



**WEEKLY MEDIA BRIEFING WITH  
U.S. ATTORNEY GENERAL JANET RENO  
JUSTICE DEPARTMENT  
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2000  
9:29 A.M. EST**

Q Ms. Reno, if the Justice Department takes a serious look at allegations of vote irregularities in Florida, half the country is going to think you're intervening politically on behalf of your party's presidential candidate.

If the Justice Department doesn't take a serious look, and quickly, at the alleged irregularities in Florida, the other half of the country is going to think that you're avoiding a very serious situation to escape some kind of controversy.

Which are you going to do? (Laughter.)

MS. RENO: I'm going to try to do everything I can to move fairly, carefully, thoughtfully, and look to see whether there is any basis for federal action before I jump in, and recognize that the conduct of an election is basically a matter of state law.

We're not here to generate controversy; we're here to do what's right and to make sure that the voice of the American people that has spoken is heard fairly.

That is generally a matter of state law.

Q Given that that --

Q Well, this --

Q I'm sorry, -- Well, given that that is a matter of state law, what conceivable -- well, let me put it this way -- isn't it fair to conclude there is no conceivable federal interest here, is -- how could there be, I guess, is what I'm asking.

ATTY GEN. RENO: We would have to look at each instance to see whether there was any basis for concluding that there was a federal violation, and do it fairly, do it carefully, and do it with dispatch.

Q Have you yet heard of any circumstance that gives you reason to believe there's a federal interest?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We are reviewing each, and at this point, I think it would -- we received a letter, for example, yesterday from the NAACP. We will review that.

But I want to be very careful that we don't do anything that politicizes what is a very important moment in American history, when we should all be working together to see that the voice of the American people has properly been heard.

Q What issue did the NAACP raise, Ms. Reno? What issue did the NAACP raise in its letter?

Was that the confusion on the ballot, or some other civil rights issue?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would just let them speak for themselves.

Q Ms. Reno --

Q (Off mike) -- of how many complaints you've gotten?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We've received a lot of telephone calls and people calling on us --

Q One of the letters was -- one of the letters that was sent was from law professors in New York, who said that the

layout of the ballot itself represented a potential discrimination, a civil rights violation, and it could have been aimed even at minorities. Do you have any comment on whether the problem of the ballot layout is a state issue, or whether that could conceivably become a federal issue?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We would look at each one. But again, it is -- in the system we have, state law governs the conduct of an investigation -- I mean of an election -- governs the form of the ballot.

And I think it is important that we adhere to principles of federalism, recognize that it is primarily a state issue, and again do everything we can to play an appropriate role that doesn't politicize the matter, but contributes in a thoughtful way to the resolution of it.

Q Are any Civil Rights Division attorneys down there now?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Not that I know of.

Q In the matter of West Palm Beach, here is a situation, allegedly, that could change the outcome of the election.

You once played the role of attorney general. Is it possible -- (chuckles) -- of attorney general in Florida --

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I did not.

Q Oh, I'm sorry. You did not.

ATTY GEN. RENO: No.

Q Oh, you were a judge.

ATTY GEN. RENO: No, I was not a judge.

Q Oh. All right.

Q (Laughs.)

Q Maybe you could give me your --

Q But you're from Florida! (Laughter.)

Q You voted in Florida!

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am from Florida.

Q Off the cuff: Is it possible to have a re-election; a new election for a small segment when there may have been some ballot irregularities? Is that -- is there any precedent for that in Florida? That's basically my question.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I would refer you to the attorney general of Florida.

Q Ms. Reno, have you been in touch with any Florida officials, or have any Florida officials called you seeking any advice from the federal level?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No.

Q When you say we're looking at these -- who in the Department is looking at these complaints?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We take each one and look at it and make an appropriate determination as to whether there would be civil rights implications or otherwise.

Q Up until now, has anything that you've seen given you any reason to trigger any sort of inquiry at all?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I just want to make sure that we look at each one and not comment prematurely.

Q Ms. Reno, have you discussed this at all with the White House yet, or have any of your aids?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not discussed it with the White House.

Q And not your aids?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know whether anybody has discussed any issue with the White House.

Q Ms. Reno, you stressed that you don't want to politicize this issue as an appointee of the Clinton-Gore administration. How do you go about actually doing that? Will you personally distance yourself from any decisions that are made, or how will that work?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the issues that is important to recognize is that the Justice Department and the attorney general have an obligation to pursue matters carefully and thoughtfully and to not let issues be politicized.

I'm going to try my level best to make sure that that doesn't happen; that we recognize that it is a matter basically of state law, and that we come together in what has to be one of the important moments of this nation's history, not to engage in recrimination, but to really address this issue thoughtfully, and to move ahead and to make sure that the processes are carefully done to ensure that the president-elect is identified early on in a manner that will have the confidence of the whole nation.

Q How can you not politicize a process that is inherently political?

How can you remove politics from the process of counting votes and making sure votes are fair?

MS. RENO: Well, as you have realized on a number of occasions, I get damned if I do and damned if I don't, and the important thing is to try to make sure that we recognize that it is a matter of state law, in most cases; that each state conducts its elections according to state law and that we do not interfere unless there is a basis for federal jurisdiction.

Q Ms. Reno, have you received inquiries from the Gore campaign or from the Bush campaign about the election in

Florida?

MS. RENO: I have not. I don't know whether anybody in the department has heard specifically from them.

Q Have you heard from anyone other than the NAACP?

MS. RENO: We've received lots of calls and other inquiries.

Q But any kinds of letters to you personally?

MS. RENO: That's the only letter that I have seen.

Q Do you know whether any members of the Florida congressional delegation have been in contact with the department?

MS. RENO: I don't know.

Q And Ms. Reno, in terms of potential federal jurisdiction, is it limited basically to the Voting Rights Act?

MS. RENO: I would not comment, because I think it is important that we consider the issues that are raised, not judge them prematurely; recognize again that it is primarily a matter of state law and that we take appropriate action based on specific facts.

Q Do you believe that the elderly would fall under a specifically targeted group, a discriminated group, under the Voting Rights Act?

MS. RENO: I would not speculate. I think it is, again, important that we look at what has happened and see whether there's the basis for federal jurisdiction before we ever proceed.

Q Ms. Reno, with all due respect, the right to vote is a federally protected right.

If a number of people say that they were denied the right

to vote fairly, why isn't that a federal interest?

MS. RENO: It may well be a federal interest.

The issue is what are the remedies available and how should it be addressed, and whether it was intentional or whether it was not.

There are just a variety of issues that must be considered before one passes judgment.

Q If not intentional, then would there be any need for federal involvement or remedy?

MS. RENO: Again, we look at each instance to see whether there's a basis for federal jurisdiction.

Q Ms. Reno, you said earlier that the department had gotten lots of phone calls. Do you have any idea how many? Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands?

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

Q Okay.

Q You sent 300 observers to various polling locations around the country because of potential concern in some pockets that there could be voting irregularities or bias against certain minority groups.

Have you heard back from the people who coordinated those observers? And were there any instances of any irregularities or civil rights violations anywhere in the country, to your knowledge?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I have not heard of any specific report from any of those observers.

I will ask Myron to give you any information that he may have that is appropriate.

Q Ms. Reno, how closely did you follow Tuesday night's events? And what was your reaction when it became clear that this was too close to call?

ATTY GEN. RENO: The first time I stayed up all night was in 1948. (Laughter.) I was 10 years old.

It was election night.

At 62, I didn't stay up all night --

Q (Laughs.)

ATTY GEN. RENO: -- but I followed it through most of the evening.

Watching people, watching reactions of people, and even in this -- these days that follow, what impresses me so much is how strong democracy is in this country. Many other nations, not knowing who their president might be, I think, might be in a more difficult situation, but this nation has a strength.

It has the ability to come together to work through issues.

And as the night unfolded, and then as we've addressed what next, I'm so impressed, again, with how strong democracy is, but how we must never take it for granted.

Q From a legal standpoint, is there -- is it possible to bring those people in, those 19,000 people who they believe mistakenly voted for two people?

Is it legal to bring them back in and say, indicate who you really want to vote for?

ATTY GEN. RENO: That would have to be addressed through state law, and if there were other situations, but I don't do "what ifs." We just have to look at each situation.

Q Has the Community Relations Service been contacted by anyone, to your knowledge, about this?

And is there any possible role they could play in discussing the issues with people there, or keeping the lid on emotions about this?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think the CRS, the Community Relations Service, has done wonderful work, and I think it's important that everybody, again, come together and address this carefully and thoughtfully, each branch of government playing its appropriate role.

Q What time did you actually stay up until, if I can ask? Who was winning Florida when you signed off?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Bush was winning Florida when I went to bed, but he hadn't been declared a victor yet.

When I woke up at 5:00 -- I forget what the situation was by that point. (Scattered laughter.)

Q Ms. Reno, you say you haven't been contacted by the Bush or Gore camps, but this is an opportunity to publicly reassure Governor Bush and Vice President Al Gore of the impartiality of the Justice Department in this process.

Do you have some public message that you want to give to them?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Just what I told you before.

I'm going to do my level best to make sure that politics is not a part of this; that we do this fairly, carefully, thoughtfully; that we don't interject ourselves when it's not right; and that the goal of everybody concerned should be what both men have said.

I think their statements were thoughtful and careful, and I think everybody recognizes that it is an important, vital time in this nation's history, and we should do it right.

Q Ms. Reno, is there anybody from the Justice Department monitoring this recount at all or observing on the Justice

Department's behalf?

ATTY GEN. RENO: No. In terms of monitoring it there day-to-day, it would be, I think, impossible to have somebody on the scene throughout.

And again, it's a matter of state law and if there was any basis for action, we would be prepared to take it.

Q Is Florida covered under the Voting Rights Act?

MS. RENO: Portions of it are.

Q Two areas that have had some criticism are the role of television in predicting the races, obviously, and also the Electoral College itself.

I'm just wondering if you have any thoughts on either one of those issues.

MS. RENO: Well, you know my view on television.

Q What is it? (Laughter.)

MS. RENO: My mother wouldn't let us have a television set because she said it contributed to mind rot.

(Laughter.)

Q You listened to the '48 elections on the radio?

MS. RENO: Yes, on the Stromberg Carlton radio, and my father kept telling me to turn it down.

I got even with him. (Laughter.)

I think polls and projections take something away from the American people. And with respect to the Electoral College, I asked my mother, because everybody thought -- they didn't know how elections worked, and she explained to me the Electoral College.

And I said, "Do you mean a man can get more of the votes of the people but lose?" And that puzzled me, as a child. And then I debated in high school, and one of our debate topics was the direct election of president, and I debated both sides -- (pause) -- and I won both sides. (Laughter.)

Q Are you convinced that the Electoral College system is the correct means? And, I guess I should ask, if Bush has the votes in Florida, when all is said and done, he would then have the electoral votes, and would that -- would that qualify him to be president, if he wins the popular vote and wins the electoral votes in Florida?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think I should stay out of a discussion of that. But I think the Electoral College is part of the framework of our process, and I think we should all work together to make sure that the law is adhered to.

Q So the Electoral College is the means by which we select a president; no doubt in your mind about that?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't think I should be drawn into your political considerations.

Q If there is any doubt, that's a big story. (Laughter.)

Q On another subject, the assistant U.S. attorney -- or a former assistant U.S. attorney who basically started all the uproar about Waco a year ago, just over a year ago, has now been indicted --

Q Yeah.

Q -- by your special counsel. Do you think this sends a harsh signal about what happens to whistle-blowers?

ATTY GEN. RENO: One of the things that I've tried to do, both with independent counsel and special counsel, is when I appoint them or seek the appointment, to not comment, to ensure that they are able to operate independently.

Thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q Thank you.

Q Are you among the absentee voters who hasn't been counted yet?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I trust it has been counted by now.

Q (Laughs.)

END.