued an unusual joint opinion in which they were fairly critical of unwarranted Federal intrusion into what should be a State prosecution, essentially. But earlier in the week -- (off microphone) -- said he's going to try to -- (off microphone). Where does the Department fall on that? Do you think it's a good idea that some of the -- (off microphone) --

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Consistent with everything that we have tried to do with respect to State and local law enforcement and local issues, it is reflected in our effort with respect to guns in communities. The best way for us to proceed is

to work with State and local officials to determine what the crime problem is, who has the guns, what the extent of the problem is, and who best should handle it, consistent with principles of Federalism and what is in the best interest of the community.

There may be resource problems in some communities that require one approach. There may be problems with State laws in other communities that require a different approach. But as I have suggested to you before, we have had great success in Boston, for example, where the U.S. Attorney and the local district attorney worked together, the local district attorney taking most of the gun cases, the U.S. Attorney, upon agreement, taking others.

We've got to work it out, with the understanding that this type of crime is a local problem. That does not indicate that the Federal Government does not have a responsibility, because much of it cuts across district lines, but that we work together, sharing information, sharing an analysis of what the crime problem is, and designing programs that get to the heart of the problem.

And so that's what we're going to continue to do, and that was what I was indicating earlier. We're going to be looking at strategies around the country, listening to State and local prosecutors, understanding where we can be most effective in reducing illegal gun usage in this country.

QUESTION: Have you dismissed any of the questions or charges or complaints -- any additional questions, charges, complaints -- raised about Independent Counsel Starr's office?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I have no comment.

QUESTION: We're hearing that you might be close on an accommodation with Richard Holbrooke. Is that true?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

QUESTION: Have you had a chance to meet with the family of Ronnie Moffett yet?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: No, I have not.

QUESTION: Why is that?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Again, as I indicated, we want to make sure that we

have explored all the ramifications of the recent developments, that we, as I indicated, do what's possible under the MLAT, and otherwise consistent with national security interests, to comply with the MLAT with Spain. And at the appropriate time, if they would still like to meet, we would try to accommodate them.

QUESTION: Has your staff sought a meeting with Pollard's representatives yet?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We have indicated that we would be happy to meet with Mr. Pollard's representative. But, at this point, I do not believe we have received a request to do so.

QUESTION: Still no recommendation to the White House on clemency for Pollard?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: That's correct.

QUESTION: And no ETA -- you don't have any idea of when you think that will occur, the recommendation?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Well, starting off the day with how long it takes to get something done, we want to make sure it's done right.

QUESTION: Is there any concern that you're about three weeks past the original deadline?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: We just want to make sure it's done right.

QUESTION: Is that still being held back by the meeting with his representatives or by completely separate issues?

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: I would not comment.

Thank you.

VOICES: Thank you.

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