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White House to review government's handling of Wen Ho Lee case

September 15, 2000

Web posted at: 5:01 p.m. EDT (2101 GMT)

From CNN Senior White House
Correspondent John King

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The White House will launch a review of the government's handling of the Wen Ho Lee case, officials said Friday.

Officials said it was not yet certain what form the inquiry would take, but that President Clinton wanted information about the key decisions in the case.

Administration officials also took issue with interpretations of the president's Thursday remarks about the case as a rebuke of Attorney General Janet Reno. While Clinton has concerns about all those involved in the major decisions, including Reno and Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, the officials made clear the initial White House view is that most of the blame rests with the FBI.

"Anyone who thought the president meant Reno when he questioned the Justice Department handling of this hasn't been paying very close attention," one senior official said. The White House has a long-running feud with FBI Director Louis Freeh.



Clinton calls government actions in the Wen Ho Lee case "inconsistent," though Lee has admitted to a "very serious national security violation"

VIDEO

Wen Ho Lee's son and lawyer discuss plea agreement and pending civil lawsuit (Sept. 14)



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Chief of Staff John Podesta is coordinating the White House review, and Clinton said Friday he expected to talk to Reno and others about the case. It was unclear whether Podesta would ask someone to lead a formal inquiry, or take a less-formal approach and make information requests of the relevant parties, several officials said.

The president said it was important to remember the former Los Alamos scientist had admitted to mishandling classified information. Speaking to reporters at the White House, Clinton said, "He has admitted to a very serious national security violation. And the most important thing now is that he keep his commitment to the government to work hard to figure out what happened to those tapes, what was on the tapes, to reconstitute all the information. That's very important."

But the president also said he has "no reason to believe" the government did not have sufficient evidence to keep Lee jailed for 278 days on a 59-count indictment. In the end, Lee pleaded guilty to one count and was released.

"I think the fact that there was -- that in such a short time frame -- there was an argument that he needed to stay in jail without bail, and then all of a sudden there was a plea agreement, which was inconsistent with the claims being made, I thought, that raises the question, not just for Chinese Americans, but for all Americans, about whether we have been as careful as we ought to be about pretrial detention." Clinton said.

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