

Reno clears President on Chinagate, for now

by Edward Spannaus

On Oct. 3, Attorney General Janet Reno released an astounding document, which was ignored by most of the news media—except in their attacking it. This was a letter to Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, written in response to a Sept. 4 letter from the Republican members of the committee, which requested (as the majority of the committee may do under the Independent Counsel law) that the Attorney General apply for the appointment of an independent counsel to investigate the 1996 Presidential campaign.

Reno's letter was clearly not the response the Republicans wanted. By forcing the issue, what the Judiciary Committee Republicans got, was a detailed and thorough refutation of the most serious charges which have been levelled by the news media against President Clinton in the course of the campaign fundraising controversy—in what is sometimes called “donorgate” or “Chinagate.”

The Attorney General wrote that her response was based upon consideration of “all the information known to me as a result of the Department of Justice's ongoing investigation into campaign finance allegations.” She added: “I have not confined myself to the facts set out in your letter, which are apparently drawn in substantial part from press accounts, and which in some cases are inaccurate or incomplete.”

Reno noted that she has preliminary investigations already under way with respect to former Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary, and also for one allegation regarding Vice President Al Gore—that of telephone solicitation from his White House office. A 30-day initial inquiry is also under way with regard to President Clinton's phone calls.

Reno rejected all the other broad allegations raised by the Judiciary Committee Republicans, as follows:

1. Bribery of the President. Reno said there is no evidence whatsoever to indicate that Clinton demanded or received donations in return for any official action; this included allegations regarding Johnny Chung, Charlie Trie, the Lippo companies, and so on.

2. Unlawful use of government facilities by the President. This concerned White House coffees and overnight stays in the Lincoln Bedroom. Reno said that there was no violation of any law found so far, and she added that the White House is the President's personal residence, provided to him for his “private use” during his term in office.

3. Tax violations by the vice president. This involved what

is generally regarded as the most serious allegation against Gore, involving the Hsi Lai Temple in California. Reno said that the task force has been thoroughly investigating that event, and has found no information that Gore violated tax laws around it.

4. Extortion of campaign contributions by the vice president. Reno said that the press accounts cited by the Judiciary Committee letter do not suggest a violation of law.

5. Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) violations by the President and vice president. This complaint pertained to illegal foreign contributions and illegal conduiting of contributions. Reno said: “While the task force is closely scrutinizing allegations of illegal fundraising, it has to date uncovered no evidence indicating that either the President or vice president engaged in conduct constituting a criminal violation of FECA.”

Media and GOP respond

The reactions came in a number of forms, including renewed calls for Reno's resignation or impeachment, plus an effort to pump up a new “Watergate” scandal: the matter of the White House's belated discovery of fragmentary videotapes of White House “coffees” attended by Democratic Party contributors and Clinton supporters.

The first response came the same day that Reno released the letter to the Judiciary Committee, in the form of a lengthy “analysis” of the failures of the DOJ task force, in the Oct. 3 *Washington Post*. The article was based on anonymous complaints from Justice Department and FBI officials, who griped that the task force investigation of Clinton and the White House was proceeding much too cautiously and slowly. The *Post* emphasized that the FBI wanted to go right to the top, to the President and vice president, and that DOJ bureaucrats were supposedly holding them back, insisting that the probe proceed under a methodical, “bottom up” strategy.

While Reno's letter got scant coverage, the *Post* article drew widespread praise from papers such as the *Washington Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, which normally pretend that the *Post* is a “liberal” paper defending the President. The truth is, as any honest observer of the Washington scene knows, that the *Washington Post* and its leading investigative reporter, Bob Woodward, view themselves as the real “task force” leading the witch-hunt against Clinton and the White House.

Reno's Oct. 3 letter is obviously not the last word: She left the door open to reconsider her decision, if warranted by “future developments.” Reno also reemphasized this in her Oct. 9 press briefing, after having been subjected to five days of attacks and criticisms from the news media and Republicans.

Given Reno's past performance, there is certainly no reason to think that she cannot easily be swayed, at any moment, in whatever direction the permanent bureaucracy in the Justice Department wishes her to go.