

No Excuse for Mr. Barr's Outrage

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Archives

When House Democrats asked for an independent prosecutor to investigate aid given to Iraq before the Persian Gulf war, Attorney General William Barr was outraged. He sensed that political opponents were out to get him. But Mr. Barr asserted wrongly that his Justice Department was handling the case credibly. Its prosecution is unraveling in a welter of confusion.

Mistakes of judgment were made when the Bush Administration kept trying to appease Saddam Hussein long after Iraq's war with Iran had ended. But crimes also were committed as the United States favored Iraq with loan guarantees ostensibly to pay for food. The money was diverted to military purposes and Government records were doctored to disguise the transactions.

For two years the main Government case has been against Christopher Drogoul, the former Atlanta branch manager for the Rome-based Banca Nazionale del Lavoro. He stands virtually alone, accused of defrauding his employers in Italy by secretly lending Iraq billions of dollars, much of which wound up helping Mr. Hussein's military.

That's like nailing second-rate burglars for crimes of Watergate proportions. Mr. Drogoul is no innocent, but he refuses to take the rap alone. He has withdrawn his guilty plea and will stand trial -- after the election. The charge that he defrauded his employers is almost certainly incomplete.

The plea bargain was dissolved amid open quarreling between Justice and the C.I.A. over who had overlooked evidence that the bank's officials in Rome were aware of Mr. Drogoul's machinations.

Now the F.B.I., which may have handled some of the intelligence from Rome that belatedly reached prosecutors in Atlanta, is investigating the Justice Department. And Justice is looking into the expense account of the F.B.I.'s Director. Amazingly, both the C.I.A. and F.B.I. contend they are unable to retrieve pertinent data from their vaunted intelligence files.

This is not a case that the Justice Department can be perceived to investigate dispassionately on behalf of the Administration it represents. Perhaps even a special prosecutor couldn't clean up so embarrassing a mess. What's needed from the Attorney General, at a minimum, is less outrage and more results.

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