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WE

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HILL ON WHEELS

On Sherman Skolnick's Trail

By Terence Sheridan

At 5:30 PM on June 14th, 1973, Isabel A. Burgess, chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board, announced that the board was in recess "indefinitely," and Sherman Skolnick, now famous but once an obscure little cripple, a polo victim from Chicago's South Side, rolled his man-of-war wheelchair to one side of the Lancaster Room in suburban Rosemont's Sheraton-O'Hare Motor Hotel and brooded. It had not been brilliant, his imaginative transformation of Watergate into "Murdergate" on the tragic wings of a "sabotaged" plane—United Flight 553, a Boeing 737 that on December 8th, 1972, crashed near Midway Airport killing 45 persons, including the wife of convicted Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt. In fact, in the waning hours of the two-day hearing before the four-person federal panel, Skolnick's Byzantine theory of conspiratorial murder and robbery disintegrated like a 1967 Corvair.

In a city notable for conspicuous eccentricities, Skolnick, hortatory legal researcher and full-time fanatic, is *sui generis*. No doubt about it. But now he was moping. He had presented his case with supernatural ingenuity and it hadn't gone over. He was deeply concerned that his metaphysics of murder would probably be ignored, or, worse, laughed at by dozing citizens he calls the "uninformed." A kid with long sandy hair approached Skolnick to ask if a copy of the coroner's report was available. "Don't ask me irrelevant questions," Skolnick snapped. "I saw you

talking to an FBI agent in the hall. You working for the FBI?" Crestfallen, the kid proffered as proof of his honor a soiled piece of a neighborhood newspaper called RAP. His name was circled in pencil on the masthead. "You know me, Sherman," he said plaintively. "I'm on your side."

"Get away from me!" Skolnick shouted, furiously moving his wheelchair a few yards away. The paraplegic researcher's crutches were under the seat of his battered wheelchair. An aluminum briefcase, stuffed with "documentation," lay across residual legs clasped in the steel braces he has worn for 35 of his 41 years. "The son of a bitch comes near me again and I'll crutch him," Skolnick muttered. Skolnick is a mere 5'3" but the upper part of him is impressively well-built. He has solid shoulders, thick arms and extremely large hands. Some have laughed at Skolnick's Citizens Committee to Clean Up the Courts, and some have called Skolnick, founder and chairman of the Committee, a liar. They are sorry for it now. The city and state are filled with wrecks that crossed Skolnick—official avarice and arrogance reduced to weeping remorse. On one of his briefcases he has black tape in the shape of four gavels, signifying judges brought low because of judicial impropriety uncovered by Skolnick. One of the judges died during a Committee investigation but Skolnick counted him anyway.

(A Committee "fact sheet" written by Skolnick put it this way: "During the course of this earthquake-type scandal, the state high court justices attempted to silence Skolnick by imprisoning him. The Committee's charges were publicly corroborated by a court commission and Skolnick's jail sentence was nullified. As a consequence of all this, the chief

justice and an associate justice of the state high court resigned and a third justice of the court died just after he was accused by Skolnick.") Skolnick is clearly not a man to trifle with, as those Yippee/New Left/SDS heroes Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman found out. Skolnick accused them all of being counterinsurgents posing as "radical revolutionaries," mouthing, "Off the pigs," while on the payroll of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Skolnick added however: "Since the Committee does not have much, if any, inside information, we can never know for sure whether we are right." In the meantime he called on them to confess and stayed close behind two of them in particular: Renard Davis and Abbott Hoffman. Skolnick has chased them for four years through courthouse halls and down city sidewalks, his collapsible wheelchair hitting every crack in the pavement, screaming "Government Spies!"

Skolnick, out of earshot of the suspected FBI fink, had calmed down. He was listening to a crescendo in his skull, the theme music from *Man Of La Mancha*. "A man of lost causes," he said wryly. "I guess that's why it's my favorite music." There are times though when he identifies, a capella, with the ghost of Zola—Ernie in a wheelchair defending thousands of faceless and ungrateful Dreyfuses. "But what the hell do they know about it—the uninformed?" he asked. "Only me and my people brought murder into this. While they were talking about political corruption, we raised the issue of *murder*."

"If we are right," Skolnick said, "it could level the White House, topple the government." But at the moment he had more important things to worry

about. Sherman Skolnick had to take a piss and there was nobody around to push his wheelchair. His darkly suspicious paladins, the praetorian guard of Skolnick's nonprofit Committee, were busy. Dave Hoffman, his wheelchair, and Alex Bottos, chief investigator, were talking to women. Hoffman, 29, wears a hearing aid to correct a hereditary nervous disorder, and where his left hand used to be there is now a prehensile hook. ("It makes a great roach clip," he says.) Hoffman, Skolnick told me, blew his hand off in 1964 while dynamiting tree stumps on a family farm in Michigan. "Sherman had no right to tell you that," Hoffman said later. "It happened with shrapnel. I was working for the Army, trained by them, but I wasn't in the Army," he said cryptically. "I know it sounds like the CIA but that's all I'm going to tell you."

Bottos, 41, was wearing a brown business suit and a bulletproof vest, a 15-pound flak jacket. An informant for several federal agencies, including the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement (DALE), Bottos was under indictment for impersonating an FBI agent last year in Gary, Indiana—a rap he beat a month later. Kinky cops and underworld hit-men have been trying to kill him since 1965, he said. Twice the vest saved his life, stopping bullets in the front and the back. Using a knitting needle to prevent further damage to the vest, he carried out the slugs, a .38 and a .32; he carries them around with him to show curious people why he wears a flak jacket on hot days. For his protection he carries a sheath knife and a pistol in his car. The pistol, an air gun, fires poison needles. "I don't want to say what kind of poison," the chief investigator told me.

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Lest you think them the elect of the lunatic fringe, bruised vegetables that should be relegated to life's rot rack, consider the good guys. Think of the rogues' gallery that made up the choice membership of the White House's clandestine Wild Bunch, the witless errata that took team-player orders from such luminaries as former high sheriff John Mitchell, former commerce secretary Maurice Stans, former White House counsel John Dean, former presidential aide John Ehrlichman, former presidential aide H.R. Haldeman. Think of wigs, guns, wiretaps, sex dossiers, "eyes-only" enemy lists, a White House wired for sound, and laws solely for the niggers out there.

Think of the bungling burglars and wiretappers, of Gordon Liddy proudly unfolding a larger-than-life poster of himself, of James McCord the consummate wireman turned articulate tattler, of Howard Hunt the penny dreadful novelist and blackmailer keeping a handgun and eavesdropping gear in a White House safe, of Bernie Barker the

'C'mere kid,' he said benignly. 'Push my chair down to the men's room.'

patriot prepared to be a point man on a suicide squad if Hunt told him to.

These fumbling Sam Slicks, merrily operating in a climate of amorality, were the re-election attendants of Nixon the Simple, the Quaker sungod. So like it or not we are forced to listen to the Skolnicks. In an era of unrelieved political decadence and casual renunciation of civic responsibilities, Skolnick and his people are the new Yankee Doodle Dandies, marching to a very different drummer.

Skolnick, getting panicky, looked anxiously around the hearing room until, inevitably, his gaze fell on me like a rock slide. "C'mere, kid," he said benignly. "Push my chair down to the men's room."

* * *

United Flight 553, arriving that Friday from Washington's National Airport, fell out of an icily leaden sky at 2:27 PM, about a minute before its expected landing on runway 31-Left at Midway, Chicago's archaic airport on the Southwest Side. Two of the 45 killed were on the ground. There were 18 survivors, including the three stewardesses. The plane, piloted by Capt. Wendell Whitehouse, a well-known stunt pilot, devastated West 71st Street and West 70th Place shearing off tree tops and the roof of Mrs. Florence Strycis's home while Mrs. Strycis was in the basement taking a bath. After destroying four houses and sweeping a parked car into what was Mrs. Veronica Cveulich's home, the plane skidded to a fiery stop. Among those killed were Mrs. Dorothy Hunt, suspected courier in the Watergate cover-up in whose belongings police found 100 \$100 bills; two lawyers with the Northern Natural Gas Co. of Omaha; Michele Clark, a CBS correspondent; and US Rep. George W. Collins, former Chicago alderman and a

prominent Democratic member of the congressional black caucus.

Skolnick's theory, simply stated, was:

In order to kill 12 "Watergate people" on the plane, the 737 was sabotaged by a callous coalition of government agents and Chicago gangsters assisted by air traffic controllers at Chicago O'Hare International Airport who misdirected a plane already crippled by a raft of manipulated malfunctions—not the least of which was an altimeter with pinholes in it—into a prearranged "crash zone." In addition, there was a poisoner on board who made sure that Capt. Whitehouse was dead before the crash (a gelatin pill of cyanide in his water, Skolnick suggested), which must have been a terrifying surprise to Harold R. Metcalf, a CIA hitman who works "personally" for President Nixon and who was on the plane to dispatch Watergate people with a gun. Metcalf, said Skolnick, was assisted by another agent (working either for the government or the gangsters) who posed as an airline stewardess and seated Metcalf advantageously in a jump seat near the rear door. Metcalf, a hitman who uses credentials identifying him as an agent attached to DALE as cover, was understandably upset when the plane crashed, Skolnick said. A treacherous act, said Skolnick, known as a "double cutout." Moreover, waiting to arrest Mrs. Hunt, who Skolnick said had stolen \$2 million from the Committee to Re-Elect the President, were 50 FBI agents who had been alerted to seal off the crash zone. Somehow, however, the \$2 million managed to slip through the ring of FBI agents. (A parachute was seen in the sky shortly before the plane crashed, according to a witness known only to Skolnick and Bottos.) Part of the money fell into the hands of underworld air pirates and part into the hands of United Airlines, which, according to a Skolnick source he refused to name, was still counting its portion, mostly postal money orders.

Michele Clark, the theory continues, was following Mrs. Hunt either as a CIA operative or as a CBS reporter with an exclusive story that Mrs. Hunt was coming to Chicago to divorce her husband and had information that would "blow the White House out of the water." The excuse that she, Mrs. Hunt, came to visit a cousin and invest money in a Holiday Inn was cover, Skolnick said. And Miss Clark, who had been in contact with Congressman Collins, knew it. On the other hand, Skolnick said, Miss Clark had a CIA boyfriend and, as everyone knows, CBS is a CIA front. As for the gas company lawyers, they had incriminating documents linking former Attorney General Mitchell to a slimy anti-trust suit in a gas pipeline case. Officials of the company, angry about being indicted in an Indiana bribery scheme, were about to blow the whistle on Mitchell, said Skolnick. Finally there was the cyanide. Although minute quantities of hydrogen cyanide, the gaseous form of the poison, is commonly found in the bodies of fire victims who have inhaled smoke from burning furnishings, Skolnick charged that abnormally large traces of cyanide were found in the bodies of Mrs. Hunt and Miss Clark. But whether the dozen Watergate victims died by poison, bullets or the plane crash, Skolnick could not say for certain because the FBI had "stripped" the bodies and whisked them away. And CBS, in collusion with the CIA and United Airlines (which had hired as "payoff" former presidential aide Dwight Chapin after the crash), had ordered an "immediate" cremation of the correspondent's body to avoid an autopsy.

("I'll tell you what it was," Skolnick told me exclusively, after I agreed to

buy two exceptional pizzas at a cost of \$17.50. "It was a classic case of overkill.")

* * *

After a decade of rooting out dishonesty in the fertile venal public offices of Cook County and the State of Illinois, Skolnick had made the bigtime. He had forced the federal government to curtsy to his demand to be heard. Last winter the NTSB had defied Skolnick, the chairman of the Committee, refusing to let him testify at a public hearing into the crash of Flight 553. Skolnick responded in March by deploying his people at strategic picket points in front of Loop offices of United Airlines while the chairman himself filed a \$2 million lawsuit against NTSB chairwoman Burgess, charging that the "so-called 'Board of Inquiry' is dominated by large corporate interests who appear to be against any disclosures, such as possible sabotage, unless and until they are originated by them."

"Flight 553," the suit charged, "appears to be an extension of a plan to murder several dozen people connected with the Pipeline-Watergate matter." The "pipeline" was in reference to intrigue in Indiana—indictments against the mayor of Hammond (a federal jury on June 15th acquitted the 66-year-old mayor of charges that he accepted a \$9500 bribe), city officials of East Chicago and former employees of Northern Natural Gas in alleged payoffs involving a pipeline right-of-way. Making sure that the uninformed did not miss the point, Skolnick aired the horrifying possibilities on the Committee's Hotline News, a 24-hour dial-a-conspiracy (312 731-1100): "More than 60 people have been murdered or have disappeared in the Midwest to stop anything being told about the Pipeline-Watergate scandal."

"The news media has told you little if anything of what was uncovered by Skolnick's group about the plane crash," Skolnick said on Hotline. United was beginning to crack. Through the windows of the Loop offices they could see Skolnick's people proudly parading their infirmities in front of the "people-to-people airline." A secretary stuck her tongue out at Skolnick. Hoffman laughed and, dexterously using his hook, handed a reprint of Skolnick's lawsuit to an elderly lady passing by. In May United surrendered unconditionally. E.O. Fennell, senior vice president, on May 24th wrote to the NTSB, formally asking that Skolnick be permitted to testify; but Fennell stiffly added: "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 rhetoric." Skolnick's joy was not diminished even by the letter he received three days later from Sen. Sam J. Ervin, Jr., chairman of the US Senate's Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities—the Watergate committee. The select committee, wrote Sen. Ervin, was "powerless to investigate the matter referred to in your letter." But Skolnick was getting ready for the June 13th-14th hearing, his own show, at the Sheraton-O'Hare. The day before the hearing he personally Hotlined the news: "Subpoenaed to testify is our chairman Mr. Skolnick who will bring with him supporting evidence of our charges—that there was sabotage, robbery of valuables from the Watergate people and murder. Skolnick intends to confront the NTSB with a mass of documentation never previously discussed even on Hotline."

It was grand, better than he had hoped for. It was worth the \$3000 he shelled out three years ago to have his teeth corrected. Snaggled, spaced and feral—a malocclusion that made him look menacing on television. ("I was forced to do it," he says. "I was in the public eye so much I couldn't look ugly anymore.") The arc lights and TV cameras, four of them, were directly in front of him. To the right, the four members of the NTSB sat on a dais overlooking the large sterile hearing room. To his left were two long tables. At the first sat representatives from United Airlines, Federal Aviation Administration, Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization and Airline Pilots Association. At the second table were members of the "working press"—a dozen of them. In truth, some of the reporters had come to laugh at Cassandra but, like a death-bed apostate who calls for the priest, they didn't want to take any chances. On the chair next to Skolnick were 20 folders containing his documentation. On the table in front of him was a cluster of eight microphones, a bouquet before the performance. He looked at the mikes and smiled approvingly. His back was guarded by Leland Cole, a chalk-faced young man in a seersucker suit and white shoes. "I'm security," Cole said. Cole, 23, told me he is also a legal researcher but that *he* works for a profit. He calls his group the International Ministry of Information—350 independent legal researchers throughout the world, a universal co-op for hire by lawyers who need help.

Chief investigator Bottos, sweating a bit in his flak jacket, sat next to Skolnick. An ex-Marine, he had served behind the lines in Korea, he told me. With clever cosmetics he was a tall Korean on night raids until a trip flare damaged his eyes. "I can't tell you much about what I did in Korea," Bottos said. "I signed papers." Despite his impaired eyes, which are sensitive to light, Bottos bore up well under the merciless glare of TV arcs for two days. Indeed, he almost stole the show from Skolnick.

Under the name Alex Doyle, Bottos last year did some informing for the Chicago Strike Force, which was hot after thieves in possession of \$351,000 in stolen securities—a small slice of the \$2.1 million in securities that was taken off a North Central Airlines Chicago-to-Milwaukee flight in August, 1972. Posing as a fence, Bottos would tell the NTSB, he insinuated himself into the gang and saw not only the North Central loot, but postal money orders and pipeline documents that he deduced (after talking to Skolnick) could only have come from Flight 553.

Bottos testified that he met the infamous Mr. Metcalf, CIA hitman and pretend DALE agent, in a "subterranean" room in a Hammond court building, a room known to only a select group of confidants. Bottos said that Metcalf, on mention of Flight 553, "turned every shade of color," blurted "that wasn't supposed to happen—" and ran out of the secret room. Bottos said that he, Bottos, was in the covert hidehold to receive final clearance as an "unimpeachable witness" for the Office of Drug Abuse Law Enforcement. (DALE, established in January, 1972, by President Nixon, melded into the Drug Enforcement Administration this July, a humiliating result of lawless no-knock raids into innocent homes by DALE nightriders.) Bottos also told the hearing board that he was absolutely sane although they had probably heard otherwise. He was talking about last March 5th when he was taken into cus-

today by federal marshals after he appeared in US District Court in Hammond to ask for a change of venue in his pending impersonation trial. While Skolnick rapped out an emergency free-titos petition on a portable typewriter, the chief investigator was shackled and taken to a federal hospital in Springfield, Missouri, where he underwent a battery of examinations for presumed delusions and acute paranoia. Freed 40 days later, after writing several jailhouse motions (with copies going to Sen. Ervin's committee) and having his sanity certified by three psychiatrists, three psychologists and six social workers, Bottos claimed he had been a "political prisoner."

"My mind," Bottos assured the panel, "is all right and I have a very good IQ." Compared with what was to come from Skolnick, the star witness in the Murdergate case, Bottos' beliefs were incomparably cogent. The 12 Watergate victims, for instance, were rapidly reduced to eight, to six, to possibly five.

"I'm working on the sixth," Skolnick

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informed the board. But the NTSB, novices in the conspiracy trade, wanted certitudes. They wanted Skolnick to be exact. For example, at one heated point, they asked if he knew for sure what "triggering mechanism" sabotaged the plane. How in the hell was a legal researcher (newspapers say "so-called" and "self-styled" when he is down) supposed to know that? They didn't understand that a legal researcher's medley of charges, by necessity, must be elastic. That way one of them might be right. Oh yes, this board was obviously up to no good. Its plan, with malice aforethought, was to let the antisocial little bastard's mouth write a check his ass couldn't cash. The pinholes in the altimeter? That charge, said Skolnick, was probably not "technically accurate." "It was a layman's term," he said. When pressed Skolnick shouted, "Cover-up!" "You are out of order," said chairwoman Burgess. Her uppity attitude enraged Skolnick, so he reminded her that she was a defendant in a \$2 million lawsuit filed by him. "Isabel," yelled plaintiff Skolnick, "you are out of order. You are disqualified. You are a defendant, and don't you ever forget it!" Mrs. Burgess, a tall, angular woman, the divorced mother of three grown children, is a former Arizona state representative and senator. Her eyeglasses slipped down her nose and she peered over them in amazement at the truculent witness, who appeared to be either vain or crazy, as if seeing him for the first time. She looked at him the way a fastidious housewife might look at a cockroach in a clean kitchen.

"I'm not a Houdini," Skolnick complained when they continued to badger him for facts. According to the coroner's report, there were no traces of cyanide in either the body of Mrs. Hunt or Miss Clark. "For \$50 the coroner would certify that a steamboat ran over a body

right in front of this hotel," Skolnick quipped, detonating appreciative guffaws from his people.

According to medical evidence, Capt. Whitehouse's blood had carbon monoxide in it, indicating that he was alive at the time of the crash. Perhaps it wasn't cyanide, Skolnick conceded; but, he insisted, Flight 553 passengers died in "some mysterious manner." Harold Metcalf, a bonafide agent of DALE who testified at the first NTSB hearing, was not seated in the jump seat, but in seat 17-B, according to a stewardess, who did not seem to be in the employ of either the government or Chicago gangsters. How was it, the board wanted to know, that Mr. Metcalf managed to get out of his business suit—the one the stewardess saw him in—and into a flight suit—the one an unnamed Skolnick witness saw him in—after the plane crashed? "Maybe he's Houdini," Skolnick said. Metcalf, nonetheless, lost status, slipping from the role of President Nixon's personal hitman to a "suspected" role in nefarious deeds on Flight 553. How was Mrs. Hunt's "ripped-off two mill" smuggled out of a crushed and burning plane encircled by 50 FBI agents? Well? "I'm thinking," Skolnick replied peevishly, glaring at the board. "Kinky agents," he said confidently, after a brief pause. (By the second day Skolnick had solved the mystery of the enigmatic parachute. It was a small ball of tinfoil, with parachute attached, thrown out of a private plane to "screw up" the radar screen. In an aside he told me this is what is known as a "fuck-up ball"—ostensibly used in the event hitmen, poisoners and saboteurs were having an off day.) Did United Airlines itself have anything to do with the crash? Skolnick said he and his people were still working on it and in "another six months we will put our finger in the face of one of your executives and it will stick there." "We don't know the names of all the buttonmen," said Skolnick, "but we got Mr. Metcalf and he is not going to wiggle out of it."

A United lawyer, J. Richard Street, nicely turned out in corporate attorney pastels but cobra-quick on cross examination, swore that United doesn't have any valuables or documents belonging to Flight 553 passengers. He also said that Miss Clark's body was cremated three days after the crash on request of her parents, not "immediately" afterwards on order of CBS. (Michele Clark, 29, called Mickey, was a tall, black, handsome woman. She was the first student accepted for the 1970 summer program for minority groups at the Columbia School of Journalism. She was named a CBS correspondent during the Democratic National Convention in Miami. At a memorial service for her in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago, Richard Salant, president of CBS News asked: "Why did United Flight 553 terminate in tragedy? Is the operation of Midway still in the interest of the traveling public and the residents of the Southwest Side? Is a jet disaster such as this one an act of God or a tragedy of man?" Miss Clark's brother, Harvey E. Clark III, said his sister's favorite quote was from John Morley's essay *On Compromise*: "You have not converted a man because you have silenced him." Miss Clark's parents lived on the same South Side street as Skolnick, a fact that somehow escaped him.)

"I've made no inconsistent statements," Skolnick, holding tight to his thread of interpretive conspiracy, gravely told the NTSB. But the mass of documentation had been the NTSB's own records from the first hearing with Skolnick's exciting conclusions. And

then Capt. John R. McDonald, a pipe-smoking veteran accident investigator for the Airline Pilots Association, kicked him in the groin when he was down. Had there been a "massive" electrical failure with "circuit breakers popping" all over the place, Skolnick, said Capt. McDonald dryly, would not have had a Cockpit Voice Recorder transcript to misinterpret.

"Little more than rhetoric under oath," said lawyer Street caustically. "Cover-up!" screamed Skolnick. He was still screaming when chairwoman Burgess put the hearing into a state of indefinite recess. The NTSB, she said privately before leaving, was still investigating but would not have a report for at least two months. She added that airline accidents are generally caused by a combination of pilot error and mechanical failure. The NTSB members were hurrying to catch planes but before they could get out of the hearing room Skolnick raked them with a parting reproach.

"You may not be crooked but you sure act like it!" he yelled.

* * *

That was a relief," Skolnick grinned, as he wheeled out of the men's room 15 minutes after the hearing recessed. Bottos was in the coffee shop and Hoffman, using one of the public phones in the 400-room motel, was calling for the pizza. "Get everything on it," ordered Skolnick. "And some coleslaw." Four stewardesses who had briefly attended the second day of the hearing glided by, secure in misplaced superiority, smiling their trained smiles and pretending not to be repelled by Skolnick, who was slumped wearily in his wheelchair. "I'm going to stick with the courts from now on," he said, forcing a smile. "They're easier." He stared meditatively at the floor. "But what the hell does the NTSB know about it?" he said, indignant again. "What the hell does anyone know about it? That's the trouble with the fucking world. Too middle-aged and too middle class. People don't know what I go through. Just last week, Friday, I had to deal with a hitman, a goddamn *hitman*. He was a clean mechanic. You understand underworld lingo? A *clean mechanic*. Means he does the job right. Ironically the guy repairs refrigerators and things like that. That's his cover, understand? Some people deposited \$50,000 in his bank account, but the guy has three kids and his conscience started bothering him."

"But he told me this," said Skolnick. "He told me if I hadn't split to Canada in March I would be dead now." On March 26th, convinced that FBI agents were going to take them away and they would never be heard from again, Skolnick and Hoffman, who keep bags packed and in the Committee's red Pinto stationwagon for just such an emergency, fled to political asylum in Canada. They traveled fast, with Hoffman driving, across country roads in three states in a circuitously desperate attempt to elude their almost phantom pursuers. As uncontradictable corroboration of the three and a half day journey of fear (that normally takes about six hours), Hoffman has a picture of Skolnick, propped on his crutches, taking a leak in a cornfield somewhere in Michigan. On reaching Windsor, Ontario, they barricaded their hotel door with a 200-pound dresser, then called the Chicago news media, collect, with reports of the Get-Skolnick program. Meanwhile, in the home office, Leland Cole issued daily bulletins on Hotline News which broadly suggested that Skolnick and his wheelman were the first kidnap victims in the Watergate caper. Following solemn assurances from US Attor-

ney James R. Thompson that federal agents would not seize him, Skolnick agreed to return to Chicago. But first he asked all of his friends to meet him when he crossed the border and escort him back to Chicago in a caravan of cars. For some reason the friends didn't show up. "It was a rainy day, a very bad day," Skolnick pointed out. Skolnick barely made it in time to hold a press conference at the Dirksen Federal Building on April Fools' Day. "They said I had make-up on for the cameras," Skolnick said angrily. "That was a little talc left over because I had to shave so fast. I was very tired but the media had asked me to hold the conference, so I didn't even have time to shave properly. And then they say I had on *pancake* make-up, the sons of bitches.

"I knew what the government did to Alex Bottos and I said to myself they ain't going to do that to me," said Skolnick of his ordeal. "So when I got that call on March 26th I was ready. The FBI hassled me with a trick. They anonymously called me and told me that they got Watergate documents and that they'll give them to me if I meet them, so I set up a meeting in a parking lot near me. It was about nine o'clock in the morning. I'm a sucker for secret meetings, OK? But when I got there I could see that they weren't just ordinary people. They were government. You could tell. Two-way radio, stripped down Chevy. You know the whole deal. They told me that if I didn't turn over to them certain papers that they thought we had that I'd go the way of Alex, and so would my friends. On the Hotline, you see, we were giving out news about the Pipeline-Watergate affair and people were convinced that we must have some *very* important documents. We had already been contacted and offered \$100,000 for them. It was a very sophisticated kind of conversation—through a foundation and that kind of thing—but we got the message. We turned them down flat. We are not a mercenary group. No deal, we said. Anyway, when these two guys in the parking lot threatened me, I persuaded them that I'm going to get the papers and to, uh, cool it for awhile. Instead we split. We were sitting ducks on the highway so we had to take the backroads of Indiana, Ohio and Michigan. We knew they were following us so we slept during the day and traveled mostly by night."

Before recrossing the border to come home, Skolnick gave a startled customs agent a small package and received a receipt, No. 712364, for a canister of 35mm Tri-X film "alleged to contain John Mitchell-Watergate documents." It was film, Skolnick said, of documents linking the former attorney general to a gas company stock transfer list.

"I wanted to see what the son of a bitch was going to do with the film," Skolnick said. "Well, they go and develop it and when I get back to Chicago the US attorney himself, Thompson, called me and told me to pick up ten glossy prints. There are supposed to be 29 and there are only *ten*. And these were routine things that I had already given to reporters. Coroner's reports and other public records, stuff like that. The Watergate stuff is missing. 'It's a fraud,' I told Thompson right in his office. I said that I was not going anywhere with the prints he was giving me. He was very upset. I called Thompson a Watergate messenger boy and left the stuff right on the floor." Fortunately Skolnick has copies of the "superhot" documents. Unschooled in the art of conspiracy, I asked why he didn't disclose them at the NTSB hearing. "For chrissakes!" he howled. "You don't understand anything." "Somebody," he

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explained patiently, "might be trying to frame Mitchell using me and the plane crash. I've gotta check that out. These are not public records, these are private corporate records, you understand? So I sent the original copies to Europe. They are with a friend for safekeeping."

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On the drive from the Sheraton-O'Hare to Skolnick's South Side home, the Committee's HQ on South Oglesby, the chairman fell asleep, his chin cradled peacefully on one of his crutches. The last thing he said before dozing off was: "No one we have accused has ever walked away from us." The street in front of Skolnick's tiny four-room house was cluttered with large and small kids. They were running, walking, playing catch and getting lost in the wild thickets of phlox and forsythia engulfing the house.

The kids were in the street, on the sidewalk and all over Skolnick's uncut lawn. The kids, all of them, were black. Skolnick's home is a white slip of sem-

'A Jewish Mother,' Hoffman said. 'A goddamn Jewish Mother'

inal eccentricity in a black sea. Skolnick's parents, who now live on the North Side, gave the house to Skolnick. "Hey, Mr. Scold-nik, I seen you on TV last night," one of the boys cried. "You looked good." "Y'all see Mr. Scold-nik on TV?" he asked a girl holding a baseball bat. "I see Mr. Scold-nik on TV every night," she replied haughtily. Skolnick, the rain king of South Oglesby, a street of mainly modest homes with small obligatory lawns, smiled royally. "I get along pretty good out here," he said, moving towards the house, his powerful shoulders and arms compelling the crutches, his substitute legs, to inch forward in dogged lockstep.

Inside, pizza and telephone calls were waiting for him. "Have some pizza, kid," he laughed. "You paid for it." Vancouver was calling and Copenhagen had called earlier. With the pizza on a paper plate in front of him on the kitchen table—pizza stacked with cheese, sausage, shrimp, olives, anchovies, mushrooms, green peppers and pepperoni—Skolnick ate and talked. He told a Vancouver radio station: "I just got in. It's been a very strenuous day. . . . Yes, yes, yes. . . . We had *thousands* of documents. They tried to shout me down. The story is going to be worldwide . . . the biggest story ever. The only places we are running into trouble at are the major newspapers, the networks and the papers in Chicago."

There are hundreds of books in the house. Most of them are law books. "They are scattered all over," Skolnick said when he got off the phone. "Some of them I'm selling now because I think the courts are totally discredited with their corruption."

"I educated myself in the law," he said. "The manner in which I present things—like to a government tribunal—I learned on my own. By going to court hundreds of times and watching how lawyers present cases, and by associating with lawyers, some of whom are

afraid to be seen with me publicly, I learned how to put evidence together and how to present it to the government. And I've spent a lot of my time in libraries. I've always felt that college interferes with education. I have a rather put-down position about colleges. In other words, for a clever person like myself who is, you know, more or less a loner . . . hell, I educated myself."

Skolnick, the youngest of three sons of Pauline and Max Skolnick, was stricken with polio at the age of six, during the Great Depression and when his father, a tailor, was out of a job. After graduating from Spalding School for the Handicapped, Sherman attended Roosevelt College (Roosevelt University when Michele Clark was a student there years later) for two and a half semesters, paying a cop \$5 for the privilege of parking his specially equipped car near a door. "Tremendous difficulties," he said. "Especially in bad weather. It became overwhelming." So Skolnick, an A student on an academic scholarship, quit to do bookkeeping for relatives and to sell a Jewish magazine over the phone. But when a \$14,000 trust fund his parents set up for him was looted, he said, by a "silver-tongued slicker," Skolnick found a lifetime job: cudgeling the courts. During the nine years the family's lawsuit to regain the \$14,000 rattled successfully around the courts, Skolnick perfected a corrosively single-minded antipathy for the nation's legal system. And thus the Committee was founded ten years ago—a committee of "hundreds, although we don't meet."

Except for a half-dozen close associates, and God knows how many disgruntled Fifth Column public employees, the Committee is anonymous phone calls in the night and unsigned notes in the morning mail with tales of scandal and turpitude. A few former students keep in contact as well, remembering what Skolnick taught them in his "Seminar on Civic Research" at Chicago's Columbia College. Skolnick, a volunteer teacher at the unaccredited community college, called his course "guerrilla law—unorthodox but legal means of fighting judicial impropriety." It included instruction on "wrecking them," where to find "so-called public records," "confronting public officials with their apparent conflicts of interest," and "alleged revolutionaries, bombers and assassins—in reality counterinsurgents." But he no longer has time to teach the seminar. He is making more money as a lecturer on himself before college audiences and social clubs. In the face of lofty scepticism, Skolnick four years ago charged that two Illinois Supreme Court justices, prominent Republicans, accepted princely chunks of bank stock from stintless litigants in a case before the court.

Though never confessing they did anything wrong, the judges nonetheless quickly resigned, and Skolnick emblazoned his briefcase with the first two gavels. Late in 1969, US District Court Judge Edwin A. Robson called new Skolnick charges "reckless" and "sensational libelous accusations." The charges were that US Court of Appeals Judge Otto Kerner, former Democratic governor of Illinois and chairman of the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (the Kerner Report) had received an "apparent gift" of \$50,000 worth of stock in the Civic Center Bank & Trust Co.—the same bank the State Supreme Court justices had stock in. This was *too* much. Bristling in outrage, the Chicago Sun-Times in December, 1969, wrote an editorial and called it "Skolnick Strikes Out." "Judge Kerner has been subjected to considerable personal distress, which he

has borne well," the Sun-Times wrote. "He has said he would not press charges of libel against Skolnick. Skolnick should bear this in mind as well as Judge Robson's scathing denunciation of his charges against Kerner the next time he embarks on his crusade against the judiciary."

Eight months before the editorial, however, Skolnick had met for ten hours with agents of the Internal Revenue Service, providing them with documents, theories, conspiracies and facts. And in December, 1971, Judge Kerner and four political friends were indicted on 17 counts of bribery, mail fraud, perjury, tax evasion and conspiracy in race track stock deals. Facing 83 years in prison, Kerner last February was found guilty, and Skolnick told reporters: "Somebody like Kerner will think twice before calling me a liar again."

Last April, while federal investigators continued to probe his various investments, Kerner was sentenced to three years in prison. Free on appeal bond, he obstinately sat on the bench of the US 7th Circuit Court of Appeals, a convicted felon collecting a \$42,000 salary, until nervous peers forced him off. "The hell with that," Skolnick said, wiping pizza grease from his hands with a paper napkin. "We just go after them. What happens to them after that is no concern of ours. But you know what really got me? Kerner is almost as shrimpy as me. When I confronted him at a press conference in 1969, man, I was thinking, *he's as tall as the Hancock Building* . . . until he walked into the room. 'That crooked little man,' I said, 'is Otto Kerner?'"

It was time now for Skolnick to leave the little house on South Oglesby. In 30 minutes he had to be on a radio talk show downtown. Skolnick told Bottos that the host had decided that he wanted only Skolnick to do the midnight show.

"He doesn't want you to go on, Alex," Skolnick told Bottos, who had taken off his armored vest and was clipping newspapers.

"He told me he wanted me on," protested Bottos. "He told me that himself."

"No, Alex," Skolnick said. "He doesn't want you. He changed his mind. He only wants me."

"Well, shit!" Bottos said, putting down his Hoyo de Casa cigar. "I don't go for that kind of stuff at all."

As Skolnick and Hoffman were going out the back door, Skolnick turned in the doorway.

"Alex?"

"Yes," said Bottos grimly.

"Here," said Skolnick, handing him a \$10 bill. "You paid for lunch and I don't want you spending your own money."

"OK, OK," Alex grinned. "Go do your radio show, Sherman."

Hoffman took a can of frozen orange juice out of the refrigerator and put it on the kitchen counter to thaw. He looked fondly at Skolnick. "A Jewish mother," Hoffman said. "A goddamn Jewish mother."

* * *

The next day, Friday, President Nixon was in Pekin, south of Chicago, and Sen. Sam Ervin was in Rosemoth. The President had cautioned a docilely happy cop-estimated crowd of 10,000 at the unveiling of the Everett McKinley Dirksen Congressional Leadership Research Center not to let the "mistakes of a few obscure the virtues of most who are in the profession of politics."

A lone dissenter with an IMPEACH NIXON sign was hustled around the corner where cops shut his contentious mouth with a full ring of keys, jamming them against the protester's teeth, bull-

dogged him to his knees, taking no more than six seconds to get the handcuffs on.

Sen. Ervin, addressing the Illinois State Bar Association at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare, said the Nixon administration had exceeded the law in applying executive privilege to those close to the President. "If the President applies the privilege to a person, then Congress never would be able to pose questions to that official in the first place."

It was ten days before Congress tried and failed to take the President's Cambodian bombs away from him—ten days before John Dean, the fired White House counsel, coolly reading from a withering 245-page prepared statement, testified that President Nixon had been a party to the Watergate cover-up for as long as eight months. The stock market plummeted ten and a half points. Saturday morning Hotline's two-minute recorded message had apparently jammed; it was still grinding out news of Skolnick's Wednesday assault on the National Transportation Safety Board: "Wednesday, our chairman, Mr. Skolnick, using the government's own documents, showed, point by point that the jet plane could not land because key instruments in the cockpit were sabotaged and the air traffic controllers intentionally steered the plane at the same time into a situation making a crash inevitable. We demonstrated fact after fact. . . . Stay on the line. You can hear the message from the beginning."

It was time for me to leave Chicago. I was beginning to like Sherman Skolnick. But before I left he told me, exclusively, of a new Committee investigation. The Committee is looking into the October, 1972, commuter train crash that killed 45 persons when an Illinois Central Gulf Railroad four-train express, barreling through a caution signal, telescoped into the rear of a double-decker Highliner backing up on the same track at the 27th Street station.

"We are getting good information on this tremendous crash," Skolnick said. "It's just like the plane crash. All kinds of mysteries, oddities, switches out, lights not working. All kinds of things. . . ." He made me wait, suspended in shivering disbelief, then said: "McGovern." "Senator George McGovern?" "Right," said Skolnick. "You can see it happened right before the election. They didn't want to kill anybody. It was just a straight crash to screw up McGovern before the election and eliminate any possible opposition to Nixon. He was coming to Chicago for a speech and this put a chill into his whole campaign."

"I can't say too much about our investigation right now except to say we are working on it," he said.

Just like President Nixon, Sherman Skolnick refuses to abandon his responsibilities.



Al Bottos, in flak jacket, Skolnick and Dave Hoffman, with hook