

The Boss at Watergate

WASHINGTON — There are two great mysteries about the Watergate Hotel break-in and bugging operation, aside from the who-done-what aspect.

First, why would anyone think there was anything worth bugging in the Democratic National Committee headquarters, which seems mainly to have generated the infallible formulas for improbable blunders? Second, what kind of mind is it that would not only risk the caper but enjoy it and even glory in it?

WE MAY NEVER get the answer to the first. But now that the seven indictments are in — including that of Bernard Barker, who depicts himself as the chief of underground operations — we may get some light on the second. On every continent there are men like Barker, devoting their lives to an underground “intelligence” role, restless without it, even boasting about it when caught.

I base myself mainly on his own words in a remarkable New York Times interview in which Barker (helped out by his lawyer) half-reveals, half-conceals his role, and makes a bid for us to understand his motives in whatever he did, and the kind of mind he represents.

What kind of mind is it?

“I have always dealt,” Barker says, “with the paramilitary, the intelligence movement, the people who live by their word.”

That’s a curious description of a life of stealth and cunning as well as danger, but I am willing to take him at his own word and call it the paramilitary mind.

Summing up Barker’s self-portrait in the interview, one comes up with four elements that seem to compose this paramilitary mind.

First, to live underground, court danger and keep coming back to it. Barker recalled his ordeal during World War II, with his Nazi interrogators who threatened him with death and later in the anti-Castro un-

derground in Cuba.

Second, to serve when needed, and be a good soldier. It seemed a kind of “ours-not-to-reason-why” mystique. Barker testily rejected the notion that he was some kind of burglar. “I think more as a cop.” He meant, I suppose, that he was using surveillance to guard America and save it from dangerous ideas or men.

Third, to face the consequences of your acts, not to squeal on others when caught, to take whatever happens with a stoic resignation. (“I won’t cry in my beer, and that will be the end of it.”)

Fourth, the sturdy independence of individual effort. Barker seemed to entangle this with the current controversy about the work ethic. “Nobody owes nobody nothing,” he said in a parade of absolute negatives. “You go out and you work for it.”

There are doubtless some who will find these elements of the Barker syndrome — or the Barker mystique, if you will — almost attractive. Our lives get humdrum, and if we can’t walk the danger line ourselves, we read suspense books about those who do.

I keep marveling at how possible it is for a man to narrow his own inner universe so that everything is turned upside down, and stealth becomes courage, and a break-in becomes protection of the law, and illegal surveillance becomes a form of patriotism.

ONE GATHERS here in Washington that the Watergate episode may have started with the crazy belief that the Democrats are somehow in league with the Castro regime, and then broadened out. Outrageous? Yes, but this is what happens with the paramilitary mind, which may start with surveillance of the enemy outside but then shifts to hunting down the “enemy within.” Carry it a step farther, and the good soldier becomes the good trooper, and may even end up as the storm trooper.