

Man Behind Crash Rumors

Chicagoan Says Mrs. Hunt's Plane Was Sabotaged

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Second of two articles

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CHICAGO—Behind the rumors of foul play in the crash last December of a United Airlines jet carrying Mrs. E. Howard Hunt Jr. is Sherman H. Skolnick.

Skolnick, a 42-year-old crusader against corruption, charges outright that the plane was sabotaged, and he claims he has evidence to support his charge.

Skolnick's credentials for making such claims are impressive. He is generally credited with forcing the resignation of two Illinois Supreme Court judges, requiring Chicago to alter its voting districts for aldermen, and playing a role in the conviction of former Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner.

Despite the national attention Skolnick has gained from these successes, the prevalent attitude among lawyers, reporters and prosecutors who deal with him in this city is that he is wrong more often than he is right. They say that in a city teeming with corruption (several dozen city officials have been convicted in recent months), Skolnick's scattergun charges are bound to hit the bull's eye occasionally.

"He has some idea of where to look for stuff, but the problem is he'll seize on any fact and somehow manage to make it into some vast conspiracy—often out of thin air," says Ron Dorfman, editor of Chicago Journalism Review.

Harold Weisberg, author



SHERMAN H. SKOLNICK
... foe of corruption

of several books questioning the official versions of the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, says of Skolnick:

"He did one good thing (the Illinois judges' resignations), and now he goes around embellishing on the grain of truth. The media are afraid of him because he threatens to sue—and does—and he accuses them of suppressing information."

Skolnick operates out of his cluttered two-family home in a residential section of this city. With the help of several volunteer assistants, he runs the Committee to Clean up the Courts and broadcasts his findings through recorded telephone messages, radio

talk shows, and lecture tours.

Skolnick's legs were paralyzed by polio when he was six, and he has lived most of his life with his parents. A high school graduate, he files lawsuits by himself and is described by the local press variously as a legal researcher or court critic.

Skolnick's activities are often a source of amusement in Chicago, as when he recently disappeared for three days after telling an associate that he should call the police if he didn't return by 9 p.m.

A police search was launched, but Skolnick later showed up at a Windsor, Ontario, motel, complete with luggage and the aide who acts as his chauffeur. His story was that he had fled the country because he was going to be arrested or put in a mental hospital for possessing documents purportedly incriminating former Atty. Gen. John N. Mitchell.

This did not impress Windsor Police Chief Gordon Preston, who commented, "Here is a man who says he fled quickly and that people are after him, and then shows up with quite a bit of luggage and calls in the press to tell everyone his whereabouts." The motel owner complained that Skolnick had turned his inn into a "circus."

Chicago's U.S. Attorney, James R. Thompson, got into the act by offering Skolnick "amnesty" if he would return home. Nonplussed, Skolnick claimed

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the offer was probably a trick.

Skolnick contends that on the way back, a U.S. Customs officer confiscated his secret documents. But the Chicago U.S. attorney's office reports receiving a call from a perplexed customs officer. It seems a Chicago man had pressed some documents into his hands while crossing the border, and the agent wanted to know what he should do with them.

Skolnick's version of the United Airlines crash last Dec. 8 differs markedly from the picture that emerges from evidence gath-

ered from the crash by the National Transportation Safety Board, the government agency that has spent the last six months investigating the tragedy.

Although the safety board hasn't yet issued its final ruling, its investigators say that all evidence gathered to date indicates that the crash was caused by a series of pilot errors and violations of established procedures.

Skolnick asserts the safety board is part of the plot to kill Mrs. Hunt, the wife of the former Central Intelligence Agency operative, White House consultant, and convicted Watergate conspirator. Skolnick

says the press has participated in the cover-up because United Airlines advertises in newspapers.

The Washington Post has tried to suppress the true story, Skolnick says, because a reporter for The Post is the daughter-in-law of Edward E. Carlson, president of United's parent, UAL Inc.

It turns out that the daughter-in-law, Margaret B. Carlson, has never been a Post employee but has contributed free-lance articles to the paper's Sunday magazine, Potomac. The latest piece was an expose of auto repair frauds.

Undaunted by this information, Skolnick says: "We don't know all the tie-ins."

Despite the implausibility of his charges, Skolnick's version of the crash has gained widespread exposure in underground newspapers, radio talk shows, and some magazines.

The details vary, and during a recent five-hour visit with Skolnick at his home and at a restaurant that serves as a second base of operations, many of Skolnick's claims changed from hour to hour.

Essentially, Skolnick's version is that the crash of what he calls "The Watergate Plane" was part of a larger plot against the plane and its occupants.

The pilot was carried out by three different "factions," ranging from the Mafia to a Washington lawyer, none of whom knew of the existence of the other.

One faction succeeded in getting 12 persons with

some connection to the Watergate scandal to take this particular plane. It also poisoned all 12 passengers, plus the captain, with cyanide.

Another faction, Skolnick says, crashed the plane by putting pinholes in its altimeter, so that the pilot did not know his correct altitude. Finally, a third faction parachuted from the plane some \$2 million in stolen securities that Skolnick says Mrs. Hunt had in her possession.

Asked for the evidence behind these charges, Skolnick says ominously that minutes before the crash, more than 100 unmarked cars with plainclothesmen were at the scene, waiting for the plane to come down.

How does he know this? Skolnick first dodges, but when pressed, he says the information comes from a United Press International reporter in Chicago, Gene Bludeau.

Bludeau says he did not arrive at the disaster scene until 40 minutes after the crash. A month later, Bludeau says, Skolnick asked him if he had seen plainclothesmen at the scene. Bludeau said yes.

"If there weren't plainclothesmen there from the FBI and police, that would be suspicious," he points out.

Asked for the evidence that a parachute emerged from the plane, Skolnick again hedges, saying his sources in the Federal Aviation Administration told him. When pressed further, Skolnick says he has an

eyewitness who saw the parachute descend.

Who is the witness? Skolnick says it is his associate, Alex J. Bottos Jr. Bottos is currently under indictment for allegedly impersonating an FBI agent. He was previously convicted of impersonating a police officer.

Skolnick dismisses the indictment as being part of a government plot to cover up the sabotage of the plane.

But although Bottos was supposed to be the witness, Bottos says the eyewitness was a Gary, Ind., tavern keeper.

The tavern keeper, Joseph A. Zale, is also under indictment for possession of securities stolen from a different plane last summer. When asked about the Chicago plane crash, Zale said he never saw the plane or any parachutes.

Pilots say that when an exit to a plane is opened in flight, there is a decompression in the cabin that produces a tremendous swoosh of air. They say this would be noticed by passengers and would also show up in the recording of cockpit conversations. None of the survivors of the crash reported hearing or seeing anything unusual until the plane had almost crashed.

As for Skolnick's claim that the captain's altimeter had been tampered with, William L. Lamb, the chief investigator of the crash for the safety board, says the captain's altimeter was relatively undamaged in the crash and was found to be working perfectly.

The copilot's altimeter

was too badly damaged to be tested fully for defects, he said.

Skolnick's evidence that passengers and crew had been poisoned is based on the finding by the Chicago coroner's office that the bodies of many of the victims had high cyanide levels, while others did not.

Medical examiners such as Dr. James L. Luke in Washington, Dr. Milton Helpern in New York City, and Dr. James Q. Sturner in Dallas, as well as toxicologists who have worked on plane crashes, say cyanide is commonly found in such circumstances.

The reason, they say, is that burning plastic in planes produces toxic fumes containing cyanide. "The only time we don't find cyanide is if the passengers die on impact and don't have time to inhale," says Dr. Paul W. Smith, chief of the Aviation Toxicology Laboratory of the Civil Aeromedical Institute in Oklahoma City.

Skolnick appears unfazed by such authoritative statements. "The level (of cyanide) was far higher than the level needed to kill a man. What more do you want?" he says.

He pulls out a typewritten report by the safety board on the results of the autopsies. "See that?" he says, dropping the sheafs of papers like a man resting his case.

What he is pointing out is quite clear. The first half of the report is typed with one typewriter, the second half with another.