

# Inside William Barr’s Breakup With Trump

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By Jonathan D. Karl



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JUNE 27, 2021

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DONALD TRUMP IS a man consumed with grievance against people he believes have betrayed him, but few betrayals have enraged him more than what his attorney general did to him. To Trump, the unkindest cut of all was when William Barr stepped forward and declared that there had been no widespread fraud in the 2020 election, just as the president was trying to overturn Joe Biden’s victory by claiming that the election had been stolen.

In a series of interviews with me this spring, Barr spoke, for the first time, about the events surrounding his break with Trump. I have also spoken with other senior officials in the Trump White House and Justice Department, who provided additional details about Barr’s actions and the former president’s explosive response. Barr and those close to him have a reason to tell his version of this story. He has been widely seen as a Trump lackey who politicized the Justice Department. But when the big moment came after the election, he defied the president who expected him to do his bidding.

Barr’s betrayal came on December 1, over lunch in the attorney general’s private dining room with Michael Balsamo, a Justice Department beat

reporter at the Associated Press. Also in attendance were the DOJ chief of staff, Will Levi, and spokesperson Kerri Kupec. Balsamo was not told the reason for the invitation. When Barr dropped his bombshell between bites of salad, he mumbled, and Balsamo wasn't sure that he had caught what the attorney general had said.

"Just to be crystal clear," Balsamo asked, "are you saying—"

"Sir, I think you better repeat what you just said," Kupec interjected.

"To date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election," Barr repeated. This time Balsamo heard him.

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Balsamo's story appeared on the AP newswire shortly after lunch ended: "Disputing Donald Trump's persistent baseless claims, Attorney General William Barr declared Tuesday the U.S. Justice Department had uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election."

The story blew a hole in the president's claims. Nobody seriously questioned Barr's conservative credentials or whether he had been among Trump's most loyal cabinet secretaries. His conclusion sent a definitive message that the effort to overturn the election was without merit.

Barr told me that Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell had been urging him to speak out since mid-November. Publicly, McConnell had said nothing to criticize Trump's allegations, but he told Barr that Trump's claims were damaging to the country and to the Republican Party. Trump's refusal to concede was complicating McConnell's efforts to ensure that the GOP won the two runoff elections in Georgia scheduled for January 5.

To McConnell, the road to maintaining control of the Senate was simple: Republicans needed to make the argument that with Biden soon to be in the White House, it was crucial that they have a majority in the Senate to check his power. But McConnell also believed that if he openly declared Biden the winner, Trump would be enraged and likely act to sabotage the Republican Senate campaigns in Georgia. Barr related his conversations with McConnell to me. McConnell confirms the account.

"Look, we need the president in Georgia," McConnell told Barr, "and so we cannot be frontally attacking him right now. But you're in a better position to inject some reality into this situation. You are really the only one who can do it."

"I understand that," Barr said. "And I'm going to do it at the appropriate time."

On another call, McConnell again pleaded with Barr to come out and shoot down the talk of widespread fraud.

"Bill, I look around, and you are the only person who can do it," McConnell told him.

Levi, the Justice Department chief of staff, had also been urging Barr to contradict Trump's assertions. But Barr had said nothing publicly to indicate that he disagreed with the president about the election. In fact, the week after the election, he gave prosecutors the green light to investigate "substantial allegations" of vote irregularities that "could potentially impact the outcome"

of the election. The move overturned long-standing policy that the Justice Department does not investigate voter fraud until after an election is certified. The theory behind the policy is that the department's responsibility is to prosecute crimes, not to get involved in election disputes. Barr's reversal of the policy was interpreted by some as a sign that he might use the department to help Trump overturn the election.

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But Barr told me he had already concluded that it was highly unlikely that evidence existed that would tip the scales in the election. He had expected Trump to lose and therefore was not surprised by the outcome. He also knew that at some point, Trump was going to confront him about the allegations, and he wanted to be able to say that he had looked into them and that they were unfounded. So, in addition to giving prosecutors approval to open investigations into clear and credible allegations of substantial fraud, Barr began his own, unofficial inquiry into the major claims that the president and his allies were making.

"My attitude was: It was put-up or shut-up time," Barr told me. "If there was evidence of fraud, I had no motive to suppress it. But my suspicion all the way along was that there was nothing there. It was all bullshit."

The Department of Justice ended up conducting no formal investigations of voter fraud, but as part of Barr's informal review, he asked the U.S. Attorney in Michigan about Trump's claim that mysterious "ballot dumps" in Detroit had secured Biden's victory in the state.

As proof of fraud, Trump's allies had pointed to videos showing boxes filled with ballots arriving at the TCF Center, in Detroit, to be counted after the 8 p.m. deadline for votes to be cast. But Barr quickly found that there was a logical explanation. It had to do with how the 662 precincts in Wayne County, home to Detroit, tabulate their votes. "In every other county, they count the ballots at the precinct, but in Wayne County, they bring them into one central counting place. So the boxes are coming in all night. The fact that boxes are coming in—well, that's what they do."

Furthermore, Trump performed better against Biden in Detroit than he had against Hillary Clinton in 2016. Biden received 1,000 fewer votes in Detroit than Clinton had, and Trump received 5,000 more votes than he had four years earlier. Trump didn't lose Michigan because of "illegal" ballots cast in Detroit. He lost Michigan because Biden beat him badly in the suburbs.

Barr also looked into allegations that voting machines across the country were rigged to switch Trump votes to Biden votes. He received two briefings from cybersecurity experts at the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI. "We realized from the beginning it was just bullshit," Barr told me, noting that even if the machines somehow changed the count, it would show up when they were recounted by hand. "It's a counting machine, and they save everything that was counted. So you just reconcile the two. There had been no discrepancy reported anywhere, and I'm still not aware of any discrepancy."

**A**FTER THE LUNCH with Balsamo, Barr and Levi went to the White House for a previously scheduled meeting with Chief of Staff Mark Meadows. After talking briefly with Meadows, they went upstairs to White House Counsel Pat Cipollone's office. As they were conferring, one of the counsel's aides knocked on the door and told Cipollone that the president

wanted to see him and then, pointing to Barr, the aide said, “And he is looking for you.”

Barr, Levi, and Cipollone walked to the president’s personal dining room near the Oval Office. Trump was sitting at the table. Meadows was sitting next to him with his arms crossed; the White House adviser Eric Herschmann stood off to the side. The details of this meeting were described to me by several people present. One told me that Trump had “the eyes and mannerism of a madman.”

He went off on Barr.

“I think you’ve noticed I haven’t been talking to you much,” Trump said to him. “I’ve been leaving you alone.”

Barr later told others that the comment was reminiscent of a line in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, in which the main character, Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, says, “I do not avoid women, Mandrake, but I do deny them my essence.” Trump, Barr thought, was saying that he had been denying him his essence.

Trump brought up Barr’s AP interview.

“Did you say that?”

“Yes,” Barr responded.

“How the fuck could you do this to me? Why did you say it?”

“Because it’s true.”

The president, livid, responded by referring to himself in the third person: “You must hate Trump. You must hate Trump.”

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Barr thought that the president was trying to control himself, but he seemed angrier than he had ever seen him. His face was red. Barr’s AP interview was dominating every cable news channel except the one Trump was watching. The television in the room was tuned to the right-wing, pro-Trump network One America News, which was broadcasting a committee hearing of the Michigan legislature. The hearing featured disproven allegations of massive election fraud, including the testimony of a woman named Melissa Carone, who had worked at the counting location in Detroit and told the committee, “Everything that happened at the TCF Center was fraud. Every single thing.” The next day, Carone would testify again, next to Rudy Giuliani, during which time she slurred her words and appeared to be drunk. (Carone later denied that she had been drunk.)

“They saw the boxes going in!” Trump yelled, referring to the stories about boxes of illegal ballots being counted.

“You know, Mr. President, there are 662 precincts in Wayne County,” Barr said. Trump seemed taken aback that he knew the exact number. “It’s the only county with all the boxes going to a central place, and you actually did better there this time around than you did last time. You

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As Trump ranted about other examples of fraud, Meadows continued to sit silently with his arms crossed, his posture suggesting that he, too, was upset by what Barr had done.

“You know, you only have five weeks, Mr. President, after an election to make legal challenges,” Barr said. “This would have taken a crackerjack team with a really coherent and disciplined strategy. Instead, you have a clown show. No self-respecting lawyer is going anywhere near it. It’s just a joke. That’s why you are where you are.”

Interestingly, Trump didn’t argue when Barr told him that his “clown show” legal team had wasted time. In fact, he said, “You may be right about that.”

After going through his litany of claims—stolen ballots, fake ballots, dead people voting, rigged voting machines—Trump switched to other grievances, shouting at Barr for failing to prosecute Biden’s son Hunter. “If that had been one of my kids, they would have been all over him!” he said. By the end of the meeting, Trump was doing almost all of the talking. Why hadn’t Barr released John Durham’s report on the origins of the Russia investigation before the election? Why hadn’t he prosecuted former FBI Director James Comey? Trump was banging on the table. He said that Barr had been worthless.

As Barr left, he was unsure whether he still had a job. Had Trump just fired him? And if not, shouldn’t he quit? Why remain attorney general after what the president had just said to him? His status had been left up in the air.

The next morning, Barr received a call from Meadows. “I think there’s a way through this,” Meadows told him. He could prevent Trump from firing him, but he wanted an assurance from Barr that he wouldn’t resign. “Are you willing to stay?” Meadows asked.

“I’m not going to sandbag you,” Barr said. “I will give you a warning if I’m going to leave, and No. 2, I’ll stay as long as I’m needed.”

Barr almost immediately began to regret his decision to stay. His statement on election fraud did nothing to deter Trump, who was now listening, almost exclusively, to Giuliani and others outside his administration. They were telling him that he was still going to win the election.

Two weeks later, Barr went down to the White House to tell the president that he planned to resign before the end of the year. It was their first meeting since their confrontation. To defuse the tension, Barr had written an effusive resignation letter, which he handed to the president when he got to the Oval Office. The letter praised Trump’s record and played directly into his complaints about how he had been treated by Democrats, saying his efforts “had been met by a partisan onslaught against you in which no tactic, no matter how abusive and deceitful, was out of bounds.”

Trump read the letter while Barr was sitting across from him. “This is pretty good,” he said.