

Board to Check Charges on Jet Crash

By ROBERT LINDSEY

The National Transportation Safety Board said yesterday that it would look into allegations by a Chicago legal researcher that a United Air Lines jetliner that crashed Dec. 8 was sabotaged as part of the Watergate case cover-up.

However, officials of the agency said privately that they tended to give little credence to the charges of the Chicagoan, Sherman H. Skolnick, who has been lecturing widely across the country on his theory. It was learned that representatives of the Senate committee that has been investigating the Watergate break-in were also studying his assertions.

The wife of E. Howard Hunt Jr., who pleaded guilty to spying in the Watergate case, was one of 43 persons killed when a United Air Lines Boeing 737 crashed while attempting to land at Midway Airport in Chicago. She was found to have been carrying \$10,000 in 100 bills.

Mr. Skolnick maintains that the plane was sabotaged to kill Mrs. Hunt and three other persons.

Among other things, he has cited as evidence of wrongdoing the presence of cyanide in the body of the pilot and six other victims of the crash. He has also linked the crash to the appointment in January of Dwight L. Chapin, then President Nixon's appointment secretary, as an executive of United.

No Evidence Found

In it, he charged the four persons who he said were the target victims of the conspiracy relating either to the Watergate incident or possibly an alleged bribe connected with a Government antitrust suit against a pipeline company in the Southwest.

The 43-year-old Mr. Skolnick, a college dropout who says he has read many law books, has been a legal gadfly well known in Chicago for more than 15

years. His campaigns forced the resignation of two members of the Illinois Supreme Court in 1969 amid charges of conflict of interest.

Other cases—including a long-running battle with the National Archives to get information he contends will disclose an assassination plot against President Kennedy in Chicago prior to his death in Dallas—have been less successful.

"We can find no evidence of sabotage," a senior official of the safety board, an independent agency of the Transportation Department that investigates accidents, said yesterday. The official said that traces of cyanide can often be found in the victims of not only plane crashes but also fires in homes, explaining this is because of a chemical reaction in the blood stream resulting from the inhaling of smoke produced in the burning of certain materials.

Despite its skepticism, the board said it would have its representatives meet with Mr. Skolnick "to hear what evidence he has to support his case," an official said. The decision was made after a United executive, E. O. Fennell, senior vice president, urged the agency to do so in order to resolve public concern aroused by Mr. Skolnick's widely publicized views.

"Mr. Skolnick has succeeded in achieving a wide dissemination of his sensationalized version of the circumstances surrounding the accident, both in radio broadcasts and written publications," he said. "Based on 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."

However, Mr. Fennell added, his charges had raised doubts about the cause of the accident and he urged the board to hear Mr. Skolnick out. Mrs. Isabel Burgess, the acting chairman of the board, replied in a letter to Mr. Fennell yesterday that it would do so.

The safety board has not completed its formal report on the accident, which will identify the "probable cause." The agency conducted hearings in Chicago after the accident and at that time refused to permit Mr. Skolnick to testify, saying that it appeared he had nothing significant to offer.

Subsequently he filed a suit, still pending, protesting the de-