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OPINION | WONDER LAND

# Why Trump Needs Bill Barr

We're one attorney-general resignation away from establishing moralized hysteria as a normal tool of U.S. politics.



By Daniel

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In a *cri de coeur* for the ages, Attorney General William Barr said in an interview last week that President Trump's tweets "make it impossible for me to do my job." Days later in a moment of introspection, Mr. Trump said: "I do make his job harder. I do agree with that."

Historians someday will identify the current period as the moment something snapped in American politics. The moorings have broken, and we are floating free of any guide ropes. How else to explain not merely disagreements over the term of Roger Stone's sentence but the mass hysteria it has produced?



## Will Bill Barr Resign as Attorney General?



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Did more than 2,000 former Justice

Department officials actually sign a petition calling on Mr. Barr to resign for "doing the president's personal bidding" on the Stone sentence? Presumably not one of these 2,000 ever argued internally over a sentencing recommendation. Within hours, there were reports that officers of the 1,000-member Federal Judges Association were calling an "emergency meeting" to talk about Mr. Barr.

In public life, tough criticism comes with the job. But what's going on here is closer to political mania. Allow us to give future historians a head start on deconstructing this case study in the madness of crowds.

The separation from anything resembling normal politics began when Donald Trump won the GOP's presidential nomination. Exhibit A here will be the charged text exchanges at the FBI between Lisa Page and Peter Strzok.

Set aside the anti-Trump bias. Have FBI officials with this much career experience ever displayed such emotional distress? Eliot Ness must be turning in his grave. Once no more hard-nosed character existed in American culture than the "G-man." Federal judges in the olden days (before 2016) were largely sober arbiters of the cases before them. Now they call melodramatic "emergency" meetings.

Mr. Barr himself is a cultural throwback. In his dark suits, blue shirts, traditional ties, horn-rimmed glasses and round ungrinning face, Mr. Barr is about as out of sync with the current age of antisocial media as imaginable.

Donald Trump, who set off the original Trump derangement syndrome, is personally more aligned with the social-media zeitgeist—a lifelong showman who glommed on to Twitter to focus millions of eyes on himself. The Beltway press, itself in thrall to Twitter, should be seen as in a co-dependency with Mr. Trump.

But the Barr derangement is something else. A lot gets tangled up at the new intersection between normal politics and psychological disorder.

The tipping point in Mr. Barr's tenure as attorney general came last April, when he told a Senate committee that he thought "spying" on the Trump campaign had occurred. What he said next, though, is what made Washington snap: "I need to explore that." About a month later, Mr. Barr appointed federal prosecutor John Durham to "explore that," and offices all over Washington instantly overnight to Defcon 1.

At some point, Mr. Durham will present the findings of his criminal investigation to the attorney general, which may include indictment recommendations, or perhaps not.

A traditional behaviorist interpretation of the anti-Barr assault is that its goal is to delegitimize what Mr. Durham's investigation of the mud beneath Washington's many rocks may turn up. As evidence we have an anti-Barr op-ed this week in the Washington Post by James Comey. He defends the Justice Department's career employees—including himself, of course—as a "a reservoir of trust and credibility, a reservoir built for them, and filled one drop at a time, by those who went before."

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Here's the bitter irony: Mr. Barr would agree with that. An alternative, nonpsychotic interpretation of Mr. Barr's recent actions is that it doesn't have much to do with protecting Mr. Trump. It is instead an attorney general attempting to restore the idea of *accountability* in the public life of Washington.

Any fair reading of the Horowitz report, or indeed the Mueller report, makes clear that a lot of people in government looked the other way when their colleagues ran off the rails. Obama Attorney General Loretta Lynch looked somewhere else when then-FBI Director Comey, her subordinate, took over prosecutorial decisions regarding Hillary Clinton's emails.

Everyone recalls that former deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein recommended firing Mr. Comey, but forgotten is the larger message in the title he put on his memo: "Restoring public confidence in the FBI." That remains an unfinished task.

Those of us who don't believe Mr. Barr is a Trump tool would like to see him finish the job of cleaning out the Augean stables at important Washington institutions—Justice, the FBI, the intelligence agencies. Their credibility deficit with much of the public is really the greater danger to the system right now.

If Mr. Trump's tweets about the federal judiciary drive Mr. Barr from office, his necessary effort to establish what happened from 2015 onward will wash out to sea. Worse, it will establish mass, moralized fanaticism as the primary instrument of opposition in U.S. politics. We may be one resignation away from that.

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