



**WEEKLY MEDIA AVAILABILITY WITH U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO
THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
WASHINGTON, D.C.
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 1999
9:29 A.M. EDT**

TRANSCRIPT BY FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, 620 NATIONAL PRESS BUILDING,
WASHINGTON, DC 20045.

FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT AFFILIATED WITH THE
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

COPYRIGHT ©1999 BY FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., WASHINGTON, DC 20045
USA. NO PORTION OF THIS TRANSCRIPT MAY BE COPIED, SOLD OR
RETRANSMITTED WITHOUT THE WRITTEN AUTHORITY OF FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE,
INC.

COPYRIGHT IS NOT CLAIMED AS TO ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED
BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS A PART OF THAT
PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES.

FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO THE FNS INTERNET SERVICE, PLEASE
EMAIL JACK GRAEME AT INFO@FNSG.COM OR CALL (202)824-0520.

Q Good morning.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Last night, a gunman walked into the Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort
Worth, Texas. He opened fire on the worshippers and he shattered a
youth prayer service. Thirteen people were shot. His gunfire killed
seven. The thought of gunfire in a place of worship should be
inconceivable. But for families, for others, last night the

inconceivable became a reality.

As a nation, we are profoundly touched by these tragic deaths and by the pain of the innocent victims, their family and friends, the congregation of the Wedgwood Baptist Church, and the community as a whole. Our hearts go out to all of them.

The FBI has been on the scene since last evening, lending its assistance to the local authorities. We have offered continued assistance to the Fort Worth police and to the mayor of Fort Worth. We are prepared to assist in any way that we can.

In 1999 alone, we have watched as innocent people were gunned down while attending school, while walking home from a church or synagogue, while playing at a summer camp, while working in their offices, while delivering mail, and now while worshipping in their church.

This morning we have many more questions than answers about last night's tragedy. We will search for those answers and try, as another community mourns its dead, to find a way to end this type of senseless and destructive violence. It is going to require the commitment of all Americans to look at the issue of how we handle guns, of how we deal with mental illness, of how we deal with hate. We don't know what the situation is here, but all of these events cry out for America to come together and to address them in an effective, permanent manner.

Q Ma'am, it was reported that this gunman spoke out in hateful terms against the Christian worship, against the Christians that were there before he began his shooting. It is too early to call this a hate crime, a religious hate crime?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's too -- we must get answers and must move carefully to make sure that we understand exactly what happened so that we can take the most effective action possible. We should not jump to conclusions.

Q Ms. Reno, these shootings seem to occur with sickening regularity, especially this year, as you pointed out. Each time there seems to be some impetus to do something about the availability of handguns in this country to people who shouldn't have them. Is there anything

about this latest incident that's going to break this logjam, which will --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it is important that we find out exactly what happened, what the weapon was, how it was purchased or how it came into his hands, and take whatever steps are appropriate. But I would stress that right now we should just find out what happened and why.

Q He reportedly -- apparently had a 9mm handgun, as well as a 380 semiautomatic with about nine clips of ammunition. Again, each time something like this happens, there seems to be some impetus in this country to do something about the wide availability of handguns, especially for people who shouldn't have them. This impetus gets worn out in political haggling. Is there any sign that this latest incident is going to break the logjam?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would hope that people would look not just at what handguns have done to America this year, not in the context of this case, but what handguns have done to America over the last many years, and that this nation would listen to its people, who again and again cry out for making -- asking government to make sure that we take reasonable steps to ensure that guns are not placed in the hands of people who are not lawfully entitled to have them.

But in the context of this case, I think we must see just what happened and make informed judgments.

Q Do you know in general what the FBI is doing down there, how they're assisting?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I don't.

Q Also, did you see Senator Hatch's committee put together a report basically complaining about the lack of law enforcement of existing gun rules? Did you see that report, by any chance?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I haven't. But this is a concern that Senator Hatch has expressed on a number of occasions, and I assume the report is somewhat the same. So we'll take a look at it.

But what we have tried to do is to make sure that we use our resources in partnership with state and local officials and make the

best judgment we can as to who does what best.

Is it better to handle the case in federal court? Is it better to handle the case in state court? It will depend on the state laws. It will depend on the state's capacity. It will just depend on the type of crime. And if we work together without regard to turf and credit and numbers, but with regard to what is in the best interest of the community and public safety, I think we can make a real difference.

Q Are you concerned -- the conference committee hasn't even met yet on the gun issue. Are you concerned about progress or lack thereof?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just hope the Senate has come up with a proposal that seems to me to make common sense, to close the gun show loophole. And I hope that we can work together to fashion something that at least begins to address the problem.

Q Ms. Reno, you talk about mental illness and guns in the same breath. Then you talk about the gun show loophole.

But how can you stop people -- and since there's been so many shootings recently by people who are obviously disturbed -- to stop them from getting weapons if they don't have a criminal history or have been institutionalized in the past? How are you going to keep those people from getting weapons?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the points that I'm careful to stress, as I have, is that with respect to the specific case, let us not jump to conclusions until we know what the circumstances are.

I address the issue of mental illness and the issue of hate-motivated crime because it is clear that in some instances people do things because they are mentally ill. And this nation has come a long, long way in learning how to treat mental illness and how to do it so that it can have an impact on a person's life in the right way. I think it is very important that we again renew our efforts in that regard as well.

Q Ms. Reno, is it time to consider repealing or revising the Second Amendment's right to bear arms?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The Second Amendment is there; what is important is

to use the authority we have under the Constitution now to make sure that people who do not know how to lawfully and safely use and possess a gun -- that they're not permitted to do so.

Q Ms. Reno, there was an incident in this area within the last week where somebody who wasn't supposed to get a gun got the gun and then, I guess, shot his two children, killed them, which you may have seen in the papers -- because of an administrative slip-up.

Now -- had there been a seven-day waiting period, there would have been a chance to perhaps look at that. Maybe that would have happened. Do you think a seven-day waiting period, which we used to have, would be more effective than the policies we have now of Instant Check?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's important that we have enough time to provide for an appropriate check. Again, you can cite an administrative slip-up here or there; no law is going to be perfect in terms of its coverage.

Q Ms. Reno, many of these shootings have, as a component, the random nature. What really can be done about someone who just decides to walk into a public place and commit an act of violence?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think that's why it's so important for us to look at just what happened; not with political rhetoric, not with emotion, but with a firm determination and a firm belief that, if we work together, if we use the latest information available, we can make a difference in some cases.

Now, we can't make a difference in all. We can't prevent every crime, and we know that.

But, "Are there warning signals? Could some step have been taken? What could have been done at an earlier age?

How did this -- if it's hate, how did hate become a factor in this person's life? Is it mental illness? What precipitated that? What could have been done? Could treatment have been available? What are the laws? How can they be improved?" These are the questions that we should be asking.

And I think one of the things that we have done in these last several years is recognize that crime is always going to be an issue. It has for every community, every group of people in the history of the world. But if we work together, if we use the latest information available, if we use appropriate research, we can make a difference in some instances. And we -- yes, you're right; there are going to be random examples -- but in some we can make a difference.

Q How concerned are you that -- as you mentioned in your opening statement -- that some of the targets have been some of the places that have been held as safe -- schools, churches?

How concerned are you about the fact that these people seem to target places that are most vulnerable?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am concerned. But I also go back to the fact that there have been parts of our community who have been subject to violence and gunfire and deaths of small children sitting on front porches, that you would hope with all your heart would be safe. It's not just schools, it's not just churches, it's America, it's home. And if it's -- for example, domestic violence -- let's not stand there and wring our hands, let's renew our efforts and recognize that we have begun to do so much to end violence in the home. That should be one of the safest places of all.

Q What do you do as attorney general to at least -- in the absence of gun control laws or actual measures to get guns out of hands, what do you do as attorney general to at least assure the American public that they can go to school, they can go to church without fearing this kind of thing?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What I have tried to do is never promise something that I can't deliver to the American people.

And I have always told them you can never prevent all crimes, neither can you create a situation -- and I don't think most Americans want to create a situation where they live in armed fortresses or go to school in armed fortresses. The balance -- the balancing of limitations on freedom with public safety has always been one of our great challenges, and how do we do it? It's a very difficult issue.

One of the long-term solutions, though, I think -- and you've heard

me say this before -- is let's find out why. And then, I think in many instances it can be traced back to how that person was raised. Were they raised with the supervision and the support needed? What can we do at an early date to identify problems and take constructive steps to deal with them instead of waiting, as for too long we have in this country, to see a child grow up without preventative medical care, only to have the consequences down the line of much more expensive tertiary care that is -- deals with an already debilitating illness or disease. What can we do to give children confidence and supervision and love, and how can we help them develop the concept of conscience and punishment and reward so that they understand how to solve problems without knives and guns and fists?

I know full well, having been a prosecutor for 15 years in Miami, that human beings are always going to do, in some rare instances, horrible things. But I think we can make a difference. We have seen crime come down in this nation. I know it can go up. But I believe we can continue to have an impact on these problems, never assuring the American people that we can prevent every crime, but we can have an impact if we use our knowledge, use it together, get rid of the political rhetoric, stop looking at numbers and start looking at human beings and what we can do to give them strong and positive futures.

Q Who should be doing that kind of research? Who should be driving those studies?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There are many people doing the research. And sometimes the research comes in pieces, and sometimes it comes in more comprehensive analysis. In the Justice Department, for example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is looking at what's working and what's not working, and providing for evaluation.

The National Institute of Justice has done some tremendous work in this regard. Others, in terms of private organizations, are providing for good analysis of what works and what doesn't work.

Sometimes, though, it's a matter of faith and of bringing people together, because you can find pieces -- you can say: This works, and drug courts work, and this particular program works. But in the long run, they won't work unless communities come together and reweave the

fabric of community around children and families at risk. We won't prevent all the crime. There will be that random, terrible act. But let us not just say we can't do anything. I think we can make a difference.

Q Ms. Reno, on a different subject, yesterday a spokesman with the Justice Department called the death of Mario Ruiz Massieu a suicide. I wonder if there's going to be any follow up? Is there going to be an autopsy or will there be any other follow up on his death?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know what will be done on it. But what I would ask is that Myron give you whatever information we have on it afterwards, in terms of follow up, autopsies and the like.

Q On another matter, on Waco, will there be additional recusals? Has there been any decision regarding that question?

ATTY GEN. RENO: You should check with Mr. Holder.

Q Ms. Reno, on the Waco matter and -- there's been a lot of talk the last few days about the FBI crime lab report and the missing 49th page. What's your explanation, your understanding as to how that page came to be omitted from the report? And how do you answer the Republican charges that it perhaps was intentionally omitted?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Since it's been provided to some of the defense attorneys -- and I don't think it's intentional in any way -- but what I've wanted to do in this whole undertaking is let Senator Danforth address these issues without comment from me.

Q Ms. Reno --

Q Ms. Reno, in regard --

ATTY GEN. RENO: This gentleman hasn't had a --

Q Go ahead. Sorry.

Q Thank you. In the case of Mario Ruiz Massieu, I would like to ask you, what is going to happen now with the case, and what will happen with the \$9.9 million that were seized under this investigation? Do you believe the family will be able to recover that, or what will

happen?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will review it in light of his death.

Q Have you talked to the Mexican government, or did they talk to you about this case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I have not.

Q With his suicide, the case is closed, that investigation against Mr. Ruiz Massieu?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will take whatever action is appropriate, based on the circumstances that have now developed. And we will -- other than that, I don't think I can say anything informed at this point.

Q He's -- the lawyer of Mr. Ruiz Massieu have mentioned that the Justice Department was harassing this former Mexican official and that he was complaining about these 25 charges presented against him in Houston. Can you tell us something about it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I can't talk about the charges, other than to refer you to the public record.

Q Thank you.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, sir?

Q Ms. Reno, how much has your ability and effectiveness to function as the attorney general been compromised by the Waco controversy? When there's a shooting in Texas and when you speak out, how concerned are you that people can't or will or won't feel the sense of leadership that you were once able to provide after your own credibility, as you say, has been damaged by the events of --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think the American people like people who identify a problem and then run from the problem and say, "I'm not going to have, you know -- I'm out of here." I think the American people like to have their leaders understand that there are going to be problems.

And when there are, you focus on them, you see what the problem was,

you see how it arose. And then if that person has done something wrong, they should be held accountable.

Q Ms. Reno, in regard to the clemency issue, the Puerto Rican clemency issue on the freedom fighters, what is the current administration position in terms of providing information to Congress?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I understand that the White House has just advised the House committee that the president will exert executive privilege. It just came in just before I came out. So rather than comment further, I think we should see exactly what the situation is. And Myron will be able to provide you more accurate information.

Q Would that in any way affect the Justice Department's ability to provide witnesses, both for Burton's committee and for the Senate side?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am not sure just what the status of it is, and so I didn't want to mislead you. But I think it would be better for Myron to provide you with any information that he can, afterwards.

Q Ms. Reno, I had another question on Puerto Rico, although on a different subject.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am sorry? I can't hear you.

Q I have another question on Puerto Rico, although on a different subject on Puerto Rico, on -- for the island of Vieques, with the Navy testing ground for bombing.

Apparently, there's some protestors who have been on that island for quite some time. And some of them are actually removing ordnance from the island, illegally. And according to an FBI statement here, the U. S. attorney down there, a Jorge Vega, is refusing to prosecute these people, thus making it difficult for the FBI -- (laughs) -- to conduct its investigations.

Do you have any comment on that -- or explain why he is refusing to do this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not comment on what future law- enforcement

actions the government might take, but we are monitoring the situation very carefully in close consultation with the Navy.

Q But -- I mean, it is illegal for these people to be, (A) there, and (B), to be taking ordnance. Shouldn't somebody be doing something about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I indicated to you, we are monitoring the situation closely. We are scrutinizing it. And I can't comment on what action might be appropriate, other than to say we would take whatever action would be appropriate.

Q Ms. Reno, the common denominator in all these horrible incidents has been guns. Should America have a gun czar like they have a drug czar? I mean, how do you bring the American people together on this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the American people are together on it. Wherever I go, when sensible gun legislation is discussed, people speak out with a louder, longer voice than they do on many other issues, and I just hope that their voice is heard.

Q Ms. Reno, back to Waco for a second. I believe earlier in the week, Congressman Waxman, a good, card-carrying Democratic, released documents that said that people in the Justice Department may have known about the use of military CS gas. I wonder why you haven't revised your earlier statements that said that you may have been misled by the FBI, but haven't addressed the disclosures that people in this building, people who have worked for you for years, may have kept this information from you or may not have brought it to your attention?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think you used military CS gas. And what is of concern is whether there was any incendiary or pyrotechnic device used, because I had asked for and received assurances that it would not be used. I think one of the issues is, what did people understand military CS gas was?

And so my whole point still stands, that it is important for everybody to look from their vantage point as to what they knew and didn't know. But the clear point is that nobody has -- that reflected this information and sent it to the Hill has tried to keep it from people. I think it is very important for Senator Danforth to have the

opportunity to pursue it in an objective way, look at the whole picture and make his judgments accordingly.

Q Ms. Reno, will you all participate in whether or not to recuse the civil lawyers from this department from the Branch Davidian wrongful death suit? Will you have anything to do with that decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm -- will address that issue, as it arises, with Mr. Holder.

Q In the case of Mario Ruiz Massieu, are you aware of the possibility that he wrote a letter directed to the Mexican and U.S. government explaining the reasons of his suicide?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know anything about that, but if Myron has information on it that can be released, I'll ask him to provide it for you.

Q Ms. Reno, I didn't understand your answer to the question just before that one. If I understood the question, it was: Did you participate in the decision for the recusal earlier this week in Texas? And then your answer was that you were going to discuss that with Mr. Holder?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I said you should discuss that with Mr. Holder because in most instances we -- U.S. attorneys' offices will recuse in a number of instances. That's usually done through the deputy's office, usually done with career lawyers in the deputy's office, as I understand it. And I never see it.

Q So you were not involved in that at all?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I heard about the request, but it was handled as the usual procedures for recusal are handled.

Q Now the issue is, well, given that recusal, now will the lawyers who are participating in the wrongful death suit --

will they have to be recused because they may be witnesses in this inquiry?

ATTY GEN. RENO: And you should check with Mr. Holder.

Q Okay. And would you be involved at all in that decision?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know.

Q Do you intend to provide a deposition to the plaintiffs' lawyers in that wrongful death suit?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That depends on whether they want my deposition.
(Laughter.)

Q On another question, in the last week -- documents that were provided earlier this week, in hindsight, if you had known that there were documents in this building, sent to Congress, making clear reference to at least military rounds, munitions, would you have sent the marshals over to the FBI to seize that videotape, if you had known that there was evidence right here in this building?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What I think people are confused about is -- or were unaware of -- is that the judge had entered an order saying that the marshals office was responsible for the security of evidence. It seemed -- and the FBI agreed with this process -- it seemed, in light of that order, to have some consistency, that it would be appropriate for the marshals to do it. It didn't have anything to do with the other issues. It's just trying to keep the evidence together in an orderly way.

Q Ms. Reno, a spokesperson for the Davidians living on the compound stated that, when asked, "Who started the fire," said, "Well, I'll give" -- they said that they'll give the U.S. government the benefit of the doubt; they are not blaming the U.S. government for the fire. And secondly, they were displaying a whole series of photos, air photos, of the fire that showed the fire starting from within the building and not on the outsides of the building. It's pretty much as you have said, I think, in your statement several weeks ago. So do you still hold with the fact that the fire was started internally?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have no information whatsoever to indicate that it was not -- that what I've said before -- that the evidence supports the fact that it was started by the Branch Davidians inside the compound.

But it is important that all of these issues be addressed by Senator Danforth, without people jumping to conclusions because, as we can see, each person has their vantage point and their range of knowledge. And it is going to be important for Senator Danforth to have the opportunity to put it all together.

Q Ms. Reno, Alex's question in regards to Ruiz Massieu, can you just tell us what is the report you have received about his suicide?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Just that he is purported to have committed suicide.

Q If -- how or when or --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'll ask Myron to provide you with any information that we have.

Q Thank you.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you.

Q Thank you very much.

Q Thank you.

END.