The Man Who Unquestion

By Jules Witcover
Washington Post Staff Writer

It's a good thing for convicted conspirator Bernard L. Barker that his leader in the Watergate break-in, former White House aide E. Howard Hunt, never told him to jump off the top of the Washington Monument.

Because the chances are, judging from Barker's testimony yesterday at the Senate's Watergate hearings, that he would have done it — and saluted all the way down.

As a good soldier with loyalties both to the country of his birth, Cuba, and of his parents and his citizenship, the United States, the 56-year-old Barker was then as now ready to do his duty as his old Bay of Pigs commander, Hunt, saw that duty and conveyed it to him.

When Hunt told him his duty was to burglarize the office of Pentagon papers defendant Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist because "it involved a traitor to this country who had given information to a foreign embassy . . . I proceeded on that assumption at that time," Barker told the senators.

"Senator," he told an incredulous Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee "E. Howard Hunt under the name of Eduardo (his code name in the Bay of Pigs and Ellsberg-Watergate missions) represents to the Cuban people their liberation. I cannot deny my services in the way that it was proposed to me on a matter of national security."

The same motivation, with Hunt again as the inspirational persuader, led Barker and the three Cuban-Americans he recruited to break into the Democratic National Committee and McGovern campaign headquarters.

". . . Our missions at those times were only to obtain and try to locate documents that would prove that the Democratic Party and Senator McGovern were receiving contributions nationally," he said, and national and foreign contributions from . . . leftist organizations, and inclined to violence in the United States, and also from the Castro government."

They never found any such documents, the balding, nervous Barker, who gave his current address as Cell Block 4, District of Columbia jail, acknowledged.

But it was not a mistake making the raid, he said, because "we were assisting Mr. Hunt, who was a known factor in the time of the liberation of Cuba. We had hopes that Mr. Hunt's position in the White House would be a decisive factor at a later date for obtaining help in the liberation of Cuba."

"How did you think you could liberate Cuba," Sen. Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.) inquired, eyebrow raised, "by a burglary in Washington, D.C." For a man 16 years in the Senate, and from an old Southern political family, Talmadge's question revealed a remarkable insensitivity to mutual backscratching.

The way he looked at it, Barker said, the Watergate break-in really wasn't all that different from the Bay of Pigs invasion for an undercover operative such as himself. He expected, and got, the same considerations.

"The moneys that were received for the attorneys [$17,000 for bail bond, $18,000 for lawyers' fees], for expenses and the family support was received in the same spirit and under the same conditions that would have been similar in a CIA operation," he said.

"Comparatively, it is based on the following philosophy: if you are caught by the enemy, every effort will be made to retrieve you, all expenses will be taken care of, and your family will be provided for. This was true of the Bay of Pigs invasion . . . and we expected this. We were not surprised . . . that this situation would come to pass."

Barker said he didn't know precisely who his benefactors were. Well, Talmadge asked, who did he think they were? "I was not there to think," Barker replied.

It was only right that Hunt, after a long absence, should have re-entered Barker's life on April 17, 1971, "exactly 10 years after the Bay of Pigs." Barker told the senators he found a note in his door in Miami telling him that "if you are the same Barker I once knew, contact me" at a certain Miami Beach hotel.

It turned out Hunt wanted Barker to attend a Bay of Pigs reunion—"incognito"—with him. They socialized occasionally after that, and Barker patiently and unquestioningly waited for his marching, or rather, his

breaking-and-entering orders from his old chief.

"We kept in contact after that without anything special brought up," Barker said. "I quite frankly waited until Mr. Hunt would tell me if there was anything else [but their socializing] . . . I expected him in his good time to tell me."

Sure enough, Hunt eventually recruited him for the Ellsberg break-in, asking only "would I be willing to help him in a matter of national security," Barker said. With Barker, Hunt without doubt knew the magic words.

Actually, Barker told the Senate committee, Hunt didn't tell him it was a file on Ellsberg of Pentagon papers fame until 30 minutes before the burglary in Los Angeles. But that wasn't unusual either, he said, under the modus operandi of the covert world.

"As a matter of discipline, of compartmentalization, and of habit," he explained, "we do not discuss these operations with anyone or even amongst each other. This was a rule between our team and it is the type of training we have received."

For the next operation, the Watergate, Hunt told Barker to get ready for a "double mission," he said, presumably also meaning the McGovern headquarters break-in, which never came off.

It would be inside an office building, Barker said Hunt told him. "Get your men in training going up and down stairs," his chief advised.

In the actual break-in, Barker said, he didn't favor proceeding once it was discovered that someone had removed the tape the burglary team had placed on a door to facilitate quick escape. But orders were orders, so they went ahead—and got caught.

Sen. Joseph M. Montoya (D-N.M.) had trouble following Barker's thinking that the Democratic or McGovern headquarters constituted any threat to national security. Wasn't it pure political espionage? he asked.

"At the time and place I had no reason to speculate on the matter," the witness said. "In my concept they were as paramilitary operations as any I had been in, and in a paramilitary operation you don't question the orders of your superiors."

Once the team was arrested, Barker said, he decided to plead guilty—after Hunt came to him, told him the evidence was heavily against them, and that Hunt himself was going to so plead. But it was his own decision, he insisted, not Hunt's, and he denied several senators' suggestion that he followed Hunt's lead in maintaining silence. That, after all, was no more than the code.

"You have a code of ethics in work of this kind," Chairman Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.) asked, "that you do not tell anything on anybody?" "That is correct," Barker replied.

". . . And so if Mr. E. Howard Hunt had pressured you into pleading guilty, you could not tell us that under your code of ethics?" Ervin continued.

In other words, said Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), buddies don't squeal. "I don't think that the word squeal is applicable to a paramilitary operation," Barker said. It's more a word you would apply to a "criminal" operation, he said.

"You're supposed to give name, rank and serial number," Inouye offered. "False name, that is." Barker answered: "Yes, sir, that would cover it."

As an intelligent man, Inouye asked him, surely he knew he was obstructing justice by not talking in the Watergate trial. "Pardon me if I smile, sir," Barker replied. "If I was a wise man, I probably wouldn't be sitting here."

Did he still think he had acted in the interest of national security, Sen. Lowell P. Weicker (R-Conn.) inquired. In the Ellsberg case, Barker said, he was still sure he had, but "not to the same degree" in the Watergate.

"Frankly, I'm a human being," Barker said. "I get confused. I don't know the answers . . ." And he concluded with an impassioned defense of his Cuban-American colleagues, who like himself he said were motivated by their burning desire to see a "free Cuba" again.

As he left the witness table, Bernard L. Barker—a strong man who has learned to take orders, take risks and pay the consequences—sniffed almost imperceptibly, blinked back tears glistening in his eyes, and walked out of the Senate Caucus Room.

Bernard L. Barker (right of center, in light colored clothing) testifies before the special Senate committee.