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# The Ultimate Trial of Edward Bennett Williams

## The Relentless Defender Wages His Fiercest Battle Outside the Courtroom

*First of two articles*

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Edward Bennett Williams is wondering aloud if the president of the United States has not cast a hex on the Baltimore Orioles. "I'm glad he came," he says, "but every time he does, we lose."

Williams, whose obsession with the Orioles has deepened with every year he has owned the team, sits in his box, working the muscles in his fleshy face, wringing the knotty tension from his huge, powerful hands. No wonder: It's Monday, opening day, bottom of the eighth, Baltimore trailing 6-4, bases loaded. Ernie Camacho is pitching for the Indians, Rick Dempsey is batting for the Orioles. Williams wants to win, his whole *body* wants to win. He stands. Sits down. Stands again. He tries to talk away the nervousness:

"Dempsey could be a hero here . . . You know, my pitchers are getting shelled all day, and all Dempsey says he wants to do is talk to the president about Libya . . . He can pull it out . . . All he's got to do is hit a blooper into the outfield . . . A little blooper, for chrissakes . . . That'll clear the bases."

Camacho wings a fast ball at around 90 mph over the outside corner. Dempsey turns and gazes at it, as if an unexpected visitor had walked through his door. Strike 1 called.

Williams shuts his eyes:

"Damn."

Strange that at 65 Williams is so caught up in the tension of games. He made his name in more severe competitions, representing some of the most infamous hooligans, pols and mountebanks of his time—Joe McCarthy, Jimmy Hoffa, Frank Costello, Sam Giancana, Robert Vesco, Adam Clayton Powell, Bobby Baker, the Birdman of Alcatraz, even a Russian spy named Igor Malekh.

He does not look like the most celebrated trial lawyer of his time in the way that, say, Robert Frost looked like the bard of New England. Williams could easily be a New York flatfoot or a retired club fighter with a decent job at a brokerage house. He is a big man with a broad belly and a shimmying jowl. When he speaks it is with precise, formal syntax but a slightly pained pitch, as if his shoes were too tight and his breakfast coffee cold.

Camacho delivers another fast ball. Dempsey swings the bat badly, as if he were wielding a small, leafy tree instead of a flame-smoothed splinter of ash. He strains and connects, but pitifully, with a ping, not a crack, and the ball begins to rise lazily, describing in the air a graceful, yet losing, parabola.

Before the ball reaches its peak, Williams reaches his; a mighty disappointment brings him to his feet. He waits out the pop-up in the vain hope that a professional shortstop will bobble the ball and lift an old man's heart. No such luck. The shortstop closes his glove and the Orioles lose their best chance of the day.

Williams used to own a piece of the Redskins, but it seems that did not provide adequate occasions for agony:

"In football you only have 16 vulnerable days for depression. In baseball, it's practically every day."

The buffed and blazered guests in the owner's box are making a show of their displeasure, wondering at great volume if a pinch hitter would have won the day and what the loss portends about the remaining 161 games on the schedule. Even before the ninth inning begins—it could only be an anticlimax—Williams is trying not to make too much out of a few hours of sport on an April afternoon.

"Life doesn't begin on opening day. Baseball does," he says. "The rest of life just goes on somehow."

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After lunch Williams folds himself into his car for the drive out to Dulles to meet his client Marvin Davis, a billionaire Denver oil magnate. Since Davis sold 20th Century-Fox to Rupert Murdoch last year, he has become "incredibly liquid," says Williams, and he needs advice in his search for investments to shelter his cash—a recent effort to buy CBS failed. When the stakes are so high, Williams and Davis do not trust the phone lines.

Sitting in the back seat of a car with Williams, one wonders about the awe he inspires in so many of his clients and colleagues. He seems to them something far more than just an outstanding trial lawyer; he is almost a mysterious force of nature. "As a young lawyer," says former colleague Pierce O'Donnell, "being in the room with Ed Williams was somewhat akin to having your breath sucked out by a tornado."

"I've always wondered," says David Webster, another former colleague, "how Ed Williams can make grown men tremble. Fear is too much of an

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imposition. It's not threat or fear or bluster or bluff. It's something engendered in *yourself.* He has special insight into your weaknesses and knows how to use them." At the firm, people try to anticipate Williams' thoughts, his moods. To make life easier, Williams' secretary used to keep a "mood meter" by the elevator. When the meter pointed to "basement," it was time to watch out.

At the moment, Williams is in good humor. The car pulls up to the private jetport at Dulles. An attendant says Davis' plane will be at least a half-hour late. Computer trouble. Williams, who owns an Israeli-made Westwind, knows about such troubles; he takes a seat in the lounge. The place is crawling with powerful acquaintances. John and Annie Glenn are on their way home to Ohio. The Glenns and Williams chat about planes. Minutes later, Mobil's public relations guru, Herb Schmertz, ambles by. The two are adversaries in the Tavoulareas-Washington Post libel case, but they, too, talk like old friends.

"Hey Eddie, you giving an interview? Maybe you want my side of the story?"

"Freedom of speech, Herbie. Go ahead."

They laugh. They shake hands. The establishment does not raise its voice in public. Williams is a long, long way from a poor childhood in Hartford, Conn., and he knows how to play the Washington game, he knows the appropriate tone at the given moment, and he has nothing but suspicion for those who do not. Williams, a member of the Metropolitan Club, a former treasurer of the Democratic National Committee, a friend or acquaintance of nearly every major figure in Washington from Reagan on down, long ago shed his outsider's pugnacity. You don't get any more *inside* than Ed Williams.

And there is an insider's decorum to observe that is no more flexible than the Ten Commandments or the "code" of Williams' old client, mobster Frank Costello. An insider does not like to be humbled or surprised. A man of fierce loyalties, Williams likes that loyalty returned. He appreciates it, for example, when Edward Kennedy thinks to tell him in advance of his announcement that he will not run for president in 1988.

Conversely, Williams did not much care for the way Jimmy Carter expressed his disdain for him and the Washington establishment. He had served on the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board under Gerald Ford; he had no idea that his post would be terminated. Carter banned the board, sending Williams and the other members photocopied letters firing them, with attached forms for unemployment compensation.

"That took some nerve," says Williams.

"If I could psychoanalyze myself, I thought I was deeply offended by Carter's contempt for this city and its people—my friends. I believe he had a deep, deep contempt for what you call the Washington establishment, the people I've grown up with as adults who have been active in Democratic politics for years and years. He shunted them aside and treated them with an arrogance that I thought was unparalleled."

A few years later Williams led the movement to "open" the 1980 Democratic convention in order to unseat Carter and promote a Henry Jackson candidacy.

Williams' loyalties to friends such as Buchwald and Post Executive Editor Benjamin C. Bradlee and the attorneys in his firm are extreme. If he sees that loyalty going unreciprocated, he can be inconsolable. He will weep. He will rant. When a colleague decided one day to go to another firm, Williams cried that night and then never spoke to that lawyer again.

Last year he sold his 14.7 percent share of the Redskins to Jack Kent Cooke for an estimated $8 million to $10 million and elected to stop doing any of Cooke's legal work. They no longer speak, friends say. But Williams will not comment. In fact, in many hours of interviews there were only two subjects he met with a "no comment": his devotion to the Catholic Church and his split with Jack Kent Cooke. "Ed and Cooke definitely don't like each other," says Larry King. "Ed doesn't like Cooke's style. He's not his kind of guy." The fact that Cooke has often talked of bringing a major league baseball team to Washington—and thereby challenging the Orioles' hold on D.C. fans—cannot have improved the situation.

Williams' imposing presence surfaced at a follow-up interview in his office. As he slowly denuded a Clark bar, he peered up from behind his immense desk and expressed "disagreement" with something done in the course of reporting. He said he thought that since he was not running for office, since he's "never been at the public trough," it was improper for the reporter to have called his doctor, Jerome DeCosse.

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At the end of a long day, Williams rides home to Potomac. His first wife Dorothy Adair died of respiratory ailments in 1959 when she was 34. A year after her death Williams married Agnes Neill, a top lawyer in his firm. He has three children from his first marriage, four from his second.

Agnes Williams has always insisted that the children not work for their father, and for the most part they have not. They are computer programmers, administrators, teachers and college students. One daughter, Dana, left her job at a newspaper in Hagerstown to help her father write an "update" of his 1962 memoir, "One Man's Freedom." Williams says that even while one of his sons, Ned, "would be great" at running the Orioles, he has not worked him into the business.

His public life in politics has mainly been a series of no-thank-yous and might-have-beens. He considered running for the U.S. Senate in Maryland but finally decided against it; he turned down Gerald Ford's invitation to run the CIA because of the havoc it would bring on the firm; he rebuffed LBJ's invitation to be the first mayor of Washington.

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