WILLIAM P. BARR TIMELINE  
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1970’s Serves as assistant legislative counsel to the CIA during George Bush’s tenure as the Agency’s director.


1988 Barr works on vice presidential selection in the 1988 Bush presidential campaign and plays a role in fashioning responses to criticism of Quayle. Barr serves on the presidential transition team. *(New York Times, 8/30/90)*

1989

January Barr selected to be Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel. The office advises the Attorney General on legal matters and issues legal opinions for the department.

June Barr issues a confidential opinion (6/21) reversing a 1980 Carter administration ruling that had barred the FBI from evading the extradition process by making arrests abroad. The opinion concludes, “The executive and legislative branches may, in exercising their respective authority, depart from customary international law norms.” The opinion was written at the request of the FBI for clarification of its authority overseas. *(American Journal of International Law, Vol. 86:758)*

July Barr testifies before House Judiciary Committee in favor of Bush’s proposed constitutional amendment to ban flag burning. Appearing with Robert Bork, who supports the measure, Barr testifies that the Bush administration is committed to the amendment. Barr argues that legislation could not be written that would pass constitutional muster. *(Washington Post, 7/20/89)*

Barr testifies before Congress on the issue of pocket vetoes made during recesses of Congress in the same session. Barr argues that “any adjournment of either house for longer than three days gives occasion for a pocket veto.” *(San Francisco Chronicle, 12/7/89)*

August Barr testifies before the Senate Judiciary Committee that an effort to bar flag burning through legislation is unconstitutional “and the only way it can be done…is through constitutional amendment.” *(Washington Post, 3/14/90)*

October Failed coup attempt of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega of Panama.
News of FBI authorization to arrest fugitives oversees without the consent of the foreign nation, as well as Barr’s confidential June opinion about fugitive arrests, is leaked to the press. Bush and Baker, surprised by information, later say that such powers would only narrowly be applied and used in very limited circumstances. They emphasize the fact that Barr’s opinion was based on domestic not international law. *(Orange County Register, 10/14/1989)*

Barr writes a clarification memo about several Ford administration executive orders dealing with clandestine actions. Memo paves the way for more active involvement in coup attempts not meant to result in assassination. *(San Diego Union Tribune, 11/16/89)*

Administration presents plan for the Noriega operation to Congressional intelligence committees.

**November**

On the 3rd, Barr writes a memo concluding that an 1878 statute barring military forces from law enforcement activities doesn’t apply outside of the U.S. borders. The ruling paves the way for direct participation of U.S. military forces in enforcement operations abroad. Among other things, this would allow troops to arrest suspects abroad.

The Justice Department declined to make public the above mentioned memo, as it had with Barr’s June 21 opinion, on the ground that it constituted “private” communications” between Barr and his clients, here Thornburgh and Bush. *(Gannet News Service, 12/21/89 and San Francisco Chronicle, 12/18/89)*

On the 8th, Barr testifies before House judiciary subcommittee that the President has the authority under U. S. domestic law to order an extraterritorial arrest of foreign criminal suspects without the consent of the country even though it would violate principles of customary international law. Barr testifies that the administration respects international law, but contends that U.S. *domestic law* does allow U.S. agents to depart from customary law when in pursuit of certain international terrorists or drug traffickers. Barr stresses that this is change in a legal opinion but not “policy”. *(Wall Street Journal, 11/9/89)*

With the approval of congressional oversight committees, the CIA launches a $3 million operation to overthrow Noriega. *(Associated Press, 11/16/89)*

**December**

U.S. invades Panama on the 20th. Barr works through the night at the White House, providing running legal opinions on the justification for the operation and the U.S. authority for arresting Noriega. *(New York Times, 8/30/90)*
Barr leads a delegation of officials from Justice and INS at a White House meeting with Chinese students to discuss legislation passed by Congress to ensure a U.S. haven for Chinese students active in their country’s pro-democracy movement. (*National Journal*, 12/30/89)

**1990**

**March**

Case challenging the Flag Protection Act of 1989 makes its way to the Supreme Court. Bush administration finds itself in the difficult position of defending a law it has already announced is unconstitutional. (*Washington Post*, 3/14/90)

**April**

Public dispute between Justice Department and agency inspectors general arises from an Office of Legal Counsel ruling that curtails the powers of these government watchdogs. The opinion stated that inspectors general lack authority to investigate private individuals or groups that do not receive federal funds. Barr defended the integrity of OLC and its actions maintaining “any suggestion that the Office of Legal Counsel is doing this in a vindictive way because of the creation of an inspector general in Justice is way off the mark.” (*Washington Post*, 4/26/90)

**May**

Deputy Attorney General Donald B. Ayer and his top aide resign two weeks after it was revealed that Thornburgh ordered Ayer to revoke a letter expressing the Justice Department’s support for stiff mandatory sentences for convicted corporations. This was the latest in a series of disputes between Thornburgh and Ayer. (*Washington Post*, 5/12/90)

Barr nominated to serve as Deputy Attorney General and will assume the day-to-day management of the department. Barr will be the third appointee to the post under Thornburgh. In response to questions about changes in the administration at Justice, Barr offers, “I think you’ll see an opening up at the top of the department.” Barr’s deputy J. Michael Luttig is nominated to replace him at Office of Legal Counsel. (*Washington Post*, 5/15/90)

Days after the announcement of Ayer’s departure, there is a further shake-up of Thornburgh’s inner circle. Thornburgh reassigns two of his top aides, executive assistant Robert S. Ross, Jr. and press secretary David R. Runkel, to other lower-profile posts in Justice, cutting them out of day-to-day operations. (*National Journal*, 5/19/90)

**August**

Barr wins praise from the Hill for his representation of the Justice department in negotiations with the Senate over savings and loan anti-fraud legislation. (*New York Times*, 8/30/90)

Barr assumes supervision of a Federal grand jury investigation into drug use by former state officials in Pennsylvania after Thornburgh was forced to remove
himself from the case because a former aide (Henry G. Barr – no relation) was under scrutiny. (*New York Times*, 8/30/90)

**1991**

**January** In the wake of the Persian Gulf crisis, FBI agents contact Arab American business and community leaders throughout the country. In addition to informing them of the bureau’s intention to protect them against backlash from the Persian Gulf crisis, the agents also use the occasion to gather intelligence about possible terrorist threats. Barr denies any FBI intention to intimidate Arab Americans. Barr notes, “in light of the terrorist threats…it is only prudent to solicit information about potential terrorist activity and to request the future assistance of these individuals.” (*Washington Post*, 1/16/1991)

**April** Immigration Commissioner Gene McNary comes under criticism for his management of the Immigration Agency after a February Justice Department study concludes his management changes caused “extremely debilitating” confusion at the agency. Barr, who oversees the INS, asks the agency to follow the report’s recommendations. (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 4/17/91)

**June** Attorney General Thornburgh announces his intention to resign in order to run for the unexpired term of the late Senator John Heinz (R-Pa.).

**July** In response to Thornburgh’s impending departure, Barr begins to personally oversee the Justice Department’s BCCI investigation. (*National Law Journal*, 11/25/91)

House Judiciary Committee votes to subpoena a copy of Barr’s controversial June 21, 1989 opinion detailing U.S. power to arrest fugitives abroad outside the extradition process.

**August** Thornburgh returns to Pennsylvania to run for U.S. Senate.

Justice Department requests a federal judge lift an injunction against anti-abortion protesters who were blocking access to abortion clinics in Wichita, Kansas. (*Washington Post*, 11/13/91)

Barr named Acting Attorney General in Thornburgh’s absence. Barr’s Deputy Attorney General responsibilities are delegated to George J. Terwilliger.

Three days after being named Acting Attorney General, Barr successfully handles a prisoner uprising and hostage crisis at the Talladega Federal Correctional Institution in Alabama, preventing any loss of life. (*Washington Post*, 10/17/91)
Barr’s 1989 opinion regarding the power of the U.S. to seize foreign fugitives abroad is leaked to the press. The leak comes just as the Justice department is concluding negotiations for a limited release of the opinion.

**September**  
Attorney General Thornburgh formally resigns and Barr is named Acting Attorney General. Administration officials expect Barr to stay in that post for a while, saying they were reluctant to make a decision on a major appointment while two contentious nominations are still pending. *(Washington Post, 9/6/1991)*

In a New York Times op-ed piece, Barr outlines case for Congress to adopt the president’s crime bill.

**October**  
Nominated to the post of Attorney General on the 16th. Bush calls Barr “a thorough professional, a defender of individual rights and a person absolutely committed to this fights against crime.” Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.) promises “fair and thorough” hearings. Others thought to be in the running for the position included Missouri Governor John Ashcroft, California Governor George Deukmejian and Transportation Secretary Samuel K. Skinner. *(Washington Post, 10/17/91)*

**November**  
At the direction of Barr, Justice Department officials announce plans to establish a “tester” program to uncover unlawful bias in selling and renting housing and to develop a joint investigative and enforcement program with other agencies. *(Los Angeles Times, 11/5/91)*

Barr and OMB Director Richard Darman announce the creation of special task force to figure out why there is a nearly $200 million discrepancy in official estimates of bad debts owed the federal government. *(National Journal, 11/9/91)*

Barr’s senate confirmation hearings run smoothly as Democrats praise his candor and spirit of cooperation. Barr says his priorities will be drug enforcement, violent crime, civil rights enforcement and white-collar crime. During the hearings, Barr agrees to appoint a “special counsel” to investigate the INS LAW affair. *(National Law Journal, 11/25/91 and Washington Post, 11/13/91)*

The United States and Britain announce criminal charges against two Libyan intelligence officers for the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet. Barr emphasizes that the “investigation is by no means over…We will not rest until all those responsible are brought to justice.” *(Washington Post, 11/15/91)*

Senate Judiciary Committee votes 14-0 to approve Barr’s nomination for Attorney General on the 15th. At one point it appeared the vote might be delayed by Senator Dennis DeConcini (D-Az.) who was concerned about a
charge that the Justice Department had manipulated the timing of the announcement of charges against the Libyan terrorists accused of the Pan Am bombing. After speaking with Barr, Sen. DeConcini said his concerns were addressed. Barr and other Justice Department officials deny any link between the indictments and Barr’s confirmation. (New York Times, 11/16/91)

On the 20th, Barr is confirmed as the country’s 77th Attorney General by a voice vote in the Senate after lawmakers in both parties praised his appointment to head the Justice Department. (New York Times, 11/21/91)

December

BCCI agrees to plead guilty to racketeering charges and forfeit $550 million to reimburse depositors and shore up two U.S. banks it secretly controlled. According to Barr, “This represents the largest single criminal forfeiture in U.S. history.” (Washington Post, 12/20/91)

In Chicago speech delivered to Illinois prosecutors, Barr says that liberal forces in Congress want a return to the permissive days of the 1960’s when violent crime was on the rise. Barr calls on prosecutors to lobby state and federal legislators to adopt strict anti-crime measures. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 12/19/91)

Barr announces the FBI is studying a major reordering of its resources in response to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, presumably involving the shifting of a number of agents now doing counterintelligence work to fighting domestic crime (Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 12/28/91).

1992

January

The FBI plans to cash in its “peace dividend” by reassigning 300 counterintelligence agents to the fight against violent and gang-related crime in the U.S. Barr says that the reallocation of manpower will be the largest in FBI history. (The Legal Intelligencer, 1/13/92)

Barr authorizes the subpoena of unaired NBC network news tapes of a month long investigation at a suspected drug warehouse. Because the NBC crew had staked out the property at the invitation of U.S. Customs, a federal judge concluded that the news agency had acted as an agent of the government and that the tapes would be considered as evidence. Barr had been extremely reluctant to order the subpoena, fearing Justice could be embroiled in a First Amendment battle with the network. (Washington Post, 1/18/92)

One day after Barr announces during a speech in California that Justice would support scaling back consent decrees on prison conditions to require no more than the constitutional minimum, the Supreme Court adopts a more flexible standard for modifying consent decrees. Writing for the Court, Justice White states, “A proposed modification should not strive to rewrite a consent decree
so that it conforms to the constitutional floor.” (National Law Journal, 1/27/92)

February  Barr meets with his Italian law enforcement counterparts who outline their new anticrime measures in Rome and seek closer cooperation with the U.S. (Washington Post, 2/9/1992)

During a speech in San Diego, Barr announces a new multibillion-dollar plan to curb illegal immigration. The plan calls for new border lights and fences and 150 additional border patrol agents. (Washington Post, 2/18/92)

During a visit to Texas, Barr calls for increased prison construction as a step toward reducing crime rates. Barr would make similar statements at future speeches to state law enforcement organizations. (Dallas Morning News, 2/12/92)

Barr announces that Justice will broaden its antitrust power in order gain what he terms “a useful tool” against foreign companies that restrict U.S. exports. Justice will use the expanded power to target Japanese monopolies that restrict U.S. imports. (Washington Post, 3/6/92)

March  Barr criticizes a bill (Freedom of Choice Act) that would forbid states to impose restrictions on most abortions arguing that the measure goes far beyond the standard set in Roe. Barr further questions Congress’ authority to enact such a change. (Washington Post, 3/4/92)

Former federal judge Malcom R. Wilkey is appointed as special counsel by Barr to conduct a preliminary inquiry into whether the House bank scandal involved any violations of federal criminal law. (Wall Street Journal, 3/20)

April  Speaking to the Wisconsin Governor’s Conference on juvenile crime, Barr called for tougher punishment of juvenile offenders to reduce violent crime. Meanwhile, the Justice department prepares to authorize the FBI to include juvenile records in its criminal history information system. (Chicago Sun-Times, 4/2/92)

Barr visits North Philadelphia to announce the kickoff of “Operation Weed and Seed” -- a joint effort of federal, state and local authorities that combines “tough law enforcement with the economic and moral revitalization of high-crime areas.” (The Legal Intelligencer, 4/7/92)

Barr recommends Bush veto the independent counsel statute when it comes up for renewal later in the year, unless Congress agrees to substantially modify it. Barr argues that the statute does not adequately provide for a “selection process that appoints individuals who understand the prosecution function and the standards and policies used by the Department of Justice.” Further, Barr
doesn’t think the law “provides any accountability or adequate supervision of independent counsel.” (Washington Post, 4/8/92)

House leaders refuse to provide all bank records subpoenaed by the special counsel investigating the abuses at the House bank. Barr denies the leaders possess any constitutional right to withhold the information in the face of a legal inquiry. (Washington Post, 4/27/92)

At the request of President Bush, the Justice Department resumes its investigation of the Rodney King beating. Once the investigation is complete the Department will decide whether any prosecutions for civil rights violations will move forward. The Department began its preliminary investigation of the incident immediately after the tape was aired, but suspended the inquiry until the state completed its pursuit of the case. (Gannett News Service, 4/30/92)

May

President Bush meets with Barr and top domestic Cabinet officers to tackle long-range problems pushed to the forefront by the riots in Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter, Barr announces the creation of a joint federal-state task force to investigate and prosecute “those criminals who terrorized communities through the area by acts of violence and wanton destruction” during the riots. Later in the month, Barr reveals that the federal probe of the L.A. riots shows significant involvement of gang members. (Associated Press, 5/4/92, Dow Jones News Service, 5/5/92 and Newsday, 5/18/92)

Barr and House Banking Committee Chair Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.) confront one another over access to classified documents about the government’s prewar relationship with Iraq. Barr said the administration would not provide the committee with any more information unless Gonzales promised to protect them from “unauthorized disclosure” and limit access to this “with appropriate security clearances.” (Washington Post, 5/19/92)

July

Barr issues “blueprint” plan for fighting violent crime. The Justice Department report’s recommends adopting mandatory minimum penalties for gun offenders and habitual violent offenders and expanding prison space. Among the report’s 24 recommendations are increasing the ability of the juvenile justice system to treat chronic violent juvenile offenders as adults, expansion of the death penalty, limits of the exclusionary rule. (Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, 7/29/92)

August

Barr rejects a House Judiciary Committee request that he appoint an independent counsel to investigate alleged misconduct by top Bush administration officials concerning U.S. prewar policy toward Iraq. In a letter to the committee, Barr notes, “there is no basis” for such a probe and Congress’s request for an investigation contains only “vague and general allegations.” (Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, 8/10/92)
The House Judiciary Committee votes to recommend Barr appoint an independent counsel to investigate Justice Department actions in the INSLAW affair.

September

Barr meets privately with Ignacio Morales Lechuga, his Mexican counterpart, to discuss the two countries’ continuing efforts in the drug war. (The Legal Intelligencer, 9/4/92)

The House Judiciary Committee again requests Barr appoint an independent counsel to investigate Justice Department actions in the INSLAW affair. Barr again refuses to authorize an independent prosecutor stating that there was not enough specific information against high-level department officials to warrant and independent investigation. (Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, 10/14/92)

October

Barr appoints retired federal judge Frederick B. Lacey to investigate CIA and Justice Department actions in investigating the Italian-owned Banca Nazionale del Lavoro (BNL), an international bank fraud case, but stops short of naming an independent counsel as requested by Congress. Justice was investigating illegal BNL loans to Iraq for weapons and food that helped strengthen Hussein’s regime before Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Barr announced he would revamp the Atlanta-based prosecution team that handled the BNL case for the past three years and form a new task force. (Washington Post, 10/17/92)

Speaking to a group of law enforcement officials and victim’s rights advocates, Barr argues that the criminal justice system should function “more like a pipeline and less like a sieve” incapacitating violent criminals and sentencing them to long prison terms. It is “revolving-door justice” that has been the most important cause of the increase in the crime rate. (Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, 10/21/92)

November


December

Frederick Lacey, the special counsel investigating possible wrongdoings by CIA and Justice officials in the BNL matter, tells the Justice department that appointing an independent counsel in the case is not necessary. Barr announces he will accept Lacey’s recommendation. (National Journal, 11/12/92)

Barr appoints independent counsel to conduct a criminal investigation of the State Department’s pre-election search of Bill Clinton’s passport files. (Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, 12/21/92)

On Christmas Eve, Bush pardons of former defense secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and five other officials involved in the Iran-contra prosecutions. (New York Times, 12/25/92)
1993

January  Barr releases Justice Department report accuses FBI director William S. Sessions of having the government pay for his private trips abroad, for the construction of a wooden fence around his home and for improperly taking an income tax deduction for his official limousine. (National Journal, 1/30/93)
Joining the Bush Administration. Experience with Bush at the CIA. How you came to join the Reagan administration’s domestic policy shop. Role and responsibilities in the 1988 election, especially relating to vice-presidential selection. Selection as Assistant Attorney General for Office of Legal Counsel.

Office of Legal Counsel. The role of the Office of Legal Counsel and its relationship with both the Attorney General and Boyden Gray’s office. Important opinions you wrote while at OLC including those dealing with the arrests of fugitives abroad, clandestine actions, use of military forces for law enforcement activities outside of the U.S. borders, and inspectors general. Experience as a legal advisor during Panama invasion. Relationship with Richard Thornburgh.

Politics and Policymaking at the Department of Justice. Role and responsibilities as Deputy Attorney General and Acting Attorney General during Thornburgh’s absence. How you came to be nominated as Attorney General. The confirmation process. The challenges facing the Department of Justice after Thornburgh’s departure. What were the major issues and investigations that occupied your time as Attorney General? The anti-crime initiatives launched by Justice. Your relationship with the Solicitor General, FBI, INS, litigating divisions, etc. Decisions not to invoke the independent counsel statute in a number of investigations (BCCI, Inslaw, Iraq matter, etc.). The role played by Justice in the screening and selection of Article III judges.

Attorney General’s Relationships with Other Governmental Actors. Relationships with key members of Congress the judiciary committees. The involvement of Justice Department in congressional relations for the administration, especially the President’s crime bill. How involved was the president in setting the Justice Department’s agenda? Level of presidential intervention in Justice’s operations. With which members of the White House staff did you work most closely? Relationships with other cabinet members. Interactions with counsels for the other departments and agencies.

The Bush Presidency in Retrospect. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Bush administration? What features of the presidency were missed or misunderstood by the press? How should the Bush presidency be viewed in history?
Timelines


Selected Writings and Public Statements by William P. Barr


Department of Justice Organizational Information

- Department of Justice Organizational Chart, prepared by Darby A. Morrisroe with information from the Federal Staff Directory, Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2/28/2001

- Summary Descriptions of Key DOJ Offices, prepared by Darby A. Morrisroe with information from the United States Department of Justice, Miller Center of Public Affairs, 2/28/2001

- William Barr’s Justice Department Staff, prepared by Darby A. Morrisroe with information from the Federal Staff Directory, Miller Center of Public Affairs, 3/01/2001
Important Office of Legal Counsel Opinions


- “FBI Able to Arrest Fugitives Oversees Without Extradition,” Orange County Register, 10/14/89.


Politics and Policymaking at the Department of Justice

- Michael Isikoff, “No. 2 Aide at Justice Quits Post; Ayers Reportedly Frozen Out at Top,” *Washington Post*, 5/12/90


- Ann Devroy and Sharon LaFraniere, “Quiet Search for Thornburgh’s Successor; Deputy Runs Justice Dept. as White House Rides Out Other High-Level Confirmation Storms,” *Washington Post*, 9/16/91


Major Issues and DOJ Investigations

Crime Issues and Initiatives


Antitrust


BCCI Probe

- Sharon LaFraniere and Sharon Walsh, “Plea Agreement Splits BCCI Assets; Bank to Plead Guilty to New as Well as Existing U.S. Fraud Charges,” *Washington Post*, 12/20/91.

BNL Investigation
- Sharon LaFraniere and R. Jeffrey Smith, “Ex-Judge to Probe Handling of BNL; Barr Stops Short of Special Counsel,” *Washington Post*, 10/17/89.


House Bank Investigation
Clinton Passport Probe

- “Clinton Passport Probe Widens Independent prosecutor named,” *Newsday*, 12/18/92.

Independent Counsel Statute