



WEEKLY NEWS BRIEFING WITH ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO

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0520.

Q Good morning.

Q Good morning, Ms. Reno.

ATTY GEN. RENO: In the last 48 hours, this nation has
witnessed the terrible and tragic shootings at the Jewish
Community Center in Los Angeles. Then the nation learned of
the murder of a U.S. Postal Service carrier, who is
Filipino, in a nearby neighborhood.

The Los Angeles Police Department, District Attorney in Los Angeles Gil Garcetti, the FBI, ATF, the Postal Service and the United States attorney are working together in the investigations of these outrageous acts.

Last night, a federal criminal complaint was filed against Buford O. Furrow, charging him with murder of an employee of the U.S. Postal Service and of being a felon in possession of a firearm. Further comments will be made shortly in Los Angeles concerning the shootings at the community center.

Although the investigations are still under way, these shootings appear to have been motivated by hate. Hate crimes represent an attack, not just on individual victims, but also on the victims' communities. They tear at the very fabric of a peoples' lives.

But the victims, their families and their communities do not stand alone. We stand with them. In these next days, I ask you to reach out to the Jewish and Asian communities and to others who have been the victims of hate. Let us stand as one nation united in respect for each other and united against threats to any one of us.

Eliminating hate crimes and eliminating bigotry and bitterness are among this nation's most important and most enduring challenges. They are a challenge for the entire nation and for each community; for our schools, for our religious institutions, for our civic organizations and for each and every one of us as individuals. We must all come together to build communities that are safer, stronger and more tolerant.

In less than six months, we will begin a new century. We must decide now, as a nation, whether we are going to allow our culture of violence to continue on into the next millennium or whether we are going to start into the new era with a commitment to tolerance and to peaceful resolution of our disputes and our disagreements.

And if we all agree that we do not want our children to

live in a society where shootings at a school or a church are commonplace and crimes committed against individuals because of their color or religion are just another story in the newspaper, then we must act now. We must do more to teach our children tolerance and make sure that they learn to accept all people regardless of their race, religion, nationality or sexual orientation. We must pass stronger hate crime legislation that will enhance the federal government's ability to prosecute and to help states prosecute those who commit crimes because of their prejudice.

Finally, we must do more to keep dangerous firearms out of the hands of criminals, children and others who should not have them. For four months, since the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, the administration and the Congress have debated over how to reform our gun laws -- four months, and yet we have not been able to pass gun- safety measures that even most gun owners

support; four months, and anyone can still walk into a gun show and buy a high-powered, dangerous weapons without even having to establish their identity.

Next month, the House and Senate will return to Washington and take up the task of reconciling the House and Senate juvenile justice bills. They will have the opportunity to pass the sensible, reasonable gun-safety measures contained in the Senate bill, and I urge them to do so.

But we must acknowledge that there is a need to do even more. We are never going to get a serious grip on gun violence in this country until we adopt comprehensive measures to keep guns away from those who should not have them. We need measures that include extending the Brady checks to violence juvenile offenders, cooling-off periods; laws which address child

safety and child-access prevention; limits on how many handguns someone can buy in a month. And I believe we must seriously explore the possibility of requiring the licensing of all handguns. It is common sense, pure common

sense to ensure that guns are only in the hands of those who know how to safely and lawfully use them and have the capacity and this willingness to do so.

This is a critical time in our nation's history. We can go into the next century with a realistic prospect of ending the culture of violence in this country.

It is critical that we do so now.

Q Ms. Reno, will the administration push for the measures you just talked about in terms of extending Brady, cooling-off period, limits on gun purchases and so forth? Will you urge Congress to enact those?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have -- think it is a matter of common sense and would certainly urge that.

Q Ms. Reno, will the administration introduce legislation to try to do that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're going to explore that. But first steps first, and the first thing we've got to do is get passed -- get the Senate bill passed.

Q Ms. Reno, do you think that the federal government is monitoring hate groups in this country as thoroughly and effectively as they need to be?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think so, because we have reviewed the guidelines. It is important that you not focus on a group unless you have a reasonable indication that they are engaged in criminal conduct. When we have that indication, we initiate an appropriate investigation. But we do not announce the existence of such investigations. While I will not disclose the organizations we have under investigation, one should not assume that we are not pursuing investigations in this area.

Q When you say you've reviewed the guidelines, do you mean since the shootings or just in the last few days?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, since I took office.

Q What can you announce about the Church of the Creator, your view in regard to that group?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I cannot comment.

Q Is that you won't comment?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I cannot comment.

Q Those investigations you just talked about have been just started, or have been going on for some time?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Cannot comment.

Q Ms. Reno, have you urged the administration to push for legislation that would require licensing of all handguns?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have talked about the need for licensing since I took office. I don't think people should have weapons unless they know how to safely and lawfully use them and have the capacity and the willingness to do so.

Q Is there more support for that now within the administration?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think there's more support for that generally around the country and here in Washington.

Q Do you think the administration will be specifically proposing that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the president has talked about it.

Q Ms. Reno, in this case, from what is known -- simply what is known publicly, would the steps you're just talking about have made any difference? Is there any indication that the firearms in this case were illegally obtained in the first place?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think we know enough to comment at this point.

Q Would they have made any difference, for example, in the Atlanta shootings of a couple of weeks ago? It appears that those guns were lawfully obtained.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Part of this -- I don't know the answer to either one of those questions because I haven't gotten all the details of the Atlanta shooting. And I don't want to say that it would keep that gun out of the hand of that person who committed that crime.

But what I am saying is that collectively, these are common-sense steps to ensure that people who have weapons have the capacity to safely and lawfully use them, and the knowledge of how to do so. If we start making sense of weapons, I think it will have an effect, almost a domino effect on the nation, in terms of making sure that we are not enthralled with guns.

Q Ms. Reno, every time something like this happens, there's tremendous momentum to do something sensible about the preponderance of guns in this country. Then when it gets to Congress, it gets mugged and tied up in the closet. It just fritters away. How do you plan to keep the heat on? How do you plan to keep the momentum going?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't plan to keep the heat on; I plan to keep talking out, as I have for a long, long time, on how we make a common-sense framework for dealing with weapons in this country.

Q If this --

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I've pointed out to you, it doesn't have to be. If Toronto has a hundred gun homicides from '92 to '96, and Chicago, a city of equal size, has over 3,000 gun homicides in the same period, we see alternatives, and we know that guns do not have to fuel violence in a community.

Q If this initiative stalls, if it -- as it has in the

past, if it goes nowhere on Capitol Hill, will you or the president go to the country and try to rally the support of the people behind some type of sensible, you know, gun controls --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I've been going to the country, and I will continue to go to the country. But the country is coming to us. When you go out to America, America is saying, "Why can't you all do something?" And I think the message should be loud and clear. The American people, including a great majority of gun owners, think that we need rational regulation of guns, to

make sure that people who are not entitled to have them don't have them.

Q Ms. Reno, when do you expect to give -- just on a different subject -- Governor Whitman in New Jersey an answer on Carson Dunbar and whether or not he'll be able to keep his federal pension so he can head the New Jersey State Police?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We've had extensive conversation with the governor, and she should comment on any of that.

Q Can you just comment on what's taking so long in making that determination?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would let the governor comment.

Q Ms. Reno, in reference to the commuted sentences of the 11 Puerto Rican prisoners, what based that decision? And what are the details of the review? What are the conditions of their release? And have any of them accepted those conditions?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I will ask Carole to give you any more details with respect to the status of the release. But the president reviewed the matter and, obviously, concluded that the sentences imposed for the crime committed were out of proportion to sentences for similar offenses, for others. This matter has been under review at the department

and the White House for some time.

Q Ms. Reno, going back to Los Angeles for a moment, you talked at first about how this appears to be a hate crime. Legally, does that make any difference in this case? And when you have a case that is so violent, does the hate-crime legislation make any difference when you have at your disposal so many other more potentially serious statutes?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I have indicated, we have obviously used the statute that has a very serious penalty to it with respect to the homicide of the postal carrier. I do not want to comment with respect to the other matters and would like to leave that for the authorities in Los Angeles to comment upon.

At the conclusion of the press availability, I'll have some people here who can talk to you about the nature of the legislation and how it might impact on different situations.

Q But as a general matter, what is the value of the having hate-crime statutes that you can use? What value do they serve?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the values that they serve in federal legislation is now, to prosecute a hate crime, I have to show that it was done with reference to a federally protected activity. If I can show that somebody has committed a crime against a person because of their religion, the proposed legislation would give me greater flexibility to prosecute without having to prove that it involved a federal protected activity.

Q Ms. Reno, in view of the concerns raised by the Los Angeles tragedy, and the concern about hate groups and terrorist groups, do you think it wise that the president has gone ahead with the offer to the Puerto Rican terrorists?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think each matter has to be considered on its own merits. And the president has reviewed the matter

with respect to the Puerto Ricans, and he's felt that justice requires the determination.

Q Already some Republicans are saying that --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Excuse me?

Q Already some Republicans are saying that the pardon came after Mrs. Clinton met with Congressman Serrano and Congresswoman Velazquez. Any reaction to that?

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

Q Ms. Reno, has there been any determination yet of whether Mr. Furrow will face the death penalty on the federal murder charge?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No --

Q And also, what linked him to -- what was the connection? Was it a confession? Is it evidence on the scene that linked him to the federal --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I cannot comment on -- with respect to any of the evidence. And any further comment concerning the matter should be made by Los Angeles authorities, so that we don't trip over each other.

Q You proposed a cooling-off period. What specifically do you mean by that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think we should consider a cooling-off period. If somebody decides they're going to wreak havoc, they should have three days to think about it, for example.

Q A waiting period, like in the old Brady law?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes.

Q Ms. Reno, if you type in the word "Uzi," U-Z-I, in your Lycos search engine, the first URL you'll hit is a company

willing to sell you an assault rifle over the Internet, in 9-mm 22-caliber and 45-caliber modes. Is it time to ban the sale and possession of all assault weapons, regardless of whether they were manufacture before the 1996 law?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Let me review that question in the context of work we're doing now with the Internet and ask Carole to get back to you on that.

Q Ms. Reno, I didn't catch your response to the Carson Dunbar question. Did you say that you had set a time frame for deciding on that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think it would not be appropriate. The governor and I have been in conversation, and she should have any comment on it.

Q Ms. Reno, Mr. Burton has been trying to get Mr. Trie and Mr. Huang before his committee before they are sentenced. He said yesterday that he was getting no cooperation from Justice, that your aides had simply refused to cooperate, and he said that this was a disregard of the prerogative of Congress. Can you respond to Mr. Burton?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It is certainly not a disregard of the prerogative of Congress. It is -- we are handling the case with respect to the prosecution, which is an executive function, and we will be happy to work with Congress in every way that we can, consistent with our responsibilities.

Q In what ways would you be willing to work with Dan Burton's committee?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Well, obviously, when the sentencing has occurred, we would try to work with him to see what could be done to provide the testimony.

Q Okay, thank you.

Q Judge Smith in Waco has ordered the department to turn over every scrap of information about the Branch Davidian

situation. Have you reviewed that ruling, and do you have a comment?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I haven't had a chance to review it yet.

Q Ms. Reno, House Majority Leader Armey has sent you a query that deals or a letter that deals in part with PIDNET, the proposal to monitor intrusions on critical government computer infrastructure. Have you responded to that letter yet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't believe we have. I have not seen a response.

Q Ms. Reno, the recent federal court opinion on the necessity to allow lawyers for defendants who face potential capital cases, to be able to sit in on the decision-making meetings, how is that going to affect the department? Are you bound by that decision now?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We will review it.

Q And it hasn't made any change yet in the procedure then?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just think it would be appropriate to say we would review it.

Q Ms. Reno, - - (inaudible) - - over at Energy said they were going to come out with a report on disciplinary action for a number of employees at Energy.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Could you speak just a little bit --

Q Sure. Yesterday, Bill Richardson over at Energy said that his department was going to come out with a disciplinary report on a number of -- employees over at Energy -- he didn't say whether anybody was going to be fired -- all in relation to the nuclear labs and the spying allegations.

In light of last week's report from senators Lieberman and Thompson, are you going to have any similar type of thing with what went on at Justice and FBI, some of the

miscommunications that happened there?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I have indicated on several occasions, we have a review team reviewing a number of issues and reviewing how the whole matter was handled, and I look forward to receiving their report.

Q If you haven't read the report from Thompson when we talked last week, the availability. I am just wondering if you have had a chance to read it now; if you have any thoughts on pretty widespread criticisms that they had of the investigation from all ends; from the FBI, to Justice, to Energy Department, and the coordination between the three, and what's being done to address those concerns?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I indicated, I have asked the review team to consider that and to consider the questions raised by PFIAB and to make sure that we address all these concerns.

Q Ms. Reno, may I come back on guns one more time? You've talked a lot about what you think the nation ought to do. Should the states also look at enacting their own restrictions along the lines you've talked about, or is this fundamentally a federal obligation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Basically, states are responsible for the regulation of firearms, but there is also a federal interest as well. I think that states should take the lead. I'm, again, a proponent of states exercising their responsibilities. And it is important for all governments, at every level, to take reasonable, common-sense steps for the appropriate use of firearms.

Q You've talked a lot about -- getting back to hate groups and how the federal government goes about monitoring those, you've talked a lot about the need for careful protection of First Amendment rights when it comes to these groups. Can you just, in light of the Los Angeles incident -- it's a fuzzy line, I think, in a lot of people's minds where First Amendment issues crosses over into criminal activity. Can you just sort of enlighten us as to how you go about

assessing that line?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The guidelines we provide is, before we investigate action, we must have a reasonable indication that the people involved are engaged in criminal conduct. And we review the facts and make that determination.

Q You know, you've talked about the gun laws. And something the NRA and Republicans will often say is that, you know, why bring up more gun laws if you're not enforcing the ones you have? And some of these that you were mentioning -- cooling off period, extending the Brady Law -- may not require additional resources, but requiring licensing and things like that would

require something of a bureaucracy to sort of -- basically to register people, to test people and things like that. If you don't have the resources now to enforce the laws you have, would it be a federal thing to beef up this area, or would you have the states sort of take the lead on the licensing? I mean, where would the resources come to sort of --

ATTY GEN. RENO: In the first place, what we have done with respect to the illegal possession or use or distribution of firearms is join with state and local prosecutors to ensure the appropriate prosecution of these cases. In some instances, the federal government may pursue it; in other instances, the state may pursue it.

In part, that depends on the state laws and the penalties provided. And I think we're going to make sure that anyone who illegally uses or possesses a gun -- that appropriate action is taken.

At the same time, what we're trying to do is save lives. When you again see that juxtaposition of Chicago and Toronto, 3,000 (gun homicides) versus 100 -- if we can show that these efforts are working -- and I think we can -- then I think the expenditure of funds is worth it.

Q If you ask for new funds, will they be state or --

ATTY GEN. RENO: If I --

Q I mean, it just sounds like -- that these laws aren't be carried out fully right now, so --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Here is where I would -- here is where I think we need to make sure, is in the process of making sure that you don't place a gun in the hand of someone who doesn't know how to use it and who doesn't know how to lawfully use it and who does not have the capacity and the willingness to do so.

Q Ms. Reno, what's a "reasonable expectation" -- in light of the Internet and everything else that's out there today, is a "reasonable expectation" if people engage in criminal conduct? If a group posts something on the Internet that incites violence, is that enough of a "reasonable expectation" to initiate an investigation?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We're reviewing the whole issue to see just what standards should be applied, in addition to any standard that exists now with respect to the Internet.

Q And you're reviewing it how? I mean, is there going to be a formal set of guidelines coming out? Is there a new report?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know. We're reviewing it to see what, if anything, needs to be done.

Q Is that phrase -- that standard, "reasonable expectation," does --

ATTY GEN. RENO: Reasonable indication that they have engaged in criminal --

Q Oh, reasonable indication. Does that occur anywhere else in your -- in guidelines to investigators, or is that sort of something all by itself, that standard, reasonable indication?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would have to ask Carole to double-check for you, so I make sure I give you the most accurate answer. It is generally not a standard; that is, it is not the equivalent of probable cause.

Q It's something less than that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes.

Q Ms. Reno, how would Buford Furrow be tried? Will he be tried in federal court or a state court first? Have you decided?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not comment. I would let the appropriate authorities in Los Angeles comment. We want to work very closely with the state and local officials.

Q And also, would you ever entertain at the Justice Department a federal lawsuit against gun makers?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Again, I think we should see how matters are proceeding. I think the important initiative that we want to undertake is to make sure that people who illegally use weapons or possess them -- that appropriate action is taken against them.

Q Ms. Reno, but various groups -- the National Rifle Association, Gun Owners of America -- would probably argue against, and have been arguing against gun laws on the basis that they believe there is an absolute constitutional right to own firearms, that laws shouldn't be put up against that. What is your view of what the Constitution provides about gun ownership?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think there is an absolute right in the Constitution to any one thing that trumps another. I have freedom of speech, but I don't have freedom to yell "fire" in a crowded theater when there is no fire. I think it is important to recognize the exact language. Most constitutional scholars do not construe it as an absolute right.

But what I have found from the NRA is that it has two groups of members; those that talk about any law will be the camel with its nose in the tent, and so we are opposed to any law regulating it, and others who say, sure, it makes sense to ensure that you don't let people have guns unless they know how to safely and lawfully use them and have the capacity and the willingness to do so.

Q What about the role of the media, especially films and television, in promoting gun violence and inciting to a great extent. Is there just too much of that? And is that not a larger contributor to these acts that you deplore?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think, from the reading that I have done and from the information I have received, gratuitous violence on television and in film has been a contributor to violence. I think it is important for America to speak out and recognize that violence has been a part of people's lives for all of history, but not the culture of violence that we have now where it is -- you see it on television, you see it in films; guns are prized by a significant group of people.

Q Do you personally --

ATTY GEN. RENO: What I am -- what I would like to see us do is -- see, I'm not much help because I -- when I come to movies, I like "Sound of Music." (Laughter.)

But part of it is just we -- violence can be an acquired habit. I think the nation does not have to be violent. I think we can teach our youngsters how to resolve conflicts without knives and guns and fists. I think we can see heroes without guns in their hands. I think we can do so much to change the attitude about violence and things that contribute to violence.

Q Ms. Reno, back to the Puerto Rican case. Some of the family members are complaining that the conditions of the release go against international law, like asking them to put in writing to ask for a pardon, which in essence they say would self-incriminate them in their case. Do you agree

with that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would not comment.

Q You mentioned when you down the road, people ask you, "Why haven't y'all done anything about guns?" Well, what is your response? Do you think it's the power of the gun lobby that's preventing anything from happening, or do you think it's a reasonable dispute over what the Second Amendment means?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think it's a reasonable dispute over what the Second Amendment means. I think Congress is listening too much to the gun lobby and not enough to the American people.

Q Ms. Reno, what's your feeling about the Second Amendment? Do you subscribe to the collective rights theory or the individual rights theory of the Second Amendment? Is it a well-regulated militia that should have guns or every individual should have guns?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I have said, I don't think it ensures to every individual the right to bear arms.

Q Who does have the right to bear arms?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We'll give you the description of the amendment.

Q Ms. Reno, can you give us any insight into what the government told the FBI as to what you --

ATTY GEN. RENO: No. I do not want to comment. I think it's appropriate that it be done at the site where the investigation is under way, and I don't think we should comment from Washington.

Thank you.

Q Thank you, Ms. Reno.

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