



WEEKLY MEDIA AVAILABILITY WITH

ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO  
JUSTICE DEPARTMENT  
WASHINGTON, D.C.  
THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2000  
9:30 A.M. EDT

Q Good morning, Ms. Reno.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Good morning.

Q May I ask you about the -- some scholars, I guess notably Laurence Tribe from Harvard -- and there's a boom shadow in the picture -- thank you very much -- has written that the department's justification for obtaining the warrant was insufficient; not that the agents acted improperly, but that the legal underpinnings of getting the warrant were insufficient because there was no crime. And he said there should have been probable cause of a crime to get a warrant. What is your view on that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We disagree with him.

Q For what reason?

ATTY GEN. RENO: All of these issues are -- we presented this to the magistrate, and I think the best way to do that is in response, in careful response, and I will ask Myron to give you the details.

Q But is it fair to say that the way the department obtained the warrant here is not unusual?

ATTY GEN. RENO: This was a most unusual situation.

Q Attorney General Reno, several members of Congress have indicated that they want to hold hearings on this matter.

You've been focused throughout in your comments and statements on what you feel is in the best interest of the child. Do you feel it would be in the best interest of the child for Congress to hold hearings on this matter as early as next week?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That would be up to Congress.

Q Ms. Reno, Greg Craig, on behalf of Juan Miguel, filed a brief yesterday asking that Juan Miguel should be the legal representation of Elian Gonzalez in place of Lazaro. Has the Justice taken a formal position on that? Do you support that? And will you be filing anything with the court?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Anything we say with respect to the court should be said to the court.

Q Have you had discussions with Greg Craig about whether or not --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Again, this is a matter that is before the court and should be litigated there.

Q Ms. Reno, what is the department's role now in controlling or deciding or having any influence whatsoever in terms of the people who visit with the father and the son, that kind of thing? Do you play any role there?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Again, these are issues that are before the court and I think should be properly discussed there.

Q Ms. Reno, how difficult will it be for you to return home?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Won't be difficult at all.

Q Can you talk a little bit more about that in light of what's occurred in recent weeks, in light of protests on your lawn and the like?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What is there to talk about? It's my home.

Q Sure, it is your home.

Q Ms. Reno, what -- (inaudible) -- should have given them a little bit more time. Is there any particular reason you felt you needed to go Saturday morning, rather than Monday or Tuesday? And do you think that you all were so far apart that point Saturday it was just -- (inaudible)? You were still talking to them at 4:00. So what happened then?

ATTY GEN. RENO: At 4:00 they indicated that the requirement that he go to Washington or someplace outside the state of Florida would be a deal-breaker. And I said there -- I had made the point that within that same week, at least two lawyers had -- for the Miami family had indicated that they would go anywhere except to the Cuban interest section and to the Bethesda home -- one said. And I said, "They've indicated that they're willing to." And he said, "No, this would be a deal-breaker." And then he came back to me, indicating that one said he hadn't said it, and the other wasn't authorized to say it.

And I had the feeling that we were in the same position that we had been in, with the goalposts changing, and that it was -- at this point, if it were a deal-breaker, we should bring the negotiations to an end.

Q And it was Mr. Podhurst who told you it was a deal-breaker?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes.

Q And were there -- (off mike) -- specific safety issues, or was it just a matter of "this isn't going anywhere, so we need to take action"?

ATTY GEN. RENO: This was the most appropriate time to take action, with the least crowd. And what influenced us -- because people have talked about it, and they've said, "Well, why move now?" -- they had always -- we had started out early on, when the matters were first developing, to say, "Look, we will agree to the appeals process if you will agree to peacefully turn the child over at the conclusion of the process if we prevail." They refused to do that. It wasn't going to get any better.

They had at one point said, "We won't -- if you come, we will just stand aside and let you take the child." That was easier said than done, because you had the situation where a crowd was gathered regularly, that would be very difficult for people to move through, even if the family had stood aside and said, "You can take the child."

Q What --

ATTY GEN. RENO: But the family then started talking in the last days about "you're going to have to use force to take the child." Thus we were faced with a situation where they had refused, even when -- if the court had ruled for us or was -- ultimately ruled for us, where they were still refusing to peacefully transfer the child.

We had a situation where there were very few people outside the house that morning. We had the situation where, if we did not go, people were sure to find out that we were prepared to go, and the crowd would gather and keep a vigil and make it more difficult for the future. And this seemed to be the safest time possible to effect the transfer.

Q Ms. Reno, let me move a little ahead on the chronology. What -- do you know -- what has been reported to you about Elian's willingness to be with his father, to go to Cuba with his father? Is anything of this being reported to you?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's important, again, that any of these matters be set forth in pleadings before the court. These are matters that are before the court now, and I think that's where appropriate statements should be made.

Q Ms. Reno, has Juan Miguel contacted you since the raid of Saturday?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: No.

Q With regard to the possibility of being weapons in the house, Fidel Castro, in the speech last Saturday, said that he informed the U.S. government that Lazaro Gonzalez had a pistol. Did you use this information as part of your intelligence?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I'm sorry, I did not --

Q Fidel Castro, in a speech last Saturday said that the Cuban government informed the U.S. government that Lazaro Gonzalez had a pistol on his back. I'm asking whether this information was considered, accepted, or was part of your intelligence?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I know nothing about such information.

Q Did you consider the information from Fidel Castro as an intelligence that you could use?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I don't know anything about such information.

Q Ms. Reno, back on the question of the family's initial statement to the Justice Department that they would offer no resistance if you came, what actually happened when the INS agents came to the door? Was there resistance?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: As I understand it, people tried to throw ropes around the agents as they went into the house and obstruct their entry into the house. A couch was pushed up against the door to limit entry into the house.

Q Is that why they used the battering --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That's correct. That's -- as I understand it.

Q And do you know anything about reports that Betty Mills, the female INS agent who actually picked Elian up, was at one point pushed down?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: There was at first a report that she was pushed down as she was entering the house. That, I am told, was not true.

She was grabbed as she was carrying Elian out of the house. She, I'm told, almost went down, but was grabbed -- and was also able to pull herself up -- but was grabbed by the agent who appears in the picture behind her as -- and they then proceeded to the van.

(Cross talk.)

Q Ms. Reno, what else occurred at --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Wait --

Q Can you verify that the agent who was in that picture had the safety on his weapon?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I am told that he did.

Q Should that situation have been avoided, of the armed agent confronting Elian in the closet? Do you think that there was a way to avoid that, and should it have been avoided?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Of the armed agent confronting Elian in the closet?

Q The photo that now everyone has seen around the world. Was there not a possibility to avoid that situation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: To avoid the situation of the photo?

Q Of that moment. Was there another way of handling that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We looked at everything that we could do to make sure that it was done safely and yet with the least impact on Elian. Clearly, the agents had to be in force. Elian was being held by this person, and there had to be a show of force, not a use of force, to show that we were in control. I think that was done carefully and thoughtfully based on the information that has been provided to me to date.

With respect to the camera, I was told that cameras were in the house, that probably much of this would be filmed. We knew that there would be pictures that would graphically display what was happening. And we went ahead with it, again based on how, when and where we could safely effect the transfer of the child.

Q Ms. Reno, the family has complained that the agents went in cursing and yelling, using rough language towards the family.

Have you received any report about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm told that they did not.

Q Was the bedroom door locked in the room where Elian was being held in the closet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know.

Q The American people, by a margin of practically two to one, have come out in support of the reuniting of Elian with his father, the action that you took last week. Why do you believe the American people have supported you so strongly in this action? And how does that make you feel after what's been a long and difficult decision- making and negotiating process?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think the American people are supporting me per se. I think they're supporting an effort that was patient, that tried in every way -- everyone involved knew how to effect a voluntary transfer, a peaceful transfer. And then I think the American people felt that the law should be upheld, upheld in the safest way possible.

They don't like the picture any more than I do. They don't like the thought of having to take a little boy to his father in this fashion any more than I do. But it was -- I think one of the things is that they had a chance to see it and to understand that in a law enforcement situation like that, it may not be the prettiest thing in the world, but it is effective, and it proved to be effective here.

And I think the reason they are supporting the actions of an awful lot of people is that they have watched a father and a son come together again.

Q Ms. Reno, there have been reports that the Miami relatives didn't believe your deadline because you had let previous deadlines pass. Do you think that was the case?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Based on all the information that we had, they thought that they could ignore us. And we had tried to be very patient with them to effect a voluntary transfer, and that then the time comes when the law must be enforced.

Q Were you surprised at what you were seeing from the family over time, in terms of the overtures that you thought you were making; were you surprised that they just didn't respond to it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think "surprise" was --

Q What was the feeling?

ATTY GEN. RENO: My feeling from the beginning has been that this little boy has been through so much. He lost his mother. He was found floating in the Gulf Stream. He came to live with distant relatives. He has been a center of attention, noisy attention from crowds. My feeling is that he deserves peace and quiet. He deserves to be with his daddy. And he deserves to have his life move on. And I hope that we can all come to the point where the family can ultimately sit down, work out their differences, if possible, and make it possible for people to keep in touch with the little boy in constructive, positive ways, through appropriate contact, through appropriate communication.

Raising children is the single most difficult thing I know to do. It takes hard work, love, intelligence and an awful lot of luck.

This little boy has had a lot of bad luck along the way, but he is still resilient, he is still strong, he's still a smiling little boy. I think it's time for everybody to sit down and just take a moment to think about him.

Q One follow-up. As you gave these final orders Saturday morning, what went through your mind?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: How he would feel, suddenly being put in the arms of a stranger. What would he think, how frightened would he be? (Pause.) And I kept thinking, I wish that I could see him when his daddy gets on the plane.

Q Marisleysis Gonzalez has said that she would like to have a meeting with you. Has anyone in the past week contacted -- anyone from the family or their representatives -- contacted you or your office to have such a meeting, and would you entertain such an idea?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Not to my knowledge. You're the second person that has raised it, and I checked the last time it was raised and nobody has contacted the office.

Q Ms. Reno --

Q Given how unusual this whole episode obviously has been, do you anticipate that there will be some sort of in-house review, once the whole legal process is done, into the immigration policies, INS handling, the negotiating strategy, the raid itself, et cetera, or will you leave that to Congress if they decided to hold hearings?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: We do an after-action in situations such as this, and we always, in any circumstance, try to learn what can be done for the future.

Q Mr. Craig said in his motion filed in court yesterday that the interests of the Justice Department do not necessarily intersect with the interests of the boy's father, and that's the reason that the father has entered new litigation.

As the litigation continues, do you expect your lawyers to work with the lawyers for the father? Do you think that his statement is correct, that there was not an intersection of interests?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There are clearly different interests involved.

Q And are your lawyers going to work with his lawyers --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, the --

Q -- depending on what those different interests are?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it's better that the matter be litigated through pleadings filed with the court.

Q Ms. Reno, do you think you talked too long? Do you think you should have moved two weeks or three weeks before you did? Or do you feel that you had to let this time run to satisfy your own desires for fairness?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It turned out just fine.

Q Ms. Reno --

ATTY GEN. RENO: And I think one never knows what the appropriate timing is. Some people say, "It wasn't two or three weeks; you should have moved much earlier."

In this situation, people have had the opportunity to appeal, to seek their day in court, in family court, and the family court in Florida said this matter is something that should be handled under federal law. We can look back on it and say that the processes of the rule of law have been given an opportunity to work.

One never knows when the best time was, because you only choose one time.

Q Ms. Reno, were you saying back several questions ago that it would be in Elian's best interests, as far as you can see, that he would be able to see his Miami relatives again before he leaves the country, something like a closure on the whole incident of his being taken from their home?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think it is a closure.

Q Okay. What is it?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it will be up to experts to tell us what is the best thing to do.

But I think it's important for everybody involved to take some quiet time for us all and to put the little boy first and, as time goes by, make arrangements -- and I don't know how this will turn out, but try to make arrangements for the cousins to see each other, for visitation for the future.

I can't imagine that Marisleysis will be out of his life. I mean, you could look at them and see a connection. And as the experts and others work with the family, my hope is that the pieces of Elian's life can come together in a way that will be most positive for him, most enduring, and so that he will look back on this time with as little pain as possible.

Q Will you or Justice intercede for the Miami family, the cousins, at all to have availability to visit Elian?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we need to talk with the experts about how we best handle a transition.

Q Ms. Reno, can you tell us anything more about what you were doing at the moment that this raid came down? For example, Mr. Podhurst said that he was on the phone with you. Who were you talking to? How were you getting your information? And did you have -- or did you watch any of it on television?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Mr. Podhurst and I had talked. He asked if he could put me on hold at about five minutes past 5:00.

And my recollection is -- minutes, more or less -- that I was on hold till about 5:15, when he came back on the phone. Almost immediately thereafter, the INS agents entered.

Q How did you first learn that Elian had been safely removed from the house? And what were you thinking of, how did you feel at that moment?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Doris Meissner told me, and I was greatly relieved.



Q Ms. Reno, speaking of Elian's future, if he winds up back in Cuba, will he have as many opportunities as a six-year old who grows up in the United States?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know. I don't know what the future holds for Cuba.

Q Ms. Reno, has this episode in any way changed your relationship with your Cuban counterparts or given you an understanding of how they work?

ATTY GEN. RENO: My Cuban counterparts?

Q Well, the Cuban government officials who have been also involved, obviously, in trying to get the little boy back to his father.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't have a relationship really with my Cuban counterparts.

Q Ms. Reno, just for a moment, on Microsoft, I realize the department will be speaking in court about what the right next step is, but I have a question about the process. Department officials were discussing their proposed recommendation for a sanction with the Treasury and White House this week, and also soliciting the views of people throughout the industry. What's the reason to do that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: This is a complex, extremely significant case, and we gave an informational briefing to the White House.

In terms of putting together pleadings to be filed with the court, I think it's more appropriate that we just speak to the court on that.

Q Okay. But can you say why the White House was briefed?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Because I think it is a significant and important case.

Q Ms. Reno, the investigators interviewed President Clinton and Vice President Gore last week. Can you say whether they're still under investigation over campaign finance?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I cannot comment in any way.

Q Ms. Reno, a question kind of related to Elian: A lot of the Republicans up on the Hill are criticizing you for what happened over the weekend, are also asking you to now take enforcement on some of the protestors who remain in Vieques, in Puerto Rico. Do you think that if you took some action against the Puerto Ricans on that issue, that you might quell some of the protests on Capitol Hill about Elian?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't comment on any prospective or otherwise considered law enforcement action, except I will generally say that whenever we plan a law enforcement action, we do so according to what we believe to be the best process, according to law, according to the processes provided by law. And I think that we will continue to do that

and we should not be influenced by concerns expressed by others if we feel like we've done it the right way.

Q Ms. Reno, can you take us through your understanding of what exactly happened in the house during the three minutes?

They went to the door, and then what happened next? The couch was pushed up against the door, you said.

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That's what I understand.

Q And then, from there?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I think the best way to give a careful analysis of that is to consider the after-action report.

Q Is that going to be made public?

(Cross talk.)

Q Ms. Reno, the --

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I'll ask Myron to give you the full details on whatever we can.

Q Is it finished yet, the after-action report? Has it been completed?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Not to my knowledge.

Q Have you spoken to President Clinton since Elian has been safely removed from the house?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Yes, I have.

Q And what kinds of words did the president have for you in the aftermath of Elian's safe removal from the house?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: That's between the president and myself.

Q Can you give us -- without his specific words, can you give us the general nature of the dialogue? Was the president supportive of the decisionmaking process and the execution of the strategy that you had employed?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: Yes.

Q Ms. Reno, a question about the negotiations. Some of the mediators in Miami said they got the impression that as part of the deal, Juan Miguel might be willing to come to Miami for an extended stay, at some place, you know, in the Miami-Dade, with the family. Greg Craig has said that he would not have agreed to that. Was there any chance that you or any government negotiators were giving the impressions to Miami

intermediaries that Juan Miguel might be willing to go to Miami as part of the deal?

ATTY. GEN. RENO: I only spoke to one intermediary. I -- when I got the proposal from them, it referred to Miami. I said that I would pass that on, but that I did not think that he would come to Miami for an extended period of time because of the hostility and the tensions that existed and that it would be, if such an effort were to be successful, I thought that it would require a more neutral arena, and I suggested Airlie House. Throughout the evening, we focused on other issues, but I had told Mr. Podhurst that, early on.

I wondered if there was any possibility that he would come for, again, such an extended period of time, and it was just flat out, "No," and I conveyed that.

Q Did you give Mr. Podhurst a firm deadline of 2:30, 3:30 in the morning?

Did you ever say, "You've got till 3:30 and then I'm not talking to you anymore? And then if you did, or if you didn't, why did you continue to talk to him at 4:00 and at 5:00? And what was the conversation like then?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I continued to talk to him until he said that the -- what I had indicated earlier, that -- when I suggested to him, "Look, some of his lawyers themselves have said he'll go -- Lazaro will go anywhere, except some very specific places, I just think that this seems like something that they shouldn't object to." When Mr. Podhurst said that it would be a deal-breaker, I said -- and this was about 4:00 in the morning -- "Then I don't think we can go any further." And I said, "I think we're out of time." We said good- night. We thanked each other.

At about 4:21 -- and some of the people started to leave the office. At about 4:21, I got a call from him saying, "We just need five minutes." And I said, "I think we've run out of time, but I'll give you five minutes." He said, "It's 4:21; you mean till 4:26?" And I remember looking at my watch, and my watch corresponded with his, and I said, "That's right." He called back a little bit after 4:26, as I recall, and continued to talk, and I just wanted to try to do everything I could to work it out, and I continued, at his request, to listen, at the same time telling him that we were out of time.

Q Ms. Reno, any thoughts on the Columbine videotape, the sale of that, whether or not that was appropriate by Littleton?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would have to let the people who are there at the scene make comments. I think to make comments from a distance would be inappropriate.

Q Ms. Reno, why was it so important for you to be so personally involved in the resolution of this matter? And did you feel that it distracted you from your other work as attorney general? A two-part question. You obviously got very closely involved.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Everywhere I went, this was the subject of people's concern. It was a major issue for the Department of Justice. I get criticized if I don't get too involved; I get criticized by others for being too involved.

And I think I've got to make sure that I know what's going on when so much is at stake, and so I don't think I was too involved.

Q Did it distract you from your other work at the Department of Justice as the attorney general?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Each time you spend some time on one subject, you don't spend time on another subject.

Q So you have peace -- peace personally, peace in your heart, about what's been done and is this all on the right track?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will have peace in my heart and peace in my mind when everybody is home, wherever home will be -- (soft laughter) -- wherever the law leads us, and I will have peace and a great deal of happiness when that little boy doesn't have to have a television camera in his face or a camera in his face, where he can go on, no matter how the law turns out in this case, and lead a normal life, because I think, unless we continue to besiege him, when he reaches his permanent situation, Elian Gonzalez is going to grow up to be a very fine young man.

Q Ms. Reno, does the Justice Department plan to pursue unanswered subpoenas at the White House with the same vigor that they executed the search warrant at the Lazaro Gonzalez home?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not comment on any issue that is framed in that sort of way, because I don't know what --

Q (Chuckles.)

Q Well, do the American people have the right to know if the rule of law may have been selectively executed?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're going to try to enforce the rule of law as effectively as we can in all situations.

Q Ms. Reno, there have been --

STAFF: Last question, please.

Q There have been death threats reported -- made against some of the agents who participated in extracting Elian Gonzalez from his Miami home. How seriously is the Justice Department taking any such threats? And is there anything extra being done to protect the agents?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We obviously would not discuss anything being done. And I would hope that people would understand that these agents were doing their job, that they did it according to law enforcement experience as

to -- that demonstrates that the show of force does so much to protect life, rather than harm life.

And that I think this gives people an understanding that law enforcement is an extraordinarily difficult job. You put your life on the line, you face investigations if you do something that somebody else thinks might be wrong, that you're held accountable, as you should be. It is a tremendous challenge, and the men and women who do it, those Border Patrol agents, others who have been involved, police officers, agents, they serve this country in so many situations with great distinction.

Yes, there are some in law enforcement that do wrong. But there are some in the media that do wrong. There is some in every profession that do wrong. Most Americans who are in law enforcement care deeply about their country, about their Constitution, and about the people that they are to protect, and I think sometimes we should say thank you more often to them.

Thank you.

Q Thank you.

END.

Copyright ©2000 by Federal News Service, Inc., 620 National Press Building, Washington, DC 20045 USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. 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](mailto:info@fnsg.com) or call (202)824-0520.