

United asks NTSB probe of Skolnick's crash charges

By Hugh Hough

United Air Lines pleaded Thursday with the National Transportation Safety Board to get Sherman Skolnick off its corporate back.

Specifically, United asked the NTSB to give Skolnick a hearing in his bizarre theory of the cause of the crash of a United jetliner last Dec. 8 near Midway Airport.

Skolnick contends the Central Intelligence Agency sabotaged the plane as part of the Watergate cover-up and that "at least 12 people connected with the Watergate affair" died in the crash.

Further, in his recorded "Hotline" dial-a-message, Skolnick on Thursday was saying, "United Air Lines condoned sabotage and, yes, even robbery and murder in the Watergate plane crash near Midway."

It was against this background that a United senior vice president, E. O. Fennell, dashed off a letter to the federal panel investigating the crash. The letter said, in part:

"Based upon United's knowledge gained during the investigation, there is absolutely no factual basis for the statements made by Mr. Skolnick with respect to accident causation, and no attempt has been made by Mr. Skolnick to support his position other than with rhetoric.

"In view of the fact that the board has not yet issued its formal accident report, and since the determination of probable cause is solely within the jurisdiction of the board, United is reluctant to respond to Mr. Skolnick's allegations with respect to matters still under investigation.

"Therefore, United requests that the board grant Mr. Skolnick the opportunity to present to it any evidence which might be of aid in deter-

mining the cause of this accident, or, in the alternative, require Mr. Skolnick to present such evidence."

In suggesting that a put-up-or-shut-up invitation be issued to Skolnick, the United vice president told the NTSB that Skolnick had injected a "disturbing element" into the investigative process by achieving "wide dissemination of his sensationalized version" of the crash.

Skolnick, a self-styled legal researcher, sought to appear at the NTSB's public hearings into the crash in late February and early March but was not allowed to testify. He could not be reached for comment on United's letter.

In pressing his sabotage theory, Skolnick has pointed out that one of the plane crash victims was the wife of E. Howard Hunt, former White House aide and convicted Watergate burglar.

Later, an NTSB spokesman in Washington said board members would be willing to talk with Skolnick once they receive Fennell's letter.