

Don't read this unless you're

by Paul Hoffman

CHICAGO—"Watergate stands for violence and murder, not merely wiretapping and break-in."

Sherman Skolnick was not talking about Congressman Mills's suicide or Gordon Liddy's behind-bars fisticuffs—he was talking about mass murder. After five months of talking into a void, he's finally forced the government to re-open its investigation into the crash of United Air Lines flight 553 last December 8.

The Boeing 737, en route from Washington National Airport, was coming in for a landing at Chicago's Midway Airport. A private plane failed to clear the runway in time and the tower waved the United flight off to make a second approach—a routine procedure. The plane never made it. It struck a high-tension line and plowed into a row of houses about a mile from the airport. Forty-five persons were killed—43 on the plane, two on the ground. Fifteen aboard survived.

Among those killed were Dorothy Hunt, wife of since-convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt, who was found to be carrying \$10,000 in \$100 bills for a purpose still unknown; CBS News correspondent Michelle Clark; and Congressman George W. Collings, a black Democrat from Chicago's West Side.

Skolnick's thesis is simple: "I accuse the highest level of this government, including the President, of murder and sabotage in respect to the killing of Mrs. E. Howard Hunt and others . . . on flight 553 and the robbery and destruction of that plane."

So far, it's a charge given credence only by the most wild-eyed conspiratorial theorists and has been aired only in underground newspapers like the *Boston Phoenix* and *Los Angeles Free Press*. While agreeing to re-open its investigation and hear Skolnick's evidence, the government still has not conceded a trace of truth to his charges. An official of the National Transportation Safety Board, the agency charged with investigating air crashes, said flatly, "We find no evidence of sabotage."

paranoid

Did the White House order the murder of Mrs. Hunt?

But others have learned the hard way not to dismiss Skolnick's charges so cavalierly. He is the gadfly of the Illinois judiciary, the founder, chairman, and driving force of the Committee to Clean Up the Courts, an outfit of maverick muckrakers engaging in what Skolnick calls "guerrilla law." He has a staff of about three dozen unpaid investigators and an army of informants, many of them in government service.

He also has an impressive array of judicial scalps dangling from his belt—metaphorically speaking, to be sure, but Skolnick does have the judge's gavels in his briefcase. The Illinois Chief Justice and an associate justice of the state's Supreme Court resigned after Skolnick lodged conflict-of-interest charges against them. He first brought the charges that led to the indictment and conviction of Federal Court of Appeals Judge Otto Kerner, the former Illinois Governor.

Even more remarkable than the record is the man himself. Now 42, Skolnick is a college dropout who studied law on his own and, though he never got a diploma or took the bar examination, represents himself in court. On top of that, he's a polio victim, crippled since childhood, and makes his courtroom appearances in a wheelchair.

On the assumption that there might be something to Skolnick's charges about the Midway crash, I sought him out five days before the Safety Board made its announcement.

Skolnick lives in half of a duplex house at 9800 Oglesby Avenue on Chicago's far South Side, not far from the Indiana border. A decade ago, the area was known as "Pill Hill" because of its concentration of Jewish doctors. Now it's home for a substantial portion of the city's black middle class, a neighborhood of brick homes, tree-shaded streets, and well-kept lawns. Skolnick's retired parents still own the house and he has the use of it not only for his residence, but as a rent-free office for the Committee.

Skolnick himself answered the bell, hobbling to the door on metal crutches. He has a barrel chest, but his legs are withered and en-

cased in braces. He stands only slightly over five feet. As the result of recent plastic and dental surgery, he's far better looking than the pictures I'd seen of him a few years back.

He led us—photographer Howard Le Vant and myself—into a living room cluttered with books and papers. On one wall was pasted a front page of the *Chicago Daily News* with the banner headline, "Kerner Convicted." On another was a portrait of his current target—Luther M. Swygert, Chief Judge of the Federal Court of Appeals in Chicago.

For nearly four hours, Skolnick recited his account of the Midway crash. Because of the libel laws, much of what he said cannot be repeated here; because of them, in some instances I have quoted not from his remarks to me, but from statements he made in documents in the public domain.

As befits those who deal in conspiracy theories, Skolnick is a cautious, fearful man. He refused to reveal sources for many of his assertions. In some instances, he declined to disclose the evidence itself. And some of his statements, it seems, were plucked from thin air. What would be coincidence to some is conspiracy to Skolnick.

Skolnick said he first became interested in the crash through one of his investigators, Alex J. Bottos, who had managed to infiltrate a sophisticated air-robbery gang led by one Joseph Sarelli and made up of former airline technicians. Bottos posed as the gang's contact with the fences.

As a result of Bottos's evidence, Sarelli and three other members of the gang were arrested by the FBI on January 13 for stealing \$2.2 million in negotiable securities from a Brink's shipment aboard a Chicago-to-Milwaukee flight. The thieves got to the bag by removing a panel between the lavatory and the baggage compartment during the 20-minute hop.

By that time, however, Bottos was already involved in the Midway crash. "Within 48 hours after the plane crash," Skolnick said, "the Sarelli mob (gave) Bottos . . . some of the items from the crash to fence . . . for \$5 million."

These items included samples of currency, American Express checks, and postal money orders, plus a set of papers that Skolnick calls "the Mitchell-Watergate documents."

The cash, checks, and money orders, Skolnick said, were part of a cache of more than \$2 million that Mrs. Hunt was carrying—not just the \$10,000 reported found in the crash. According to him, some \$40,000 was cash, in "Barker bills," traceable through their consecutive serial numbers to the Florida bank account of since-convicted Watergate conspirator Bernard Barker; the rest was in traveler's checks and money orders. Without citing any source, Skolnick asserted that Mrs. Hunt had "ripped off" the more than \$2 million from CREEP, the Committee to Re-elect the President.

The documents supposedly were carried by two Omaha attorneys who were killed in the crash—Ralph Blodgett and Jim W. Krueger, both in the legal office of the Northern Natural Gas Company. The company and two of its subsidiaries were indicted for paying \$14,500 in bribes to

John Nicosia, the mayor of East Chicago, Indiana, for permission to construct a pipeline through the community. The charges against the corporations were later dropped, although the prosecution of Mayor Nicosia is continuing in the Hammond, Indiana, federal court.

According to Skolnick, the papers carried by Blodgett and Krueger were stock-transfer lists showing that John Mitchell, the former Attorney General and former CREEP chairman, had acquired a "substantial ownership" in the El Paso Natural Gas Company, a major rival of Northern. The ownership purportedly was in the name of a nominee, whom Skolnick would identify only as a partner in Mitchell's Wall Street law firm, Mudge, Rose, Guthrie, and Alexander.

It is a matter of record that in 1969 anti-trust charges were pending against El Paso in connection with construction of a pipeline to the Pacific Northwest. Because his firm had represented El Paso, Mitchell disqualified himself from ruling on the case. Then Deputy Attorney General Richard Kleindienst decided to drop the action against El Paso—the point at which Mitchell allegedly acquired his interest—but it was subsequently reinstated by the Supreme Court.

Skolnick claimed Blodgett and Krueger were using the documents to "blackmail" Mitchell and the Justice Department to drop the charges against Northern and its subsidiaries. A similar accusation was made in court by Mayor Nicosia's attorney, William Barnett, who added that the Omaha lawyers had met in Washington with

Mitchell in the hours immediately before the ill-fated flight 553.

Again without citing a source, Skolnick said Blodgett and Krueger "were warned by an anonymous call that they would never get to Chicago with (the) documents." He also asserted that Krueger's briefcase was not found in the crash wreckage.

"Several weeks after the crash," Skolnick continued, "when I made a public statement describing some of the documents that disappeared from the crash, a federal employe known to me from another matter came to my home some 24 hours after my statement and in a very sophisticated discussion offered me for my organization a \$100,000 donation. . . . I

as the chairman of the group, refused such an out-and-out bribe."

(Skolnick said that he and the committee subsist on the lecture fees he receives and through mail-order sales of two books which he claims the government will not permit commercial importers to bring into the U. S.—"Who's Who in CIA" by Julius Moder, published in East Berlin (\$5); and "Farewell America" by James Hepburn, published in Luxembourg (\$10), a CIA-conspiracy thesis of the John F. Kennedy assassination.

(Needless to say, Skolnick is an ardent advocate of conspiracy theories in JFK's death. He has charged the FBI, the Secret Service, and local officials with a "second" conspiracy to kill Kennedy on an aborted trip to Chicago in early November, 1963. He has filed a suit, so far unsuccessful, to force the National Archives to release the documen-

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tation which he says "proves" his thesis.)

The documents carried by Blodgett and Krueger are still in Skolnick's possession, but he would not say where. Presumably, they are in safe-keeping out of the country.

On March 26, Skolnick continued, he was warned by two FBI agents of dire consequences if he did not return the documents. Fearing for his life and liberty and the safety of the documents, Skolnick, assisted by an associate, evaded the FBI "by going through unmarked dirt roads up and down the countryside" until they ended up in Windsor, Ontario.

Five days later, when he re-entered the U. S. with the documents safely disposed of, the customs agent in Detroit routinely asked Skolnick if he was carrying any contraband. The customs receipt shows that Skolnick surrendered "1-undeveloped 35mm Tri-X film in canister allegeded (sic) to contain John Mitchell-Watergate documents alleged to be stolen from UAL flt. 553 of 12-8-72."

Five days after that, James

Thompson, the United States Attorney in Chicago, informed Skolnick that he would return the developed film to him. Skolnick insisted that it be done in a public place. The outer lobby of Thompson's office in Chicago's Federal Building was chosen—with the press in attendance. Skolnick said that Thompson attempted to return prints of 10 pages, not the 29 he had photographed, and that the 10 pages were not even from the documents he had photographed. He declined to accept them.

* * *

All of this, even if verified to the most minute detail, would not constitute evidence of sabotage. Skolnick agrees—but he said the trail that started with Alex Bottos led him to investigate the circumstances surrounding the crash itself.

"When we began looking into this," he said, "we were hoping that it would be only an accident. We were in fact terrified to find as each day went by that there was more and more information compiled by us which led us to the conclusion that the highest level of the government was involved with murder, robbery, and sabo-

tage in respect to flight 553."

First, Skolnick said, "we developed contacts in the FAA who told us that the altimeters on the plane . . . were malfunctioning, that they had among other things pinholes in the bellows." That might explain why the plane was some 200 feet below course before it crashed.

Skolnick also claimed that one of the plane's flight recorders stopped working some 14 to 20 minutes before the crash, while the other flight recorder "disappeared" from the wreckage, only to be "found" later. "The FAA," Skolnick said, "claims they were able to, what they call, 'reconstruct' the tape from this other recorder that disappeared. The circumstances are very suspicious."

The most ominous indication of sabotage is the medical evidence. Cyanide was found in the bodies of seven of the 43 persons who died on the plane. Skolnick identified five of them as Mrs. Hunt, Miss Clark, Blodgett and Krueger and the pilot, Captain Wendell Whitehouse. ("What a name," Skolnick said, "what a prophetic name!") Since the coroner's report listed the autopsy findings by seat number, not name, it was possible to verify Skolnick's as-

sertions only as to the pilot.

Skolnick provided me with a copy of a still-secret National Transportation Safety Board document on the crash: "Human Factors Group Chairman's Factual Report" by C. Hayden Le Roy—less obtusely, the report of the chairman of the investigative team studying the human, as opposed to the mechanical, factors in the crash.

Attached to the report are the findings of the Cook County Coroner's Office. It shows that the pilot's death was caused by: "some inhalation with carbon monoxide asphyxia and blood cyanide accumulation. . . ." The cyanide content was .211 milligrams per milliliter.

The government has argued that the presence of cyanide was caused by a plastic in the seat covers which, when burned, gives off cyanide gas. But that does not explain why only six of the 40 crash victims in the cabin (and presumably none of the 15 survivors) inhaled the lethal gas and why, of the three persons in the cockpit, only Captain Whitehouse suffered the effects of cyanide poisoning. Also, the fire occurred *after* the crash and, according to the Coroner's Office, Captain Whitehouse was dead *before* the plane hit the ground. One theory is that he fell dead on the control, causing the plane to plunge to the ground.

"We took it up with what we felt was an impartial toxicologist," Skolnick said of the coroner's report. "The toxicologist we consulted about this looked at the figure shown for the cyanide level in Captain Whitehouse's body and said, 'My god, that's nine whiffs too many!'"

"I said, 'What do you mean by that?'"

"He said, 'Well, one whiff of cyanide, if it were a gas, would have been enough to kill him. He's got whiffs that must have come by another means.'"

"I said, 'What do you mean by that?'"

"He said, 'He must have gotten it by injection or ingestion, which means foul play.'"

The cyanide is fact. The who, how, and why is conjecture. Skolnick believes he has identified the man who he says poisoned the six passengers in the cabin—an agent with Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (DALE), but "one of the oddest narcotics agents we ever ran into, because he holds a position in the government so high that he is answerable to the Presi-

dent." According to Skolnick, the agent, who survived the crash, rode in the jump-seat next to the galley, a seat not normally used by passengers.

"Of course," Skolnick said, "it is unlikely that Mr. ——— super-

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vised the poisoning of the pilot by way of the pilot's coffee, because that would have been suicide for Mr. ———. But we do believe that he supervised some chemical, presumably cyanide, put in the snacks or other beverages of the six Watergate people who died with a cyanide level in their body."

(The two others, Skolnick said, were gas industry lobbyists. "We know who they are and we are currently working on their particulars.")

Expanding on this theory, Skolnick argued that the DALE agent may have been part of a "double cutout"—assigned to carry out part of an operation while others, unbeknownst to him, were assigned to eliminate him. Under this theory, the DALE agent poisoned the six passengers and abstracted Mrs. Hunt's money and the Omaha attorney's documents and parachuted them to accomplices outside (a formidable task, to be sure). Skolnick claims to have a witness who saw a parachute drop from the plane. Then, another operative poisoned the pilot and caused the crash in order to cover the traces of the first crime.

Skolnick could not say who poisoned the pilot or how it was done. Nor could he explain why the second operative, knowing it would be suicide, poisoned the pilot.

Skolnick said he "confronted Mr. ——— (the DALE agent) a week after the crash and told him that we believed the crash was sabotage. He became so distraught that he suddenly blurted out . . . 'That wasn't supposed to—' And he did not finish the sentence."

According to Skolnick "somewhere upwards of 200 people in about 100 unmarked cars took over the crash zone almost simultaneously with the crash. . . . Some police complained to us that these mysterious people, not curiosity seekers, were there almost before the police arrived. . . . The police are only half-a-minute or a minute away, and yet these mys-

terious people in the unmarked cars had taken over the inner circle around the crash almost simultaneous with the crash. They were there at the morgue before the police got there. . . .”

Skolnick believes the men were federal agents who had been waiting at Midway Airport to arrest Mrs. Hunt.

The National Transportation Safety Board opened its public hearing on the crash on February 27.

“Each day I and Alex Bottos sat and listened to the proceedings,” Skolnick said. “It was the first time Bottos was seen publicly with me. The government up to that point did not know he was one of our people.”

Skolnick asked that he be allowed to present evidence at the hearings, but the chairman, Isabel Burgess, refused permis-

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“Two or more of the Watergate defendants are double-agents who wanted to be caught so their plan to destroy the Presidency could go forward.”

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sion. On March 2, Skolnick filed suit against her.

"One business day later—March 2 was a Friday—Monday, March 5, federal marshals took Alex Bottos into custody without any written charge," Skolnick said. "It was a frame-up. They kept him for 40 days in custody in the so-called Federal Prison Hospital in Springfield, Missouri, supposedly for mental observation."

Actually, Bottos had been arrested by a Gary, Indiana, policeman on a charge of impersonating an FBI agent and turned over to the federal authorities. He was released on April 20 with a clean bill of mental health, but the criminal charge is still pending.

The charge was denounced by Elmer Jacobsen, executive director of the Northwest Indiana Crime Commission, as "not only frivolous, but distorted and illegal." Jacobsen claimed Bottos was arrested because he was working with the Commission on



—Howard Le Vant

SHERMAN SKOLNICK

an investigation of corruption in Indiana's notorious Lake County. To Skolnick, however, Bottos's arrest was part of the Watergate "cover-up."

Other aspects of the crash cover-up, according to Skolnick, came in the appointment December 9—the day after the crash—of since-departed White House aide Egil Krogh, Jr., as undersecretary in the Department of Transportation, which had charge

of the National Transportation Safety Board's investigation. Krogh was forced to resign when he was implicated in the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office.

And in the departure of White House aide Dwight Chapin to become United's marketing director. Among Chapin's chores, Skolnick charged, was "exerting muscle . . . to see to it that the establishment press print not one single word other than that the Midway crash was an accident."

* * *

There are some gaping holes in Skolnick's story, but rather than plug them, he went on to erect on this fragile foundation a castle in the air.

"The Watergate affair in its true sense involves murder and sabotage. Just before the Watergate break-in was the attempt to assassinate George Wallace. The press suppressed details about what is really involved there. . . . Then, of course, December 8, 1972, the plane crashed.

"One of the Watergate defendants, James McCord, in a memo filed with the Ervin Committee . . . says that matters came to a head early in December and that Nixon was becoming ruthless. He said that both Mr. and Mrs. Hunt were letting it be known that they had information that would cause the impeachment of Nixon.

"Here is a quotation from James McCord's memo with the Ervin Committee: 'Hunt purportedly threatened to blow the White House out of the water. Mrs. Hunt, at that point in her conversation with me, also repeated the statement which she too had made before, which was that E. Howard Hunt had information which could impeach the President.' . . .

"The highest levels of the government, including the President, had the strongest motive to murder Mrs. Hunt and to silence those who were working to bring her story out, such as Michelle Clark.

"McCord's attorney is Bernard Fensterwalk, whom I've known for three years. A friend of Fensterwalk, also known to me, invited me to come to Washington, where I came April 16, 1973, and I met for an hour and a half with Fensterwalk. . . .

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repression"—Ellsberg's leaking the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times, then the burglary of Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office so Ellsberg would go free; the dismissal of Nixon's Marine guard on marijuana charges to make it easier to seize power; even the current gasoline shortage, brought about deliberately so the populace will be immobilized when the coup comes . . . But by this point I'd stopped taking notes.

* * *

Like an antique Victrola, Skolnick finally ran down. Fearful of starting him up again, I didn't press questions. Instead, I asked if I could get copies of some of the documents he had told me about. He disappeared into the basement to Xerox them.

The doorbell rang. "That's Alex," Skolnick called out. "Let him in."

Even more cautious than his boss, Bottos had slipped around to the rear door to avoid detection by the authorities. I opened the door to admit him and a pert blonde, about 20, in a flaming red minidress, whom he introduced

as "my little girl Sheila." She plainly wasn't his daughter.

While Sheila sat on the couch and paged through a comic book, Bottos and I chatted. He's a tall, thin, dark man in his 40s with a pitted face and thinning hair. He chewed constantly on the plastic mouthpiece of an expired Tigarillo. Although he claimed to be a management consultant and an executive recruiter, he was obviously a blue-collar type. It was easier to conceive of him as the fence for a robbery gang.

"It's a nightmare down there," Bottos said of the Springfield prison hospital. He said some prisoners were subjected to narcoanalysis to extract information from them.

I asked if it had been used on him.

"They were going to," he said, "until I dumped some legal documents on the chief psychiatrist . . . and dumped some names on them, so they gave me the run of the place."

Skolnick returned with the documents he had gone to fetch. The photographer and I departed. Like Skolnick with Fensterwald, we had mixed feelings about what we'd heard. The man may be monomaniacal and his theories fanciful, but there is that one bedrock of hard fact—the coroner's report. Until that is adequately explained, there will be those who give credence to Skolnick's contention that Watergate really is a synonym for murder and violence.

"What I found out was that there's a faction in the government which wants Nixon pushed to the wall, not merely because he's corrupt, but in order to destroy the Presidency. So I am left with the mixed feeling that, on the one hand, we believe that the President himself is involved in the death of Mrs. Hunt; on the other hand, there is a faction—the Council on Foreign Relations" (the creme of the Washington-Wall Street-Ivy League Establishment, financed by the Rockefellers and formerly headed by John J. McCloy, now by William Bundy) "and some CIA people—who want the office of the President destroyed, not so much Nixon as a person, but the Presidency. Presidency.

"What's really weird is that Nixon has a background of political sabotage. Therefore, it was

easy to sucker him into a plan which he would have approved of anyway. . . . But two or more of the Watergate defendants are double-agents who wanted to be caught so their plan to destroy the Presidency could go forward.

"I don't for a moment justify what Nixon has done. But I wonder which is worse: the White House being corrupt, or this faction—the CIA and the Council on Foreign Relations—and their plan to destroy the Presidency? What's interesting is that they are not framing him, but cornering Nixon with the truth. Some would say a plague on both their houses.

Skolnick rambled on, linking all sorts of events to this CIA and Council on Foreign Relations plot to take over the country and impose "martial law and massive

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