



Legal researcher Sherman Skolnick testified before special hearing of National Transportation Board that he knew motive and means behind Chicago tragedy.



Firemen remove body of crash victim. More than 40 persons were killed when airliner en route from Washington plowed into residential homes in Chicago.

WATERGATE PLANE CRASH MYSTERY

by MILT MACHLIN

On December 8, 1972 a United Air Lines plane en route to Midway Airport in Chicago crashed, killing 43 passengers and two persons on the ground.

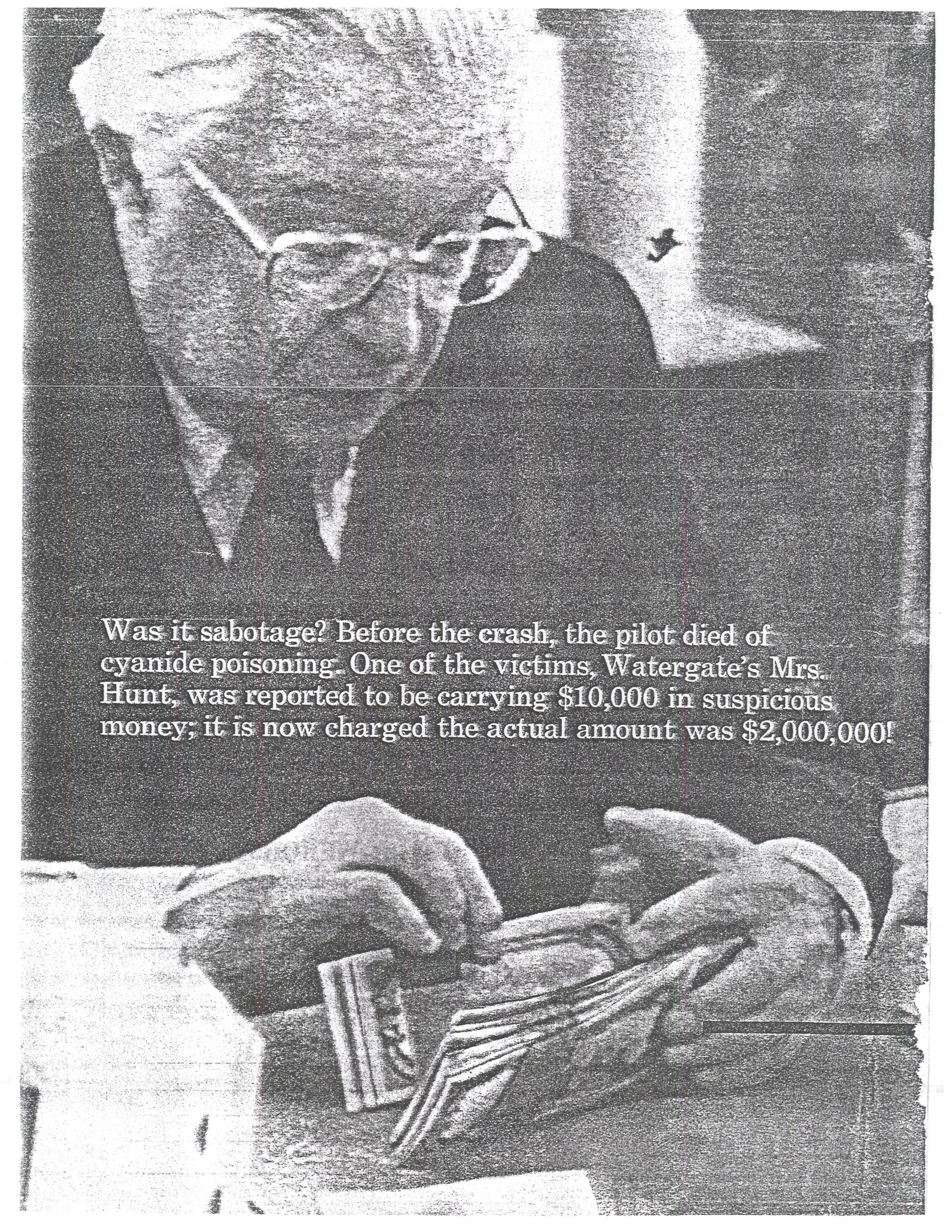
This in itself was big news, but when it was revealed that one of the dead passengers was Dorothy Hunt, wife of Watergate "Mission Impossible" team leader E. Howard Hunt, the fat was really in the fire. When it was further revealed that Mrs. Hunt was carrying \$10,000 in one-hundred-dollar bills, suspiciously similar to those used to pay off the Watergate Seven, many people began to wonder whether the crash of Flight 553 was really an accident!

Now a private investigator, with an impressive record behind him, has come forward with a shocking theory.

"The crash of Flight 553 was murder and sabotage," says Sherman Skolnick, a legal investigator. Its purpose? He thinks it was a multi-million-dollar robbery and the possible destruction of the Presidency itself!

Mr. Skolnick, who is head of a private organization called "The Committee to Clean Up the Courts," was largely responsible for the recent indictment and ultimate conviction of Illinois Judge Otto Kerner on corruption charges. As a consequence of some of Skolnick's charges, the Chief Justice and an associate Justice of (continued on page 66)

Coroner Andrew Toman counts the \$10,585 found in the purse of a crash victim, Mrs. E. Howard Hunt Jr.



Was it sabotage? Before the crash, the pilot died of cyanide poisoning. One of the victims, Watergate's Mrs. Hunt, was reported to be carrying \$10,000 in suspicious money; it is now charged the actual amount was \$2,000,000!

WATERGATE PLANE CRASH MYSTERY

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the Illinois high court resigned, and a third Justice died after he was accused of improprieties by the Chicago gaffly. So when Skolnick now makes serious charges concerning the accident that killed the woman later identified as chief bagwoman in the Watergate scandal, attention must be paid.

To go back to the facts of the case: The U.S. Boeing 737 en route from Washington National Airport was coming in for a landing at Chicago's Midway Airport. A private plane was coming in for a landing on the same runway. The tower waved the 737 off for another approach, a routine procedure, but the airline never made it; it seemed to stop dead in the air and then smashed to the ground, killing all but 15 of the passengers.

Aboard the plane with Dorothy Hunt, the Watergate spy's wife, was a friend of hers, reporter Michelle Clark, who was supposedly doing an exclusive story on the Watergate conspiracy. The plane also contained several other figures worth noting, including Congressman George W. Collins, a black Democrat from Chicago's North Side, and two Omaha attorneys, Ralph Blodgett and Jim W. Krueger, from the legal office of the Northern Natural Gas Company. This company and two of its subsidiaries were reportedly indicted for paying \$14,500 in bribes to the mayor of East Chicago, Illinois for permission to build a pipeline through his community. The charges against the company were later dropped, but action is still proceeding in Federal courts against the mayor. Skolnick claims that the two lawyers were carrying papers which tied former Attorney General John Mitchell to unethical and possibly illegal chicanery concerning El Paso Natural Gas Company, a major rival of the company represented by Blodgett and Krueger.

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The investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board following the crash certainly turned up some intriguing facts. There was, of course, Dorothy Hunt's suitcase. Former presidential counsel Herbert Kalmbach, CREEP (Committee to Re-elect the President) money-raiser, confirmed recently that Mrs. Hunt was the principal conduit for hundreds of thousands in hush money channeled to the Watergate defendants.

But the most startling fact coming out of the investigation is that pilot Wendell Whitehouse was probably already dead when the plane hit the ground! An autopsy by the Cook County Coroner's Office showed 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. . . ."

How is this explained? The Government spokesmen have argued that the cyanide could have been produced by the seat covers, which are made of a plastic which gives off cyanide gas when burned. (Who on earth ever okayed that plastic for an airplane cockpit?)

The National Transportation Safety Board report, however, showed that, in addition to the pilot, six other people had sizeable doses of cyanide in their systems. According to Skolnick the others included Mrs. Hunt, Miss Clark, Blodgett and Krueger! (The Government hasn't confirmed these other identifications, but Skolnick says that he has a copy of the official report.)

The official board still sees nothing suspicious, but even those who do not buy all of Skolnick's charges must wonder about certain apparent facts here:

1. Out of four people in the cockpit, why did only Captain Whitehouse absorb the cyanide?

2. Why did only six out of the forty people in the cabin show cyanide in their systems?

3. The fire in the plane occurred *after* the crash, which presumably would have killed the pilot on impact, so how could he have absorbed the fumes from the burning seat covers?

More important, Skolnick took the coroner's findings to an impartial toxicologist. "The toxicologist we consulted," he says, "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 from other means. He must have gotten it by injection or ingestion—which means foul play.'"

It is Skolnick's theory—a possible one on this point, certainly—that the pilot fell dead on the controls, causing the crash. How was he poisoned? Skolnick has an answer to this also.

According to the Chicagoan's investigation, the man who administered the poison was an agent of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (DALE). But, says

Skolnick, "one of the oddest narcotics agents we ever ran into, because he holds a position so high that he is answerable only to the President." (Skolnick hasn't produced any proof of this, so we'll have to take it with just a grain of salt. Actually, DALE was set up as an organization reporting only to the President, but that doesn't mean that Skolnick's "odd narcotics agent" reported *personally* to the President.)

Anyway, according to Skolnick's theory, this man identified himself to the crew and indicated that he was carrying a gun, so that presumably he could be an addition to flight security. He was assigned the jump seat next to the galley.

Skolnick doesn't believe that the agent deliberately poisoned the pilot's coffee, since this would have been tantamount to suicide, "But we do believe that he saw to it that some chemical, presumably cyanide, was put in the snacks or other beverages of the six people who died with a cyanide level in their bodies."

Of the six passengers in the cabin who died with cyanide in their systems, two are not, so far, linked to Watergate. They are, says Skolnick, two gas industry lobbyists. "We know who they are, and we are working on their particulars."

Skolnick's idea is that the DALE man was part of what he calls a "double cut-out." That is, he was supposed to carry out one part of the scheme while others, without his knowledge,



According to sources, Hunt collected \$200,000 insurance money on his wife's death.

had the job of rubbing *him* out. This may be a little complicated, but it's as possible an explanation as any so far available. (Couldn't the poisoning of the Captain have been an accident? Maybe he got the coffee meant for somebody else? If there *was* a second operative, how did *he* poison the Captain without dying in the crash himself? If they wanted to kill the DALE man, why didn't they simply poison him instead of the Captain?)

In any event, it's Skolnick's theory that Operative Number Two somehow got the lawyers' documents and Mrs. Hunt's cash—after the DALE man knocked off Mrs. Hunt and the other six, and before the crash—and parachuted them to accomplices outside. He even has a witness, he says, who saw a parachute falling from the plane.

Skolnick told our reporter that he actually confronted the DALE man (who survived the crash). He claims that when he told the narcotics agent that he thought the plane had been sabotaged, the man looked startled, and blurted out: "That wasn't supposed to . . ." and then stopped without finishing the sentence.

The parachute theory seems pretty farfetched (it's just about impossible to open a 737 door in flight), but there's more to the mystery than this.

Almost as soon as the plane hit the ground, says Skolnick, upwards of 200 people in about 100 unmarked cars swarmed over the disaster area. According to police who arrived at about the same time, these people identified themselves as Federal agents and took over the crash area. They were also at the morgue before the police.

Skolnick first became interested in the crash itself through one of his investigators, Alex J. Bottos, who succeeded in infiltrating a gang of air pirates made up of former airline technicians.

Bottos made contact with the gang, he says, by posing as a fence. The gang was busted by the Feds on January 13 for stealing more than two million dollars in negotiable securities from a Brinks shipment while in flight between Chicago and Milwaukee.

By the time the mob was apprehended, the Midway crash had taken place. Bottos still hadn't blown his cover. "Within forty-eight hours after the crash," Skolnick says, "this mob gave Bottos some of the items from the plane to fence—about five million dollars' worth."

What was all this loot? It included, according to Bottos, samples of currency, American Express checks, postal

money orders, and some papers that, according to Skolnick, would be dynamite if exposed to the Watergate prosecutors or the Senate committee.

The cash, checks and money orders, says Skolnick, were part of a bundle of more than \$2,000,000 in getaway money Mrs. Hunt was carrying—not just the \$10,000 officially reported. Some \$43,002 of this was in "Barker bills"—one-hundred-dollar notes traceable to the Watergate burglary team by their serial numbers. Skolnick won't say where he gets his information on this, but it is his idea that Mrs. Hunt, tired of racing around the country as a CREEP bagwoman, simply ripped off the committee for this loot and was planning to skip with it.

Of added interest here is the fact that Hunt's wife was insured for \$200,000 which, according to our sources, Hunt has collected. Could there be still more motives for this crash?

The day after the crash there was still more monkey-business which Skolnick finds strangely coincidental.

Egil Krogh Jr., a leader of the Watergate crew's dirty tricks division, was appointed Undersecretary in the Department of Transportation, which supervised the crash probe. He was forced to resign shortly afterward when his part in the Ellsberg break-in was revealed. Dwight Chapin, the President's appointments secretary, who was in the center of the Watergate spotlight, became marketing director of United Airlines. Skolnick says that one of Chapin's jobs was "exerting muscle to see that the establishment press didn't print one word other than that the Midway crash was an accident." In addition, the law firm of Herbert Kalmbach, the President's lawyer, also worked for United Airlines.

Throughout his presentation the shrewd, but at times imaginative, Chicago investigator scatters a patchwork of disturbing and often undisputable facts, even though some of the theories he derives from these facts seem untenable.

He attaches much significance to the fact that CBS's Michelle Clark was accompanying Mrs. Hunt on the doomed plane. According to Skolnick, Mrs. Clark's story was also potential dynamite. "Mrs. Clark had lots of insight into the bugging and coverup through her boyfriend, a C.I.A. operative. In the summer of 1972, before any major revelations of Watergate, Mrs. Clark tried to pick the brains of Chicago Congressman George Collins regarding the bugging of Democratic headquarters," Skolnick says. This has apparently been confirmed by the late Congressman's public relations man.

After the crash, Skolnick says, Mrs. Clark's body was cremated, "to conceal foul play?" Certainly the cremation makes autopsy difficult, though traces of cyanide would probably survive the burning if an exhumation were ever ordered.

That by no means exhausts the mysteries surrounding the crash. Consider this, from Skolnick's fact sheet.

"Also on the plane were four or more people who knew about a labor union that had given a large 'donation' to CREEP to head off the indictment of a Chicago labor hoodlum (matter currently being investigated by the Committee)."

Also this: "For many years, like clockwork, one Chicagoan went to Washington on Monday and came back on Friday afternoon on flight 553 or its equivalent. On Friday, December 8, 1972, he received a call from someone he knows in the White House, telling him not to take the flight, but to go instead to a special meeting."

(When called by us at his home, the man admitted to being a regular commuter to Washington until recently, but said that the meeting that he attended on the day of the crash had been scheduled two weeks before by the Pentagon, and that he had not had any calls from the White House. He did say, however, that without the change in plans he might have been on the fatal flight.)

What about the mysterious flood of "federal agents" onto the crash scene?

Says Skolnick: "After the crash we made public statements that 200 F.B.I. and D.I.A. (Defense Intelligence Agency) people, refusing to show their credentials, had taken over the crash site coincident with the crash or just shortly before." (*Before?* That's what the man says!)

"We were called 'liar.' Then, on June 13, 1973, Chairman John Reed of the National Transportation Safety Board told the House Government Activities Subcommittee that he sent a letter to the F.B.I. that: (a) never in living memory had the F.B.I. acted as in the flight 553 crash. Reed said that 50 agents came into the crash zone shortly after the crash; (b) one F.B.I. agent proceeded into the Midway Control Tower and took over the tape relating to flight 553 without asking permission; (c) before the N.T.S.B. investigators could do so, the F.B.I. conducted 26 interviews, including the surviving flight attendants. The F.B.I. interviews were completed within 20 hours of the crash.

"For six months, they claimed we were liars when we said that 200 F.B.I. and C.I.A. men were in the crash site coincident with the crash. Now they admit 50 were there. Witnesses living in the crash zone tell us that the F.B.I. types were there *before the fire department*. (The fire department responded within one minute after the crash.) The F.B.I. kept a medical team out of the crash zone, although one member of the team said he heard someone in the crash screaming." (This last was offered in testimony after Skolnick was influential in having the National Transportation Safety Board hearings reopened on June 13. The board still decided that there was no evidence of sabotage.)

Shortly after Skolnick made his charges, his chief agent, Bottos, was picked up for impersonating a Federal officer—a charge still pending. He was then locked up in a Federal mental hospital for 40 days, but released without prejudice after Skolnick protested. Skolnick says that this is all part of the Government's pattern of harassing him. (Mightn't some of those Feds at the airstrip who declined to show their identifications have been phonies?)

Bottos claims that his troubles with the law started when he uncovered

links between the judiciary in Northwest Indiana and the crime syndicate. His prosecution for impersonating a Federal officer (which Bottos denies) is based, he says, on the testimony of a self-confessed prostitute and drug abuser.

Skolnick offers a number of reasons for this massive crime and coverup. He says that "big interests"—oil people, media people, airline people, plane manufacturers, politicians and others want the matter hushed up. He has even filed a million-dollar suit against the inquiry board charging it with an illegal coverup.

Despite the disturbing elements of his investigation, and the unquestionable doubts that it arouses, many of his theories seem farfetched to say the least.

He connects the sabotage-murder plot to the Ellsberg break-ins—a possibly reasonable connection if all the other facts are right. Then he goes still further: "Just before the Watergate break-in, George Wallace was shot. The press suppressed details about what really is involved there. . . ." Skolnick believes that the Wallace assassination attempt and the plane crash are related.

His principal belief is that "there is

a faction in Government that wants Nixon pushed to the wall . . . in order to destroy the Presidency." Among these plotters, Skolnick says, are a number of C.I.A. people. He claims in fact that the Hunts were essentially a "C.I.A. couple." That is to say, their marriage was strictly a convenience to the agency. This is very much contrary to Hunt's own statements, of course.

Skolnick also has a theory that "two or more of the Watergate defendants are double agents who wanted to get caught so that their plan to destroy the Presidency could go forward."

Motives can be in the realm of fantasy. But pending a better explanation, there are still some hard facts to be contended with here: the coroner's report of cyanide poisoning, the appearance of mysterious "Federal agents" on the site so soon after the crash, the Watergate money found with Dorothy Hunt, the admitted fact that Mrs. Hunt was the bagwoman for the Watergaters, the fact that many people close to this event had the motives, means and technical know-how to pull it off.

One thing is certain: more will be heard about this crash before the matter is closed. □