

## Review Essay

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### *Memoir of an Attorney General: One Damn Thing After Another*, by William P. Barr

Mike R.

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***In June 1971, Barr began seasonal employment at CIA, while during the academic year he pursued a graduate degree at Columbia University. He said of this period: “My summers at the agency were some of the best times in my life.” He also lauded the environment to his professors in New York: “There’s more academic freedom at the CIA than at Columbia.”***

As a high school junior, William Barr told his guidance counselor that he wanted to become director of CIA. If not for his mother and Stansfield Turner, he just might have done so.

*One Damn Thing After Another* (William Morrow, 2022—595 pages, illustrations, index) is the autobiography of President Donald J. Trump’s second attorney general, who led the Department of Justice (DoJ) from February 2019 to December 2020. Barr is only the second individual to reprise the role, having occupied the position during 1991–93. The book starts promisingly but grows uneven in its most anticipated section devoted to his service in the Trump era. It branches off onto numerous expositions about current sociocultural flash points, and Barr gives free rein to his opinionated commentary, which he holds more in check during depictions of the impressive buildup of his career up until that point.

While the book naturally is more focused on DoJ concerns, those with an interest in intelligence and national security will find these topics addressed regularly throughout its nearly 600 pages. A reader willing to overlook the memoir’s many downsides will come away with an enhanced appreciation for a consequential figure in two presidential administrations.

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#### ***Intelligence Ties***

Intelligence runs through Barr’s veins more than most people probably are aware, going back to his father Donald’s brief service in the Research and Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services during World War II. The younger Barr followed in his father’s footsteps at Columbia University and pursued a predetermined goal: “I want a career in intelligence.... My strategy is to make myself an attractive candidate by becoming an expert on China.” (27) Anticipating being drafted upon graduation in the early 1970s, he set his sights on a commission as a Navy intelligence officer, after which he would apply to CIA.

As it happened, Barr’s draft number made military service unlikely, and a CIA recruiter on campus suggested he apply for an internship. In June 1971, Barr began seasonal employment at CIA, while during the academic year he pursued a graduate degree at Columbia. He said of this period: “My summers at the agency were some of the best times in my life.” He also lauded the environment to his professors in New York: “There’s more academic freedom at the CIA than at Columbia.” (34)

A couple of years into his CIA career, he decided to get a law degree, heeding the advice of his mother to have a backup plan in case intelligence did not pan out. A

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full-time employee by this point, he worked for the agency during the day while attending George Washington University Law School at night. He was in good company: "Many CIA veterans, including Allen Dulles, the first civilian director, had gone to GW night law school." (35) Part way into his law studies, the agency came under assault from a succession of scandals and investigations into allegations of abuse, prompted in large part by exposure of CIA's "Family Jewels" report of potential charter violations. Short on lawyers and in need of urgent help, CIA asked Barr to pivot assignments internally and assist the then Office of Legislative Counsel; he never looked back from this switch to the legal side.

Even though it would not be apparent until later, the stars came together for Barr in January 1976, when Langley welcomed incoming Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) George H. W. Bush, who would profoundly influence Barr's career in the years to come. Working together on testimony for Capitol Hill, they bonded over a shared affinity for China—Bush had just come from Beijing, where he was chief of the US Liaison Office—and the DCI respected Barr's counsel. As Barr was entering his final year of law school, a classmate suggested he put in for a clerkship upon graduation, something he had not been considering as he was planning to remain at CIA afterward. Barr applied to work for a judge on the US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit, who, it turned out, was a friend of Bush's from his adopted home state of Texas. Bush strongly recommended Barr, who commenced clerking in mid-1977.

Barr's time away at the DC Circuit cemented views that had been building in the months since his benefactor's departure:

*My plans for a career in the intelligence community changed abruptly, however, after President Ford lost reelection in November, Bush stepped down in January 1977, and President Jimmy Carter appointed a new director: Admiral Stansfield Turner. The admiral was a disaster. He arrived with a retinue of naval officers who served as an impregnable palace guard. CIA officials had to conduct business in writing through these naval officers. Turner treated agency professionals with distrust and disdain. Worst of all, he decimated the clandestine service. Turner, like many political appointees since, bought into the delusional belief that intelligence work can be conducted wholly by satellites and gizmos that don't require anyone's hands getting dirty. Agency morale plummeted. I was ready to leave in July when my clerkship started. (41)*

Barr's decision to abandon an intelligence career was motivated both by his increasing enjoyment of the law and his "lack of respect for Admiral Turner's leadership." (43) Yet if unpleasant leadership were enough to drive him away from a relatively low-level job at CIA, it begs the question why 40 years later he would agree to work directly for President Trump, about whose management style he would acknowledge

many misgivings before accepting the offer. The book has a number of such internal inconsistencies, which stand in contrast to his presentation of an otherwise logical, determined, and principled life.

The author covers in the space of a few chapters what could have been an extensive memoir in its own right had it been written at the time: his rise in power culminating in service at the pinnacle of the legal profession under Bush 41. Even now, Barr seems mystified over this ascendance:

*The journey to my first tour as Attorney General, at the age of forty-one, took many serendipitous twists and turns. How I went from being a China scholar to the government's top legal post in eighteen years still surprises me and was largely the result of chance—a sequence of coincidences. (10)*

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### **First Stint at DoJ**

Contacts and coincidences certainly played a role, as they do in so many stories of success, but they would not have amounted to anything were it not for Barr's decision to dabble in the political sphere while at a Washington, D.C., law firm from the late 1970s through the late 1980s. He put his toe in the water assisting the transition team for incoming President Ronald Reagan in 1980; served more substantially on the White House Domestic Policy Council Staff in 1982–83; and again played a role on the transition staff in support of President-elect George H.W. Bush in 1988. This latter role led directly to him becoming assistant attorney general (AG) in charge of the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC),

the office responsible for providing legal opinions and advice to the president and the rest of the executive branch.

Barr says that Bush wanted him at OLC because he was looking for someone who shared his view of the need to restore the power of the chief executive. Bush had seen Barr in action at CIA in the mid-1970s when it and so much of the executive branch was under assault in the post-Watergate era and knew that Barr's thinking on executive strength had not changed.

As head of OLC, Barr promulgated two notable opinions that expanded the president's freedom of maneuver in the national security arena. His interpretation that the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878 limiting the role of the US military in domestic law enforcement did not apply extraterritorially opened the door to increased use of the military in overseas law-enforcement-like operations, particularly in counterterrorism and counternarcotics. His reversal of previously held interpretations regarding the practice of renditions—snatching an individual in another country without that country's permission—increased the use of this practice.

Referring to his time heading OLC, Barr writes, "Of all the positions I held in government, this was the one in which I was happiest." (55) He notes this in surprise, saying he had not expected that serving as the department's "top egghead" in an "ivory tower" environment focused on research, analysis, and writing would be his cup of tea. Barr is adept at analysis, except, apparently, when it comes to himself. He had, after all,

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been preparing for an academically oriented career, pursued this early on at CIA, and had a track record of success; the combination of skills and responsibilities at OLC seemed almost tailor-made.

In 1991, having been bumped up the previous year to the number-two position at DoJ and serving as acting AG—Dick Thornburgh had departed to run for Pennsylvania senator—Barr was faced with a crisis the resolution of which he would claim as his proudest accomplishment in office. At the federal prison in Talladega, Alabama, dozens of Cubans who had arrived in the United States during the 1980 Mariel boatlift and were facing imminent deportation had rioted and taken control of the facility. Barr became intricately involved in the response planning and directed the deployment of an FBI hostage rescue team, which he described as its first actual rescue attempt since formation of the concept in the 1970s. Lives were saved, the mission was a success, and Bush would point to Barr's handling of the incident—"professional and without fanfare" (107)—in his decision to nominate him later that year as permanent attorney general.

Although Barr's recounting of his first tenure at DoJ is fairly brisk, his predilection for and hardline stance on national security issues come across clearly. Owing in part to Barr's time at CIA, AG Thornburgh asked him early on to carry much of

DoJ's water at the National Security Council (NSC) and specifically asked him to serve on the deputies committee chaired by Robert Gates, which helped formulate policy options for the president and NSC. Barr lauds this committee—"the most effective and competent group in government I have been associated with"—and states that "my work with [National Security Advisor Brent] Scowcroft, Gates, and the rest of President Bush's national security team played a big role in the President's decision to appoint me Attorney General in 1991." (54)

Remembering a plaque at DoJ that regularly caught his eye, Barr raises America's response to a little-remembered historical episode at the dawn of World War II—the landing by submarine of eight German saboteurs in New York and Florida—as a role model for action in times of trouble. After the men were quickly captured in summer 1942, President Roosevelt commissioned a military tribunal, which convened at DoJ headquarters, to dispense justice. All were found guilty within a month; the Supreme Court upheld the president's right to try enemies for violating the laws of war; and soon thereafter six of the men were put to death. As Barr noted, "That generation did not dither around when it came to defending the country." (109)

He showed a further preference for military-oriented responses in late 1991, roughly two years after

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the bombing of Pan Am 103, which killed 259 crew and passengers (among them 190 Americans) and 11 on the ground. When briefing the NSC on DoJ's findings after an extensive investigation, Barr made an impassioned case that a criminal proceeding should not be the endgame and that sanctions were not the way to force Libya to turn over two of its intelligence service (JSO) officers for trial. Instead, he said, "at a minimum we should reduce the JSO headquarters to smoking rubble," prompting the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to quip, "I thought I was Defense, and you are Justice." (113)

### **Defending CIA**

Intelligence issues come to the fore in several other incidents during Barr's first tenure at DoJ. For example, he defended CIA when it was caught up in a web of intrigue surrounding an alleged cover-up involving the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL) and the supposed secret funneling of funds to Iraq, known as "Iraqgate."<sup>a</sup> He uses this episode to make clear his feelings on one of the most significant controversies that would surface decades later in the Trump era:

[The] media's abuses perpetrating the Big Lie of "Iraqgate"

*were unequaled until the "Rus-siagate" lies used against President Trump. In March 1991, at the end of the Gulf War, the mainstream media, almost acting as one, collectively took up and propagandized the totally baseless allegation that, before the war, Bush had secretly and illegally engaged in a program to build up Saddam Hussein's armed forces. This was accompanied by the further lie that Bush covered up the program by having his Attorneys General, Thornburgh and me, "obstruct" the Justice Department's investigation of illegal loans made to Iraq by the Atlanta branch of ... BNL. (129–30)*

Barr also expresses sympathy for CIA officials implicated in the Iran-Contra affair, recommending pardons for all, not just the most prominent figures such as former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger: "I was particularly concerned that it would not be fair to pardon only the political-level officials while leaving out the CIA officers. All three—Clair [George] and [Dewey] Clarridge in particular—were legends within the agency and had long and distinguished careers fighting the Cold War. I thought leaving them out after their courageous service would not go over

well at the agency." (140) Not all of Barr's actions would be seen as far-sighted, however. Seizing on a thaw in US-Soviet relations and wanting to buttress his longstanding domestic crime priorities, one of his first acts as AG was to transfer 300 FBI special agents focused on Soviet counterintelligence to anti-gang work.

In the book's shortest chapter, only 13 pages, Barr covers some two dozen years between his departure from government service in 1993 and Trump's installation in 2017, during much of which he served as general counsel for what would come to be known as the telecommunications giant Verizon. Describing how he was lured by a CEO looking for "someone who would be imaginative and aggressive in pursuing its interests," (144) his fight against regulators and his innovative approaches to problem-solving sounds reminiscent of former CIA Director Michael Hayden's sports-themed admonition about pushing things to their limits, as captured in his memoir *Playing to the Edge*.<sup>b</sup> Images of Barr getting chalk on his metaphorical cleats seem to aptly capture his lifelong approach to dealing with tough issues, whether in business or government, unafraid to use the maximum maneuver room possible in pursuit of his goals.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks punctuated this experience and provided occasion for Barr to pick up on earlier themes. He counseled officials working for President George W. Bush about the dangers of looking at the event purely through a criminal justice lens rather than as a

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a. For a brief discussion of the BNL episode, see L. Britt Snider, *The Agency and the Hill: CIA's Relationship with Congress, 1946–2004* (CIA, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2008), 243. Available at <https://cia.gov/resources/csi/books-monographs/the-agency-and-the-hill/>

b. See Hayden Peake's review in *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 2 (June 2016).



President Donald Trump shakes hands with Attorney General William Barr in the White House Oval Office during Barr's swearing-in ceremony, February 14, 2019. (Official White House Photo by Tia Dufour)

national security issue and—consistent with his support of how the US government dealt with the German saboteurs in World War II—advocated the use of military tribunals instead of civilian courts. Barr notes how Vice President Cheney held the same view and that Bush issued orders along those lines, but he leaves out whether any causality existed between his advocacy and the administration's response.

### ***The Trump Years***

The bulk—more than 400 pages—of Barr's memoir is devoted to the "Trump Years," but this is one of its biggest weaknesses. Whereas his depiction of the period culminating in service as the nation's 77th AG was too short, his recitation of his return as the 85th AG is too long. At times, it feels painfully drawn out, as if Barr's editor is forcing him to lengthen and separate into distinct chapters a number of issues that

could have been covered more briefly. Barr might have taken too literally his 1970s predecessor Ed Levi's description of the job, which he fashioned into the book's title: "It's just one damn thing after another." The book's numerous tangents and seeming loss of focus will sorely test readers' patience at several points; not all will elect to continue the journey.

### ***CIA Connections***

What might not be well known about Barr's return to service in 2019 is the role played yet again by his intelligence connections:

*My first official connection with the Trump administration was in the first part of 2017 at my old haunt the Central Intelligence Agency. Mike Pompeo, confirmed as CIA director at the beginning of the administration, asked my friend Bob Kimmitt to chair his external advisory board – a bipartisan group of*

*business leaders and former senior officials who meet regularly to advise the agency on a range of matters. On Bob's recommendation, Mike, whom I had not known, invited me to join the group, an unpaid advisory post. I enjoyed reconnecting with the agency and working with my colleagues on the board and with the CIA directors – initially Pompeo and, after he went to serve as secretary of state, Gina Haspel. I found Mike and Gina immensely talented, quality people, and I became friends with both of them. I heard later that Mike was among those encouraging the President to consider me as the replacement for AG Jeff Sessions. (199)*

Days after the 2018 midterm elections and the announcement that Sessions was resigning, Barr found himself at a CIA external advisory board offsite at which many board colleagues were urging him to take the AG job if asked. While concerned about Trump's temperament and the flood of negative reports issuing from so many observers, he comes down on the side of guidance that several other experienced hands seemed to heed as well, notably Jim Mattis, who became Trump's secretary of defense, and John Kelly, who served as secretary of homeland security and chief of staff. Barr cites similar advice from former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Bob Gates, the CIA director turned secretary of defense who agreed to stay on during the transition from President George W. Bush to President Barack Obama. Gates told him: "Look, *somebody* has got to do these jobs ... and what is best for the country is that we get

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good people who know what the hell they are doing.” (218)

A chapter devoted specifically to national security in the midst of the Trump section allows Barr to close the circle on a number of issues from an earlier time in his life. Returning to his original substantive focus and shifting to a forward-looking posture, he declares, “By far the greatest challenge facing the United States in the national security arena today is the rapid rise of Communist China as an aggressive adversary.” (403) He cites the country’s well-known industrial espionage and tries to put his own catchy spin on it: “China’s goal isn’t to *trade* with the United States. It is to *raid* the United States.” (406) Although not personally claiming credit, he is probably taking liberties with the narrative when he notes that “Prior to the Trump administration, the United States did not have a coordinated response to counter the threat posed by China’s systematic pillaging of our technology.” (409)

In any event, the pendulum was certainly swinging, and by late 2021, following Barr’s and Trump’s departures from office, a number of US government organizations had announced the launch of new bureaucratic entities to face this threat. The State Department created a “China House,” and CIA inaugurated a China Mission Center, with CIA Director William Burns’s comments sounding

quite familiar: “The most important geopolitical threat we face in the 21st century, an increasingly adversarial Chinese government.”

Barr criticizes many aspects of America’s involvement in Afghanistan and speculates “whether there was an alternative ‘lower intensity’ approach building on the CIA’s original success—*using* the tribal system rather than trying to supersede it.” (425) He registers contempt for the manner in which President Biden undertook the 2021 withdrawal—“reckless and moronic” (426)—but puts part of the blame on Trump. Just as Trump entered into office highly suspicious and disdainful of the Intelligence Community, so these lingering feelings would influence his actions up until the end of his tenure in this arena: “I believe Trump’s distrust of the intelligence and military communities prevented him from considering alternatives to complete withdrawal.” (425)

Barr provides some interesting vignettes, including when he raced to the White House to get the president to immediately order the military to secure several high-level ISIS terrorist prisoners wanted in the United States when their Kurdish captors’ positions in Syria were in danger of being overrun. Barr’s depiction of the White House’s ham-handed effort to replace FBI leadership by springing people on him out of the blue in the

Roosevelt Room is both comical and deeply distressing; Barr simply walked out and refused to consider the matter.

Barr uses these later pages to return to favored themes from before, noting his preference for military tribunals for foreigners accused of war crimes or terrorism, and stating that “I strongly favored keeping Guantanamo open” and adding more detainees to its ranks. (423) National security also provides a bookend to Barr’s return to DoJ in a personal way. Just days before leaving the department in December 2020, he announced charges against a third Libyan conspirator in the Pan Am 103 case; he had announced charges against the first two individuals when he was AG in 1991.<sup>a</sup> Barr would note that so much had changed between his first and second tours as AG, but this continuing thread helped bring closure and link these disparate periods.

A number of other intelligence nexuses crop up during Barr’s second tenure at DoJ. Some of these are minor, like contacting various countries’ intelligence service chiefs in support of a DoJ investigation or engaging with “Five Eyes” partners—Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and New Zealand—about the intelligence challenges of the use of encrypted communications by terrorists and criminals. Some are almost unconscious, his background at CIA seeming to influence his approach and choice of words, even if unwittingly.

Witness his use of a classic term from the heyday of CIA’s collaboration with Lockheed to produce the U-2 and A-12 spy planes and

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a. On December 12, 2022, Abu Agila Mohammad Mas’ud Kheir Al-Marimi appeared in the US District Court for the District of Columbia on federal charges.

CORONA satellite: “I set up a skunk works of key players from the department and other agencies to ... fight against the Mexican cartels.” And some are much more notable, including looking into the FBI’s handling of former National Security Advisor Mike Flynn’s contacts with Russia before Trump took office and the investigation by the DoJ inspector general (IG) into former FBI Director Jim Comey’s inclusion of classified information in memos about his interactions with Trump, which he shared with his lawyers after being fired.

Fallout from the actions of a different IG, the Intelligence Community IG, generated considerably more attention—and headache—for Barr and prompted the first of Trump’s two impeachments following its referral to DoJ. As the world soon learned, an NSC staffer reported concerns arising out of Trump’s telephone conversation on July 25, 2019, with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, wherein the president was alleged to have illegally attempted to press Zelensky into an action that would help Trump’s 2020 election bid and hurt the efforts of his expected opponent, Sen. Joe Biden.

Barr’s assessment of this case as “foolish” but not criminal exemplified his professed approach to all matters at the department, one that was frequently misconstrued in the opposite manner. He was candid about this with Trump prior to being selected: “As Attorney General, I would view my central mission as eliminating this double standard and restoring the same standard for everybody, regardless of politics.” (214) This corresponded with a mantra he attributed to Bush 41: “The best

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politics at the Department of Justice is *no* politics.” (106)

What many observers interpreted as politically motivated actions could also be seen as excruciating efforts on Barr’s part to be fair to all sides, to apply reason and common sense, and to not be vindictive or engage in tit-for-tat actions. That he generated as much animus on the part of Trump as he did with the president’s opponents speaks to what a difficult task he set for himself, walking that fine line.

The investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller into whether candidate Trump and Russia had somehow cooperated in an effort to influence the 2016 election, as well as whether President Trump had tried to obstruct that investigation, of course looms large. Barr expresses at length his exasperation with this issue and explains his controversial characterization of its findings in a detailed manner, providing helpful background to some of the legal arcana behind his actions.

More baffling is his decision to include gratuitous personal details. Barr and Mueller had known each other for decades, both having arrived at DoJ around the same time in the 1980s, where the latter would serve as head of the Criminal Division. Barr thought highly of Mueller, and the two had been close professionally and personally, even their wives having become friends. How odd and surprising it appears, then, when Barr relates the story of his first meeting as AG in 2019 with Mueller and his

team about their work: “I noticed both of his hands were trembling ... and his voice was tremulous. As he spoke, I grew concerned. I knew he wasn’t nervous, and I wondered if he might have an illness.” (239) He continues: “Wow ... Bob has lost a step” (242), and, describing a follow-on meeting, “Mueller seemed unsteady.” (253)

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***Sense of Humor***

For all its seriousness, Barr has a lighter side that peeks through and helps humanize him. Who would have guessed that Barr served as social chairman of his fraternity, where he “was kept very busy arranging Friday-night mixers and postgame Saturday parties”? (30) Or that when queried as to who should play him in a movie version of the Talladega prison rescue, he originally suggested the portly, loud-mouthed comedy actor John Candy? He also embraces being called a “space cowboy,” a term his younger staff applied to him and several former colleagues from the first go-around who all returned to DoJ under Trump, in reference to the 2000 motion picture about old-timers called back into the service of their country. A particularly curious personal tidbit is in the musical realm. Barr took up the bagpipes while growing up in New York in the 1960s and then resumed the practice in the 1980s in Washington; he would play at special Justice occasions and toured the globe in international competitions with a Washington area band. When he

originally marketed himself to CIA, he flagged a special qualification: “Bagpiping—excellent.”

Nonetheless, the book meanders in places, and Barr’s otherwise strong writing is at times subsumed by the sheer force of his viewpoint. He includes extraneous details such as Trump constantly asking if he would like a Diet Coke. In addition, Barr appears to enjoy flaunting his erudition, including repeatedly using the Latin expression *ipse dixit* (“he

said it himself,” an unproven assertion) (147, 554) and references to the ancient Greek playwright Aeschulus’s *Eumenides* (340) and 11th century King Canute’s apocryphal command to halt the tides. (458)

In the end, *One Damn Thing After Another* is a flawed piece of work. To its credit, it is an interesting and at times thought-provoking read, sheds light on notable events, and showcases a keen intellect, able to discuss controversial topics in ways that

might prompt a reader to examine long-held beliefs. However, Barr’s approach—part memoir, part analytical exposition, part diatribe—is less than ideal. A shorter, more tightly constructed book in the traditional manner of a Washington chronicle would have worked better and more closely matched expectations. The excised portions could have been turned into a follow-on volume.



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