

# ONE DAMN THING AFTER ANOTHER

MEMOIRS OF AN ATTORNEY GENERAL



WILLIAM P. BARR

## Dedication

*To my wife, Christine*

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## Author's Note

For forty years, successive Attorneys General have heard the story. After President Ronald Reagan nominated him in late 1980 to serve as Attorney General of the United States, William French Smith, preparing for his new duties, talked to Ed Levi, who, four years earlier, had served as Attorney General under President Gerald Ford and, before that, had been Dean of the University of Chicago Law School, and then president of that university. With his pipe-smoking, bow ties, and intellectual demeanor, Levi seemed the quintessential academic. When Smith asked Levi to describe the job of Attorney General, he was expecting him to launch into a philosophical discourse about the Founding Fathers, the rule of law, and the principles of democracy. Levi, taking a leisurely puff on his pipe, paused a moment, and said: *“It’s just one damn thing after another.”*

Having held the post twice, I can say—and I know all my fellow former Attorneys General will agree—that description perfectly captures the essence of the job.

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## Prologue

The first day of December 2020, almost a month after the presidential election, was gray and rainy. That afternoon, the President, struggling to come to terms with the election result, had heard I was at the White House for another meeting and sent word that I was to come see him immediately. I knew what was coming. I soon found myself standing in the President's small dining room off of the Oval Office. The President was as angry as I had ever seen him.

More than two hours earlier, when I had left the Justice Department for the White House, I told my personal assistant, Theresa Watson, that there was a good chance the President would fire me. If he does, I said, he will probably direct me not to return to the office, so she might have to pack up for me. "Oh, POTUS always says that," Theresa responded, using the government acronym referring to the President of the United States. "But everyone ignores it, and if it happens, you just come back," she said. As I walked out the door, Theresa called after me, "But anyway, he's not going to fire you."

My chief of staff, Will Levi, was with me. "You know," Will said with a worried look, "he just might."

"I know," I said. "As the President likes to say, 'We'll see.'"

Over the preceding weeks, I had been increasingly concerned about claims by the President and the team of outside lawyers advising him that the election had been "stolen" through widespread voting "fraud." I had no doubt there was *some* fraud in the 2020 presidential elections. There's always *some* fraud in an election that large. There may have been more than usual in 2020. But the department had been looking into the claims of fraud made by the President's team, and we had yet to see evidence of it on the scale necessary to change the outcome of the election.

The data suggested to me that the Democrats had taken advantage of rule changes—especially extended voting periods and voting by mail—to marshal the turnout they needed in their strongholds in key states. I had been a vocal critic of these rule changes precisely because they would

increase the opportunity for fraud and thus undercut public confidence in the election results. There was also no question that, in some areas, state rules meant to guard against fraud—for example, the requirement that voters file applications for mail-in ballots—were not followed. This also increased the opportunity for fraud.

Still, the *opportunity* for fraud isn't *evidence* of fraud.

Under our system, the states have responsibility for running elections. Claims that the election rules are not being followed fall under the state's jurisdiction, and the burden is on the complaining party to raise the matter with state officials and courts to have it addressed. This often requires pressing the states to conduct in-depth audits of relevant districts needed to resolve alleged irregularities. The Justice Department does not have the authority or the tools to perform that function. Instead, its role is to investigate specific and credible allegations of voting fraud for the purpose of criminal prosecution. A complaint just saying the rules were not followed is not enough. There must be some indication of actual fraud.

When I looked at the voting patterns, it also appeared to me that President Trump had underperformed among certain Republican and independent voters in some key suburban areas in the swing states. He ran weaker in these areas than he had in 2016. It seemed this shortfall could explain the outcome. The fact that, in many key areas, Trump ran behind Republican candidates below him on the ballot suggested this conclusion and appeared inconsistent with the fraud narrative.

As I had said in my confirmation hearing two years earlier, our country is deeply divided, but our saving grace is the ability to carry out the peaceful transfer of power through elections. If the American people lose confidence in the integrity of their elections, and the legitimacy of an elected administration, we are headed toward a very dark place. That is why I was so disgusted by efforts in 2016 to delegitimize President Trump and “resist” his duly elected administration. But now the situation was completely reversed. It is one thing to say that the rules were unfairly skewed; it is another to say that the election's outcome was the result of fraud. President Trump's legal team was feeding his supporters a steady diet of sensational fraud claims, without anything resembling substantiation. But if election results are going to be set aside on the grounds of fraud, it must be based on clear evidence, and it should be fraud of such magnitude as to be material to the outcome of the election. Proving fraud after the fact is exceptionally difficult, which makes it all the more important to have safeguards in place that prevent it from happening in the first instance.

In the weeks after the election, accusations of major fraud centered on several claims: allegations that counting machines from the Dominion Voting Systems Corporation had been rigged; that video footage from Fulton County, Georgia, showed a box of bogus ballots being insinuated into the vote count while poll watchers were absent; that massive numbers of ballots for Joe Biden had been inexplicitly dumped in the early morning hours in Detroit and Milwaukee; that thousands of votes in Nevada had been cast by nonresidents; that more absentee ballots than had been requested were cast in Pennsylvania; and that a truck driver had delivered many thousands of filled-out ballots from Bethpage, Long Island, to Pennsylvania. I had asked all the Department of Justice (DOJ) office heads around the country, working with the FBI, to look into these and a number of similar claims. Some turned out to be patently frivolous; others just were not supported by the available evidence.

I had repeatedly informed the President through his staff that the department was looking at substantial claims of fraud but so far hadn't found them to have merit. For more than a week, I had been getting calls from Republican senators and members of Congress deeply concerned about the direction of things, especially the President's expanding his challenge from the courts to the state legislatures. They were concerned that, if President Trump continued claiming he won the election, without hard evidence, the country could be headed for a constitutional crisis. They wanted to know my thoughts on the fraud claims and asked if I could do something to inject more caution into the President's rhetoric about a stolen election. It was not lost on me that, with two Georgia runoff elections for senator coming up the first week in January, Republican senators still hoped for the President's help and could ill afford picking a public fight with him. On the other hand, as Attorney General, I uniquely had the ability to counteract the speculation and misinformation by arming myself with the facts from the relevant US attorneys.

On November 29 the President, appearing on Fox News Channel's *Sunday Morning Futures* program, hosted by Maria Bartiromo, had claimed the election was rigged and stolen and attacked the Department of Justice as "missing in action." Based on my previous discussions with the President and his staff, he knew that the department was playing its proper role: when we received specific, credible allegations of substantial fraud, we investigated them. But President Trump appeared to think we were missing in action unless we worked with his legal team to reverse the results of the election.

At noon on December 1 I sat down for lunch in the Attorney



General's private dining room with Mike Balsamo, the Associated Press reporter who covers the department. I was joined by Will Levi and Kerri Kupec, the head of the Office of Public Affairs. Mike asked me about the President's criticisms over the weekend. I told him that, contrary to the President's comments, we had been looking into substantial claims of fraud. "What have you been finding?" Mike asked.

My response: "To date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election."

Moments later, news was blasting out across media outlets that the Attorney General had contradicted the President by declaring that the department had yet to find evidence of widespread voter fraud sufficient to change the election's result. Will and I then left for my previously scheduled meeting in the West Wing with the President's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, and Pat Cipollone, the White House counsel.

As I had expected, once the President heard I was in Pat's office, he hailed both of us down to meet with him. While Pat headed down to the Oval, I took a few minutes to check how the media were covering my AP interview. I then proceeded to the Oval for what I knew would be an unpleasant meeting. As I walked into the outer office, the President's confidential assistant, Molly Michael, pointed to the back.

"He's all the way in the back," she said, "and he's waiting for you."

Will and I walked through the Oval and along the narrow hallway that leads to a small rectangular dining room that President Trump also used as a work area. POTUS was sitting as usual to my left at the head of the dining table. The opposing head of the table to the right was unoccupied, but looming on the wall behind it was a large-screen TV. It was tuned to the One America News (OAN) channel covering a Michigan legislative hearing on voter fraud allegations. Facing me on the far side of the table sat Meadows, Cipollone, and Deputy Counsel Pat Philbin. Standing to my right was a White House lawyer, Eric Herschmann, who had been on the first impeachment defense team before being pressed into service on the White House staff. The side of the table closest to me was empty. I walked over to the chair on my side of the table close to the President, rested my hands on the top of the backrest, and remained standing. The President, holding the remote, turned down the volume a bit but kept it audible in the background.

I looked at POTUS and greeted him. "Hello, Mr. President."

There was an awkward silence. He put down the remote control, at first not looking at me. I could tell he was enraged, struggling to keep his temper under control. He shuffled through some papers on the table,

looking for something, his breathing a little heavier than usual, his nostrils flaring slightly. Finding what he wanted, he thrust a news clipping at me. “Did you say this?” he snapped.

It was the Balsamo article. “Yes, I did, Mr. President,” I responded.

“Why would you say that?” he demanded, his voice rising.

“Because it is true, Mr. President,” I replied. “The reporter asked me what the department had found to date, and I told him.”

“But you did not have to say that!” he barked. “You could have just said, ‘No comment.’ This is killing me—killing me. This is pulling the rug out from under me.” He stopped for a moment and then said, “You must hate Trump. You would only do this if you hate Trump.”

I had no problem arguing with the President one-on-one, but I had learned that when you fight with him in front of an audience, things can get out of control very quickly. I was determined to stay calm.

“No, Mr. President, I don’t hate you,” I said. “You know I sacrificed a lot personally to come in to help you when I thought you were being wronged.” The President nodded, almost involuntarily conceding the point. “But over the weekend, you started blaming the department for the inability of your legal team to come up with evidence of fraud. The department is not an extension of your legal team. Our mission is to investigate and prosecute actual fraud. The fact is, we have looked at the major claims your people are making, and they are bullshit.” The President looked defiant. I continued, “I’ve told you that the fraud claims are not supported.” I gestured to some others in the room. “And others have also told you this. But your legal team continues to shovel this shit out to the American people. And it is wrong.”

The President motioned toward the TV. “Have you listened to any of these hearings?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t, Mr. President,” I said, “but I am familiar with the allegations.”

The President leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, rocking a little from side to side, staring at me, his face getting redder. He was seething, but appeared willing to let me continue. Normally, when Trump is being told something he doesn’t want to hear, he filibusters—he just keeps talking, so no one else can get a word in edgewise. There was nothing he wanted to hear less than what I was telling him, but he was letting me talk.

I explained quietly that it is very difficult to challenge the results of a presidential election because there is only a five- or six-week window to make a case before the Electoral College acts. The responsibility for

mounting a challenge lies with the lawyers of the campaign and each state's GOP. They have the burden of persuading the state authorities or the courts to conduct the kind of deep-dive review needed to assess the validity of the election results. The Department of Justice does not play a role in this. We don't have the legal authority or the tools to do that kind of audit-style review.

The President shook his head in disgust.

"Mr. President, when we get credible claims of fraud, we are looking into them," I said.

Pat Cipollone jumped in. "DOJ has been following up on fraud claims, Mr. President," he said supportively.

I continued, "Your legal team keeps publicly saying 'fraud,' but their arguments in courts *don't* claim fraud. They're really saying the state didn't follow the rules—like excluding Republican monitors. That might create an *opportunity* for fraud. But that is not the same as *evidence* of fraud."

"There is a mountain of evidence," Trump protested, gesturing to the hearing on TV.

"Mr. President," I said, "the reason you are in this position is that, instead of having a crackerjack legal team that had its shit together from day one, you wheeled out a clown show, and no quality lawyers who would otherwise be willing to help will get anywhere near it."

"Maybe," he said, almost pensively, "maybe." But he was not assuaged.

"Look, Mr. President, they wasted a whole month with this idiotic claim about Dominion machines," I continued. "First, there is no evidence they were compromised. Your team picked the one theory that can be easily disproven." I explained that the machines are simply tabulation machines that count the paper ballots fed into them. Because the paper ballots are retained, it is easy to verify the machine's accuracy by comparing the machine's tally with the retained stack of ballots. As far as I knew, I said, wherever this had been done, there had been no material discrepancy, and no one had yet pointed to one.

"Have you seen the thousands of Biden ballots dumped in the early morning in Detroit?" he asked. "People saw boxes of ballots being carried into the building in the early morning."

"We have looked into that also," I replied. "Detroit has over six hundred precincts, and, unlike other places, all the ballots are transported to a separate processing center for counting. It's not surprising that boxes of ballots would arrive through the night. Detroit's votes usually come in

late, and this time the vote totals were comparable to previous elections,” I assured him. “In Detroit, you actually did slightly better than in 2016, and Biden did slightly worse than Hillary Clinton.”

The President seemed a bit taken aback that I seemed to know what I was talking about. I *had* been looking into things, but he seemed just as angry as when we’d started.

“Have you bothered to ask the people who are feeding you this shit how the votes compared to the last election?” I pressed.

The President glared at me and shifted the conversation away from the election, mentioning other areas where he felt I had failed him. The big one was the failure to bring to conclusion before the 2020 election US attorney John Durham’s inquiry into the origins and conduct of the Russian collusion investigation. “I regret it’s taking so long,” I said, “but, as I have told you, a big part of that is Covid.”

“When will it be done?” he snorted.

“I am not sure, but I’m hoping it will be done in the first part of the Biden administration,” I replied.

“The first part of the Biden administration!” the President roared harshly, staring daggers at me. I could not tell if he was mad at the delay or at my explicit recognition that Joe Biden would be the president.

The President then started raking me over the coals about his longest-standing grievance against me: my August 2019 decision not to indict former FBI director James Comey for giving his lawyers memos that were later found to contain a few words of confidential information.

“I’ve explained a million times, Mr. President, everyone at the department agreed the evidence showed Comey lacked criminal intent. No one thought that prosecution could be justified.”

“You could have gotten him. I read the report. All eighty pages,” Trump shot back.

I tried to bring the conversation to conclusion. “I understand you are very frustrated with me, Mr. President, and I am willing to submit my resignation. But I have—”

*Bang.*

A loud sound, almost like a gunshot, cut me off and jolted us all.

“Accepted!” the President yelled. It took me a second to see that President Trump had slammed the table with his palm. “Accepted!” he yelled again.

*Bang.*

He hit the table once more; his face was quivering. “Leave, and don’t go back to your office. You are done right now. Go home!” he barked.

I nodded and said, "I understand, Mr. President." I gestured to Will, and we started walking out. Just recovering from the surprise themselves, Pat Cipollone and Eric Herschmann both yelled loudly at the same time, "No!"

Pat continued, "This is a big mistake, Mr. President."

As I walked with Will through the Oval toward the outer office, I heard Pat and Eric still protesting. I looked at Will, who smiled a bit sheepishly. I smiled back and gave a shrug. We had gotten only about fifty feet down the hallway leading to the stairs, when my cell phone rang.

"Don't leave!" Eric said insistently.

"I am getting the hell out," I replied before the call was dropped.

It was rainy and dark as I emerged onto "West Exec"—the drive running along the side of the West Wing. The FBI agents on my protective detail met me, and Will and I climbed into the armored black Chevy Suburban.

"Where to, boss?" the agent in charge asked.

"The department," I said, as the Suburban drifted slowly down the drive toward the exit gate.

Suddenly the thudding, heavy sound of fists pounding on the backseat windows on both sides of the vehicle made me and the FBI agents in the front seats jump. In the dark and rain, I could barely make out Pat on one side and Eric on the other. We pulled over. Will climbed back into the third-row seats, followed by Herschmann, while Pat climbed in next to me. Pat explained: "Bill, as soon as you walked out the door, the President told us not to let you leave the building. He did not mean it. He is not firing you. Come on back in."

"I hear you, Pat, but I am not going back in tonight," I said. "Talking any more about this tonight wouldn't be helpful."

"You're right," Herschmann chimed in. "But you agree there's no change in your status, right?"

"Let's let cooler heads prevail and talk more tomorrow," Cipollone advised.

"Okay," I agreed. "But I don't know where he's going with this stolen election stuff."

"So, what are you going to say about what happened tonight?" Eric asked.

"Nothing happened tonight," I said, "except I'm going home and having a stiff scotch." Pat and Eric jumped out, and we drove off.

But this was far from the end of the story.

When I am introduced as only the second person to serve as Attorney General twice—the first being John Crittenden, who served in 1841 and again from 1850 to 1853—I have quipped that I am the first person to serve twice as Attorney General in two different centuries. Though I served two vastly different presidents, George Herbert Walker Bush and Donald J. Trump, in two vastly different eras, I'd like to believe I was the same man throughout.

The journey to my first tour as Attorney General, at the age of forty-one, took many serendipitous twists and turns. How I went from being a China scholar to the government's top legal post in eighteen years still surprises me and was largely the result of chance—a sequence of coincidences. My second tour, at sixty-nine, after retiring from a successful legal career, was the result of choice—a deliberate and difficult one. I agreed to join the besieged Trump administration as it careened toward a constitutional crisis.

This is a book about the history I observed and, in some cases, had the opportunity to influence in those eras. It also is about a set of beliefs and principles that I believe are vital to the preservation of our democratic system—ideals I tried to protect and advance.

## **Part I**

### **Early Years**

## Chapter 1

### Planning Ahead

**I** grew up in the Columbia University neighborhood on the Upper West Side of New York City. My parents, Donald and Mary Barr, were on the Columbia faculty, and we lived in a stately apartment building owned by the university on Riverside Drive at 116th Street. From our living room window, we looked out directly over Riverside Park, with a panoramic view across the Hudson River to the cliffs of the New Jersey Palisades on the other side.

My father grew up on the same block. His father, Pelham Barr, had been born in London and immigrated to the United States with his mother and father at the age of fifteen. His parents were shopkeepers—Ashkenazi Jews who fled Ukraine to settle first in England and eventually in America. Pelham graduated from Columbia University in 1916 and worked as an economic consultant in New York City. In his last year at Columbia, he married a mailman’s daughter, Estelle De Young, a Barnard College graduate who went on to practice as a psychologist. Estelle’s parents were both from Dutch Jewish families. Pelham and Estelle had two children. Their daughter died of leukemia in her twenties. Donald, my father, was born in 1921 and graduated from Columbia University in 1941. Soon afterward, he was drafted into the army.

My mother was Irish Catholic. Her father, William Ahern, was born into a struggling farming family in County Cork, Ireland. His parents were native Gaelic speakers and could not read or write. He immigrated as a young man, and settled in Hartford, Connecticut, working for the Colt gun factory as a drop press operator. In 1917 he married Catherine (“Katie”) Flynn, from County Clare, the oldest of eleven children in a farming family. She had immigrated as a young woman and found work as a nurse’s aide in Hartford. William and Katie had their first child the following year, 1918: my mother, Mary Margaret Ahern. She graduated in 1939 from St. Joseph College, at that time the Catholic all-women’s college in West Hartford, and then—uncommon for a woman in those days



—went on to Yale University to receive a master of arts degree in English literature.

Like many in my generation, World War II brought my parents together. In 1942, before the Allied invasion of Italy, the army had sent my father to learn Italian at the University of Missouri, in Columbia. One day he was walking through a classroom building and spotted a beautiful young woman teaching an undergraduate class on Shakespeare. This was Mary Ahern in her first teaching job since leaving Yale. Transfixed, my father hung by the classroom door watching her teach. After class, he walked her home. He tried for months to get her to go on a date with him. She refused.

In later years, my brothers and I teasingly pressed our mother on why she put off Pop for so long. When she said she was worried “he was a New York wolf,” we all erupted in laughter—including my mother.

Pop was manifestly far from a “wolf.” Flesh-toned, horn-rim glasses; benign, boyish face; gentle temperament—he was the bookish, intellectual type. The real reason for my mother’s resistance was that, as a committed Catholic, she found it hard to imagine marrying a secular Jew raised without any religion. But my father was persistent, wrote her poetry, and impressed her with his broad erudition. She saw he had a genuine respect for Catholicism, and he pledged that, if they ended up together, he would raise their children as Catholics. She relented, and, before long, they were engaged. My father, meanwhile, had transferred to the recently established US Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). When he returned from Europe at the end of the war, he and Mary Ahern were married in New York City. They remained devoted to each other for fifty-five years, parted only by death.

For the first fifteen of those years, they struggled. Four sons arrived in close succession: Christopher in 1947, me in 1950, Hilary in 1952, and Stephen in 1953. My mother worked as an editor for a variety of women’s magazines, which allowed her often to work from home. My father taught English at Columbia while studying for his doctorate. He got his master’s degree the year I was born, but the demands of his growing family derailed his plans for a PhD. To make ends meet, he expanded his teaching assignments at Columbia and supplemented his income by teaching night courses at Pace College and City College of New York (CCNY)—teaching at all three colleges during the same school year. Our apartment was crammed with stacks of “blue books” from the three institutions. I remember my father telling me that all his income together amounted to “less than the pay of a New York City garbageman.” It wasn’t hyperbole.

We had the largest family but smallest apartment in the building. It had only two bedrooms. My older brother, Christopher, and I slept in one, and my parents briefly rented the other to a foreign grad student to generate a little extra income. They converted the dining room into their bedroom—an odd arrangement, but it worked. When Hilary and Stephen came along, the foreign student had to leave. Because the dining room was otherwise occupied, our family usually ate dinner together in the kitchen, but we also used a section of our large living room when needed for formal dining.

Our apartment had a solitary bathroom for all six of us—a fact that effectively enforced the Golden Rule. When one of us boys urgently needed access, we had to rely on the goodwill of the other to relinquish possession. Fights and ill will among brothers could not be carried too far, since each knew that, before long, he'd be shifting from foot to foot outside the bathroom door pleading with his antagonist to “please hurry!” The principle of “mutually assured destruction” moderated sibling conflict in the Barr household.

At five years old, I was a scrawny, pale child and collapsed one day on the street while walking to kindergarten. When tests showed I was anemic, I was admitted to nearby St. Luke's Hospital for evaluation. Some doctors thought the X-rays showed a growth on my heart and wanted to conduct exploratory surgery; others thought it was just a shadow. I was going into my second week of tests, when my Irish-born grandmother arrived from Hartford, as did a priest, also from Ireland, who was close to my mother's family. Quickly pooh-poohing any idea of an operation, they instead prescribed at least eight ounces of Guinness stout a day. I was discharged from the hospital, and, until I was twelve years old, I drank a glass of stout every day—much to my brothers' envy. Treatment was discontinued when it became apparent that I had become anything but scrawny.

My mother was a good match for my father intellectually, but she was more practical. When any problem emerged, her approach was to grab the bull by the horns and wrestle it to the ground as quickly as possible. She ran the household with a hawk eye and a firm hand—a necessity with four rambunctious boys. Fortunately, she had charge of the finances, and I remember her sitting at the kitchen table every evening reconciling her budget journal, keeping track of every penny that came in and went out. I still have some of those journals. They show how she juggled bills and looked for every opportunity to cut costs just to get through each month.

My mother was gregarious, with a great sense of humor and a ready

laugh. But as a child of the Great Depression, she was always anxious that the bottom was about to fall out and always thinking about how she could make provision against things going wrong. She called it her “Celtic gloom” and told me I’d inherited it. To a degree, she was right. That little voice in my head always warning me of what could go wrong and how I needed to protect against it is my mother’s voice. For a lawyer, it is a great trait, since that is what good lawyers do: anticipate what could go wrong.

The difference between my father and my mother showed itself whenever any of us would ask for help on homework—usually a math question. My mother would get right to the question at hand and explain quickly whatever we needed to know to solve the precise problem. My father would put down the book he was reading, grab a yellow pad, draw a line across the page, and say: “Now, let’s start with the number line.” An hour later, he’d be just getting into the mysteries of long division, and we’d be ready for bed. My brothers and I referred to this as getting the “number line” treatment.

My efforts to learn about the birds and the bees ran afoul of this treatment. I was about ten and had already picked up a few tantalizing shreds of information from neighborhood buddies. I was having my hair cut by my mother in the kitchen and started to pump her for more information. Things reached an impasse when I asked, “Exactly how does a man ‘fertilize’ a woman?”

“You have to ask Pop about that.”

As usual, my father pulled out a yellow pad and started drawing pictures of . . . *cells*. He started talking about protozoa. *Uh-oh*, I thought, *this is going to be a long night*. He worked his way through the division of cells and had gotten to DNA and chromosomes, when I tried to move things along.

“When are you going to get to, um, sticking it in?” I asked.

“Oh!” he said, surprised that I would want to miss hearing the good stuff about haploid gametes. At that point, he rushed through a thirty-second explanation of intercourse heavy on ten-cent words I did not understand, like *tumescence*. It was disappointing. It was back to the gutter for me, where at least I could get a straight answer.

For my parents, education was a priority, and they sacrificed happily to give us the best education they could. But for them, the primary educational arena was the home. Both my parents were natural teachers who loved explaining things and answering our questions—on history, or current events, or religion. Reading to us each evening was a routine. When we were little, my mother took the laboring oar, but as we got older,

my father would give bravura readings of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and other great novels, performing all the parts in different voices and dialects to great dramatic effect.

The main forum for education, however, was the dinner table. And the Barr family dinner table was a loud free-for-all. There was little small talk. We liked discussing the issues of the day, and, as we grew older, debate got more robust. In debates, our father's word on a topic was dispositive. As his number-line approach revealed, he loved expounding on matters, and, given his broad erudition, we considered him the font of wisdom on almost everything. While our arguments could get heated sometimes, more often our dinners were marked by hearty laughter. Everyone in the family had a good sense of humor. My father had an interesting style when he expounded on a subject. He would use an elevated, scholarly, and refined delivery, but then punctuate it with earthy and rougher language to drive home his point. The contrast was quite effective. He was far from a prig, and as we all got older, he was willing to use more off-color language, which my mother always felt obliged to respond to with mock horror.

When it came to parenting, my parents were old-school. They were not our chums—they held the offices of father and mother, and there was never doubt as to who was in charge. They believed that a child-centered home led to a self-centered child. We knew they would sacrifice unstintingly for our good, but they also understood that saying no can be as much an expression of love as saying yes. They believed that, if a child was to develop self-control, it was essential that parents set clear limits and enforce them dependably. They never made idle threats. When they mandated something under penalty of punishment, you were guaranteed to meet with the promised penalty if you defied them. Close in age, and living at close quarters, the four of us boys could be boisterous, and physical fights were not uncommon. Keeping order sometimes required a good spanking, but more often a credible threat of force was enough to bring peace. My father would calmly enter the room where offenses were under way and hang his army belt on the doorknob, look at us severely, and then walk out. We all knew what that meant.

For elementary school, we all went to the Catholic parochial school at Corpus Christi Church, the parish for the Columbia University neighborhood. Then under the pastorship of the great liberal champion Father George Barry Ford, the parish was renowned for three things: the beauty of the church, the magnificence of its liturgical music, and the excellence of its school. Over the years, I have come to realize that, apart