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President Clinton calls Lee case 'troubling'

September 14, 2000
Web posted at: 2:25 p.m. EDT (1825 GMT)

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- President Clinton said Thursday he was troubled by the government's turnaround in the case of fired nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, who was kept in a county jail with no bail for nine months because federal prosecutors said he was a threat to national security.



Clinton says he "always had reservations" about the claims made by federal prosecutors to deny Lee bail.

"The whole thing was quite troubling to me, and I think it's very difficult to reconcile the two positions that one day he's a terrible risk to the national security and the next day they're making a plea agreement for an offense far more modest than what had been alleged," Clinton told reporters in front of the White House after an event promoting his Patients' Bill of Rights proposal.

Lee, 60, was released from custody Wednesday in New Mexico after agreeing to plead guilty to one count of mishandling classified information. He originally faced 59 counts of the same charge, after he was accused of downloading what prosecutors called the "crown jewels" of U.S. nuclear defense secrets onto 10 tapes he took from the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory.

As part of his plea agreement, Lee promised to

VIDEO
Wen Ho Lee's son and lawyer discuss plea agreement and pending civil lawsuit



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CNN's Pierre Thomas says Wen Ho Lee faces a year of further interrogation over



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As part of his plea agreement, Lee promised to tell the government what he did with seven missing tapes.

President Clinton said he "always had reservations" about the claims mounted by federal prosecutors to deny Lee bail.

"We ought not to keep people in jail without bail unless there's some real profound reason," he said.

The president said there's no justification for keeping someone in custody without bail if the case moves so easily to a plea agreement.

When asked about offering Lee clemency, Clinton said the former scientist is still pleading guilty to a substantial charge, but that he would look into the matter.

"It means he spent a lot of time in prison that any ordinary American wouldn't have, and that bothers me," the president said.

Reno not embarrassed

Earlier, Attorney General Janet Reno said she felt the government "made the best decision" it could "based on the evidence and the law" in the Lee case and that she felt "very comfortable about that."

When asked Thursday if the former Los Alamos scientist deserved an apology, she said that Lee was given an opportunity from the onset to resolve the problem and "he chose not to."

U.S. District Judge James Parker accepted a plea bargain that called for Lee to be sentenced to the nine months he has already served while awaiting trial. The judge told Lee that he "deserved to be punished" but that he had been "punished harshly." Parker went on to criticize federal prosecutors and investigators for holding Lee in solitary confinement, saying their actions had "caused embarrassment."

Reno said in her daily briefing that she was "not embarrassed."

"I regret deeply that Judge Parker feels that way but I know what I've had to do based on the evidence and the law. I know what I've had to do to address the national security issues," Reno said.

Reno said Lee had downloaded "very sensitive" information concerning nuclear secrets. "He had not done that just accidentally or in a flash of a three minute period. He had done it over time, taking some 40 hours to do it. He had made it available on an unsecured computer subject to hackers and the like. He had, based on the information we had, done this carefully, deliberately, willfully. He had no need for it in his work."

She said Lee had been asked a series of questions and offered an opportunity to explain his actions. "Did you do anything with the information that you

still-missing files

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Listen to Wen Ho Lee's comments after his release

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downloaded? Did you give it to anybody? What has been done with it? If you destroyed the tapes, how did you destroy the tapes?" [FOOD](#)

She said he failed to respond to those questions.

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