

Essay

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Justice Corrupts Justice

WASHINGTON

U.S. Attorney General William Barr, in rejecting the House Judiciary Committee's call for a prosecutor not beholden to the Bush Administration to investigate the crimes of Iraqgate, has taken personal charge of the cover-up.

The document that will be Exhibit A in a future prosecution of obstruction of justice is an unsigned 97-page apologia that accompanied Mr. Barr's unprecedented refusal to recognize a "political conflict of interest," as called for in the law.

Read it for yourself; though intended to explain in detail why Congress does not understand the intent of Congress, Barr's Apology does the opposite: its strained defensiveness will cause any objective reader to say "something smells fishy here."

Mr. Barr and the chief of his Criminal Division, Robert Mueller, could face prosecution if it turns out that high Bush officials knew about Saddam Hussein's perversion of our Agriculture export guarantees to finance his war machine, and delayed the inquiry into the Atlanta Lavoro bank scandal. They have a keen personal and political interest in seeing to it that the Department of Justice stays in safe, controllable Republican hands.

In professing to see no conflict in the investigation of themselves, these political appointees seek to hide behind the professionalism of "career prosecutors" of the Public Integrity Section and the F.B.I.

But dismayed professionals inside Justice tell me that the Public Integrity chief was reassigned months ago to make way for a more malleable man. The Barr Apology was prepared by political appointees for a political pur-

Attorney General Barr leads Iraqgate's cover-up.

pose: contain Iraqgate until after the election.

And Mr. Barr has thoroughly abused the F.B.I. Field agents have told me for a year that higher-ups at Justice have steered them away from

rewarding lines of inquiry. This month the former head of the F.B.I.'s Atlanta field office, William Hinshaw, publicly accused Justice of having "delayed indictments for nearly a year in the \$5 billion scandal."

It's no secret why the F.B.I.'s Lavoro investigation was hamstrung: to allow Agriculture and Commerce officials to carry out Bush national security directive 26 supporting Saddam.

Two days ago, I called Agriculture officials at the center of the grain-financing scandal; not one has been interviewed by the F.B.I. The reason "no evidence was found," in Mr. Barr's repeated phrase, was that no evidence was sought.

The Attorney General arrogantly insists that Federal Judge Marvin Shoob, who does not appreciate Federal wrongdoing in his Atlanta courtroom and has called for a special prosecutor, "does not understand the case." Judge Shoob understands the Lavoro case the way Judge Sirica understood the Watergate case.

That Atlanta case, which the Criminal Division in Washington was forced to admit it delayed during the Bush buildup of Saddam, may provide a way to scale the Barr stone wall. Christopher Dragoul, the local bank manager who pleaded guilty, comes before Judge Shoob Sept. 14 for sentencing.

Justice, with so much to cover up, wants him to stay mum; local prosecutor Gail McKenzie has been pushed aside again, as Arthur Wade, a non-lawyer from Agriculture, has led the team at the Atlanta penitentiary coaching Dragoul on what not to say. He reminds Dragoul that the only way he can get a "downward departure" from the sentencing guidelines is upon the prosecution's request.

However, Mr. Dragoul now has a new pro-bono lawyer — Bobby Lee Cook, "the Ed Williams of the South" — who is said to understand that concealing the truth about the Government's guilty knowledge of bank fraud is not the best way to obtain leniency from Judge Shoob.

I hope the Judge asks about Mr. Dragoul's meeting in 1988 with an aide to Hussein Kamel, Saddam's son-in-law and arms procurer, in the London offices of Matrix Churchill, an Iraqi front.

When Mr. Dragoul informed the Iraqi that investigators from the C.I.A. and the National Security Agency had been in the Atlanta bank to monitor its financing of Iraq's huge commodity credits, he said Saddam's agent replied: "Don't worry about that — we know all about it; we're working together."

Do you suppose our Criminal Cover-Up Division has demanded the N.S.A. and C.I.A. reports and interviewed their agents? Forget it; that might lead to finding evidence making it unlawful to resist appointing a special prosecutor. □