



WEEKLY JUSTICE DEPARTMENT MEDIA BRIEFING WITH

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

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9:36 A.M. EDT

(Chorus of good mornings from reporters.)

Q Ms. Reno, you've had a pretty spectacular week -- (laughter) -- to say the least, victories on all fronts in courts, Capitol Hill, the Elian matter. What happens now? (Laughter.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know that I would describe them as "victories." But there is a lot more to do, and I want to focus on issues that are of concern to everybody. And at the same time, I want to go see the Tall Ships in New York Harbor.

Q Ms. Reno, what are your thoughts on the Gonzalez matter now that it's finally resolved?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You think back over -- I was in Miami. And I looked at the copy of the Herald the day -- reporting on how he was pulled from the water. And I thought: "What a remarkable little boy! And what a sad situation, a tragedy."

And it's a mixture of so many different things: a little

boy who lost his mother, a country that is not free that is one of the few countries that is not a democratic nation in this hemisphere. It's a story of families that have disagreements. It is a story of so much of human life.

And yet in the end he is with his father, and I am glad of that.

I just wish he were with his father in a democratic free country.

Q Ms. Reno, the Cuban government has made clear that Elian is not going straight back to Cardenas and his school but is going to go to some special school for a couple of months, where he will be seen by different psychiatrists and other mental-health workers.

Doesn't this sort of smack of a reeducation or indoctrination camp?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know what will be involved.

But again I say, it's -- I think, as you look at him with his father, it is wonderful that they can now move on with their life.

And his father has made the decision, as I think he must have under the law.

Q Did you hold out some faint hope up until the end that Juan Miguel might decide to stay here?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One can always hope.

Q Do you think that Juan Miguel really had an opportunity to opt for coming to this country, coming to this democracy?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, he did.

Q He did?

Q Ms. Reno, did you see the departure, and what was your reaction as you watched?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Just what I reflected on now.

Q Ms. Reno, in hindsight, is there anything you might have done differently to have ended this earlier than seven months, in the way of negotiations, diplomacy, et cetera?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know what else could have been done. I go over it regularly.

Q What particular lessons did you get from this, from this ordeal?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think that there is any lesson that -- because I don't think we'll ever see anything quite like this again.

Q Were you surprised, Ms. Reno -- you've been around the law a long time. Were you surprised at the tenacity, the tenaciousness with which the Miami relatives pursued this in court?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No.

Q Why not?

ATTY GEN. RENO: They believe strongly in their cause, and they wanted to pursue it till the end, and they had the opportunity to do so.

Q Ms. Reno, how do you go about healing the wounds, I think, is the way you described it earlier, with the Miami Cuban exile community? And can you?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know whether I can. I would like to think that I can. Some of the messages that I get from them indicate maybe I can't.

But I am devoted to that community. I believe in it, I

believe in its caring nature, and I'm going to do everything I can to heal it.

I don't know whether it will be possible. But I say, to all of those that are speaking sharply and are feeling hurt, I would like to talk to you.

I would like to let you know just how much I care about you and care about the community, and what it has done for a city I love.

Q Ms. Reno, were there any discussions about Juan Miguel or anything that he initiated or the government initiated to try to get him to stay while he was waiting here in D.C., anything that you can share with us?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What was your question again? Did -- that Juan Miguel --

Q Did he initiate any conversation, express any interest at all in learning more about what he would have to do in order to defect?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, he didn't.

Q He did not? Not at all?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Not to my knowledge.

Q But isn't it correct that in his meeting with you, someone brought up the subject -- it was made clear to him at the time that he was sitting in front of the attorney general that he had this opportunity, wasn't it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the question was, did he raise anything?

Q Right. And I'm asking the opposite question. Was it ever presented to him that he had this option?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The subject came up -- he was sitting right there -- and he said he wanted to go home.

Q Ms. Reno --

Q (Off mike) -- a lot in the past about the future of Cuba and what's -- what would happen, and I think at one point you made a 20-year time reference. Now that Elian is back on the ground in Cuba, what role will he play in determining the course of Cuba's events over the next decade or so? Do you think he'll play a personal role in what happens?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Do you think he will what?

Q Play a personal role, as a symbol, as somebody who's been to the United States, as somebody who's been here for a year, as somebody who's been fought over?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know what role he will play, but the role I wish for him is an opportunity to grow up in a strong and healthy and free fashion, able to speak and think what he believes to be true, able to thrive. He's a pretty special little boy.

Q Ms. Reno, in reviewing the regulations, as you all had to do, to look at what happens with a 6-year-old seeking asylum, did that process of realizing that there is -- as the government said in its own legal briefs, there's a gap in the law, did that -- is there any thought being given now to new regulations for what would guide children when they seek asylum?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're following up. We're having our regular INS biweekly, and one of the questions I want to ask is what, if anything, should be done -- not just that issue. I mean, I'm just asking the general issue, because it is clear that -- where do you draw the line between the 6-year-old and the 12-year-old? How do you make these judgments? And I think, before this case is too far removed in terms of the details, that we look at it in that connection.

Q Do you think it might be useful to have a regulation

spelling out at which ages a child could or could not make -- ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think it's going to depend on the child.

Q So in that case you wouldn't want to spell out the age?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know. All I want to do is try to do what I've always done after something that raises issues and disagreements, is to sit down and see if there is anything that we can do.

Q So will you be asking for recommendations from your people on what might work in the way of new regulations?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No, I'll just ask what I usually ask -- what you've all asked me this morning.

Q Do you think in the future there should be some type of family court intervention or participation in such a case?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think the court has spelled out -- the family court in Miami spelled out the fact that this is a federal issue and should be determined federally.

Q Well, do you think there should be a change in the federal law or regulations?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Again, I think it's a federal matter and should be determined federally, and what I indicated previously was that we will be looking at it to see if there is any lesson learned, anything that should be done.

Q The cost figures that were provided yesterday indicated that nearly \$2 million had been spent by this department for security and other things related to Elian's stay. Was there ever discussion of any limits or at any point did you talk about the resources that were being devoted, or was that simply never an issue?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: What we were trying to do was to abide by the court order to make sure that everything was in place to ensure that he did not depart the country.

Q Ms. Reno, did you receive any threats personally during the course of this matter?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I didn't receive any.

Q Was anything passed on to the Justice Department?

Q (Off mike.) (Laughter.)

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know.

Q FBI?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know.

Q There were some pretty strong feelings. Even though you can't name specifically, you're not aware of any hard feelings expressed that way?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think there were some hard feelings expressed, and I think they were expressed because of the intensity of feeling.

Again, I've spent many, many years with the Cuban community in Miami. They can speak sharply, they can speak very sharply to you on the radio, and then you will see them later and they will give you a big hug or they will bring you Cuban pastries or Cuban bread. This hurt may go too deep, which I will regret; but I still have to do what I think is right under the law.

And I think that this little boy's father should speak for him, and I think he should be with his father.

Q On the other matter that had you before the cameras this week, and that was Tuesday's hearing.

Q Speaking of hard feelings.

Q At one point, Senator Specter said you should have

appointed an independent counsel for Vice President Gore based on one standard of evidence, and you corrected him and said he was citing the standard to trigger a preliminary investigation, not the appointment of an independent counsel. That struck me as rather odd, since Senator Specter has been at this more than three years in two different committees. I was wondering, do you think he was being deceitful, or did he just make a mistake?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think Senator Specter would consciously ever be deceitful.

Q Well, how do you know when a politician, or anyone, for that matter, is --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just --

Q -- making a false statement about an event or an interpretation of an event or a recollection?

ATTY GEN. RENO: By -- not in his context, but if you make a false statement, you've got to do so knowingly, knowing that it was false, and by your comments and other evidence, you can prove a case. But I first met Senator Specter long before I came to Washington. He can provoke me. He can say some harsh things. But deceitful, I don't think Senator Specter is.

And even in the midst of his harshness, he can be very thoughtful.

Q Ms. Reno, have you initiated a leak investigation, or are you still contemplating a leak investigation, on the source of the leak on the Conrad recommendation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have no comment on that.

Q But last week though, I believe, you said that you were reviewing the matter? Has that --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have no comment.

Q Senator Torricelli's opening remarks the other day, do you resent the implication on Capitol Hill that you are playing politics and acting to protect fellow members of the administration? Do you resent that implication?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As hard as I have tried to keep politics out, when people insinuate that politics are involved in my decisions, or that I am trying to protect people, I get frustrated.

But what I have tried to do is just keep -- (confers with staff or a reporter) -- (Pause.)

MR. : Sorry.

ATTY GEN. RENO: That's okay. (Cross talk, laughter.)

But one of the things, and I sensed it at that hearing: There had been preliminary reports that it was going to be harsh session, that I was the target of something I am not sure what.

People say some very harsh things. But when you look at those people -- I disagree with some of their approaches, but it's part of democracy.

And in the end, that hearing was a lot more thoughtful and civil and, I think, perhaps set a tone for what I hope will be the politics for tomorrow, as opposed to some of the harshness. You can bear disagreements, you can expose mistakes, you can do so much in a constructive and thoughtful way.

And I think the American people appreciate that way.

Q Do you think you persuaded anyone?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No. (Laughter.)

Q Senator Torricelli also made the point that a witness before a grand jury is allowed to, if he does it promptly, correct any statements.

Does that generally also hold true for a deposition?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It would, I think, depend on the circumstances.

Q Is there anything that came up in the hearing that changes or affects your thinking on the independent counsel? You said it was kind of a useful exchange.

Was there anything that was brought up at the hearing that has an impact on your thinking on this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have reviewed it and I don't see anything, but I'm going to be looking at the transcript.

Q You were told by, I think it was Senator Specter, that it was really too late for you -- or probably too late for you to appoint a special counsel even if you did want to at this point, just because it's so close to the election, and especially I think he even mentioned that it was way too close to the Democratic National Convention. You didn't say anything or respond in any way when that comment was made.

Could you now, please?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't because this obviously is an ongoing matter. And as I have said on many occasions, we shouldn't investigate in the newspapers, we should investigate with all appropriate speed, with thoroughness, and make our determinations, and as appropriate, advise the American people or advise Congress, depending on the circumstances, and be accountable for our decisions.

I will do that. But to do a running commentary where the issue is not -- in so many of these issues, there's been a concentration on an independent counsel or a special counsel.

That's not the issue.

The issue is the truth and how we best get to it.

And I don't think we do that by running commentary. I think we do that by conducting an appropriate process and then taking whatever course the facts dictate.

Q As a general rule of thumb, how do you decide when the political process might be compromised by an investigation?

Is there a certain number of months that is too close for an appointment or an indictment or an investigation? I mean, what is -- what is too --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't think that, as I have reviewed it, that there is any way that you can say. You've got to look at all the facts.

Q So can you -- you're saying then that the election proximity, or the election period, will have no influence on how this matter will be pursued?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I didn't say that.

Q Didn't say that? Oh --

Q Well, can you say that -- I mean, it is in the newspapers now, so you can at least say that you'll decide something before the election.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I have no comment.

Q Ms. Reno, on the issue of Los Alamos, Secretary Richardson recently said that there's still no evidence of espionage.

Can you give us an update on where that investigation stands?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: It is continuing. I have -- am anxious to get a report on it. But I obviously cannot comment, again, because it is a pending matter.

Q Ms. Reno, you've been gracious in describing the -- your encounters with the oversight committees. But here's a hearing called before the ink is scarcely dry in the papers about a new investigation.

You've graciously described it as "oversight," but does there come a time where the oversight is a little too close over your shoulder and you're tempted to tell them, "Back off for now"?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think that's what I graciously tried to do. (Laughter.)

Q Senator Schumer said that the -- that once the matter hit the newspapers, that the hearing should have been cancelled.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think I -- (pause) -- I don't judge whether any hearing should be cancelled, because I don't know what questions they have to ask. What I do think is that the system should take its course.

It is -- I won't comment on the specifics of the hearing, but to have a piece of fact here or a piece of fact here or a piece here, without the full information, is not fair to the American people or to any of the people involved.

And I just think it is important, as we move ahead, that we try to, as I said, respect each other, respect each other's opinion, keep the politics out of law-enforcement initiatives, and try to make democracy work in a civil way.

Q Ms. Reno, complying with some of the Senate oversight committees and the House oversight committees, the department did release to them some of the internal documents on the campaign finance investigation, where you can see Director Freeh's rationale, where you can see Chuck LaBella's rationale. In hindsight is that a good thing? You earlier expressed concern that the people who were giving you advice needed to be able to give it without fear that it would be somehow exposed.

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I mentioned at the hearing, I think the Founding Fathers, as they set up three branches of government, realized that there would always be instances in which two of the branches came together in conflict, that the responsibilities of one branch would conflict with the responsibilities of the other.

Early on these memoranda were described as "providing a map for the investigation," and all involved, including Director Freeh and Mr. LaBella, felt that it would be harmful to the investigation for that road map to be made available.

There were also questions about 6(e) material because -- I am told the courts changed it later -- there was a higher standard as to what 6(e) material was.

The memorandum had been so discussed that, at the point we were at, we had to work on an accommodation; how Congress does its oversight and how we conduct our investigations. We had hoped that Congress would not release it because of the possibility of a chilling effect.

They chose to do so.

I would hope -- when I consider the difference between a prosecutor in Miami and a prosecutor in Washington, and the burdens they have to meet, it's as different as night and day.

If state and local prosecutors around the country had to constantly be worried about what might be before Congress and Congress be investigating how they were handling a major homicide case or a major corruption case, it would be very, very difficult for them, particularly with their caseload.

And I just think we have got to sometimes come to a stop and consider what's at stake.

Q Ms. Reno, don't you think now, though, that you've, for better or worse, set a precedent? The barn door is open. I

mean, won't all congresses henceforth feel free to demand all kinds of internal documents from the Justice Department about ongoing investigations?

ATTY GEN. RENO: They have felt free to date. I don't think anything that we've done will stop it.

Q Is there a danger that these investigations can be turned into a tool where the FBI is not being used to investigate crimes but determine the truthfulness of a candidate? And what does that -- is there not a sort of distortion of the democratic process when that occurs?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't comment, because I think you're referring to the specific matter. But those are the concerns generally that we all must have, to make sure that law enforcement agencies pursue law enforcement initiatives, that the political bodies that are appropriately involved in policy and in the political issues pursue those, and that we each try to pursue our function in the right way.

Q Ms. Reno, there's a political dynamic going on here. About once a year, somebody on the Hill calls a hearing.

Maybe it's more often than once a year.

They announce -- beforehand, they say very mean things about you.

They announce that they're really going to stick it to you politically when you get up there.

When you do get up there, you're like a matador with a cape; they really don't touch you.

Is there some technique that you're using -- (laughter) -- that you can pass on to your successors?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Politics is sometimes a lot of sound and fury, signifying very little.

Q (Off mike) -- Shakespearean.

Q Let me ask you --

ATTY GEN. RENO: What I hope I could pass on is that there are so many senators and congressmen who are people of great goodwill, who may disagree vehemently with me, but do so with respect and civility and great courtesy.

We get to the same hard issues, but we get there in a thoughtful and dignified way.

I would hope that all of us in American -- yesterday I had a wonderful opportunity. I went to a national conference on citizen and community service.

The United Way, General Powell's Promise -- America's Promise, the Points of Light groups, and the national service initiative that Senator Wofford has been such a leader in were all meeting together.

At the end, six students were given an opportunity to ask me questions, and I then I met subsequently with six others who had not had the chance.

One of them asked me about the report that indicates that so many young people want to do -- be involved in service, service to others, but they don't want to get into politics. That, to me, is very discouraging.

But they don't want to get into politics because they see the harshness involved.

I -- my message to everybody, including students across this nation, is that there is nothing so rewarding as public service, in the end; that you consider what so many Americans have done for their country in World War II, World War I, Vietnam, Korea.

They have given their lives. They have come home with serious injury that has been permanent and scarring for the rest of their lives.

All of us can do more for this nation, and in doing so, you put yourself at risk of criticism. But it's a lot less a burden than others far greater than we have done for their country.

Thank you.

Q Thank you.

END.