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That Watergate mystery

New York—Suddenly Bernard Barker surfaced, and that in itself is perplexing. He gave an interview to the New York Times, but disclosed very little.

He is a tough professional, with a background of intelligence work, for Cuba and for the United States (his mother was Cuban), and he stressed that he would not talk, period; that he would never talk, and that nobody would succeed in making him talk

about the supersecret mission in the Watergate Office Building in which he and three associates were engaged when early in the morning they were arrested, giving rise to a case that continues very prominent in the news because it has everything.

Extravagant suits

Barker and his associates had cash. They had the name and telephone number of E. Howard Hunt Jr., who worked in the White House. Money transfers to Barker had been made, from funds donated to the reelection campaign of President Nixon.

Maurice Stans, though chairman of the fund-raising committee, professes no knowledge of what the funds were doing in Barker's account. Former Attorney General John Mitchell says he knew absolutely nothing about it. The Democratic Party, enjoying hugely every minute of it, is making charges all over the place and has filed extravagant civil suits alleging "conspiracy to commit political espionage", whatever that means in this day and age, and it is widely speculated that Mr. Nixon's entire campaign is jeopardized by the Watergate Caper.

But why did Mr. Barker grant the interview, inasmuch as he primarily emphasized that he would not talk about the only subject he is in a position to speak about authoritatively, that would interest the New York Times or its readers?

Paramilitary work

Perhaps he did it in order to register the single point that he deeply resents being thought of as a common burglar. In fact no one has accused him of being interested in Democratic Party Headquarters on the grounds that he might have found money there.

Barker and his friends were looking for information, and certain kinds of information are for all intents and purposes legal tender. Barker said that he was used to "paramilitary" work, by which he gave us to understand that he was engaged in a job touching on the national security. I would guess that that is true.

The mysterious Howard Hunt, who disappeared from sight after the arrests, continues to figure in the case. Barker said that he knows no man to whom his country should be more grateful than Howard Hunt. I concur. I have known the gentleman for 21 years and am the godfather of three of his children. Hunt is not a trifler — yet his

involvement in the venture, if it went beyond mere coincidence, tends to magnify rather than diminish the significance of the case.

Writer's version

Only James Jackson Kilpatrick has publicized a version of what happened that is in any way both coherent and, though melodramatic, not implausible. He sets forth the hypothesis of a friend knowledgeable in the ways of the intelligence community and conversant with contemporary Cuba.

According to this hypothesis, the Castro government, foreseeing its economic excommunication from the Soviet Union, decided late this Spring to make a deal with McGovern's Democratic Party. A very straightforward deal based on the tactical need of the McGovern people for money with which to wage the presidential campaign, and the strategic need of Cuba for more and economic help in the years to come.

Someone inside the Castro government — so the story goes — tipped off a prominent Republican to the fact that the deal would be secretly consummated at the Watergate perhaps on the very day of June 17. The recipient of this information requisitioned a suitcase full of money with which to pay professionals to bug the Democratic Headquarters. But in turn the Republicans were betrayed, whether by someone in their own ranks or by a double agent we leave it to John Le Carre to divulge.

So? The mystery will probably continue. The indictments are imminent. But they may amount to nothing more than breaking-and-entering charges, which would be the equivalent of indicting Alger Hiss for lying about his associations with prothonotary warblers.