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A multipurpose ‘hammer’

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Samuel K. Skinner believed President George H.W. Bush was in harm's way.

In June 1992, Bush was scheduled to make a speech in Panama City praising the revival of democracy there. Skinner, then serving as Bush's chief of staff, joined the president on the trip.

Bush was set to deliver his speech at an outdoor downtown plaza when gunfire rang out.

"We had to evacuate there immediately because we assumed it was a threat on the president," Skinner said.

Skinner had only one thing on his mind — and it wasn't his own safety.

"The sole focus is on making sure the Secret Service gets the president out," he said.

Hard-charging lawyer's career has spanned White House, law firms and board rooms

Heavily armed agents moved Bush, Skinner and others in the presidential party to a nearby American air base.

The gunfire didn't result in any injuries — it was caused by the accidental discharge of a Panamanian security guard's weapon in a nearby area where he was dealing with protesters.

"It's a surreal moment when you think everything is going well, then you heard gunfire, and you think the president is under attack," Skinner said.

After beginning his career as an IBM salesman who attended law school at night, Skinner has since reached high levels in the

federal government, corporations and large law firms.

He's been of counsel at Greenberg, Traurig LLP's Chicago office since 2003 and now advises clients on transportation, corporate governance and litigation issues.

He's developed relationships with powerful politicians, government officials and corporate titans. Those contacts make him a sought-after lawyer who sits on corporate boards.

His list of professional contacts likely contains thousands of names, said former Gov. James R. Thompson, a friend of Skinner's since the late 1960s.

"There cannot be many important people in America who are not in his Rolodex," said Thompson, a partner and senior chairman at Winston & Strawn LLP. "His reach is just amazing."

A scouting life

Skinner, 76, and his younger brother were raised in Wheaton, mostly by their mother, Imelda Curran Skinner. His father, Vernon Skinner, died when he was in seventh grade.

As a teenager, Skinner became an Eagle Scout, the highest rank in the Boy Scouts of America.

"It gave me a lot of self-confidence," he said.

He graduated from the University of Illinois in 1960 with an accounting degree. He then worked for eight years as a salesman and marketing manager in data processing at IBM Corp. and was one of that company's three national salesmen of the year in 1967.

In the early 1960s, Skinner served in the Army Reserves and was a platoon leader at Fort Knox in Kentucky.

He went to DePaul University College of Law four nights a week, graduating in four years. He became a licensed Illinois lawyer in 1966 but continued working at IBM until 1968 when he left to join the U.S. attorney's office.

One of the initial matters he worked on was conducting research for prosecutors in the Conspiracy 7 trial stemming from protests surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention here.

Thompson, who was set to become U.S. attorney in Chicago, recalls meeting Skinner at the trial in 1969. He said Skinner introduced himself and asked to speak with Thompson privately.

Skinner pledged to take care of his new boss.

He "told me he would take care of me" and show him the ropes in the office, Thompson said, laughing. "He was a young assistant on the hustle."

Skinner rose through the ranks at the office, and he and Thompson tried the corruption case against 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals judge and former Gov. Otto Kerner Jr.

To date, Kerner is the only federal judge to be convicted of a crime.

While an assistant U.S. attorney, Skinner also worked under 7th U.S. Circuit Judge William J. Bauer, who described Skinner as a “powerhouse lawyer” with an edge.

“If you get in his way as he’s doing his duty as he sees it, you are going to get run over,” Bauer said. “He does not take being pushed around kindly.”

Washington-bound

After serving as first assistant, he became U.S. attorney in 1975 when Thompson left the post to make a successful run for governor.

Two years later, after President Jimmy Carter decided to appoint a Democrat to be U.S. attorney, Skinner joined Sidley, Austin LLP. He was a partner there for 12 years.

Active in Republican politics after joining Sidley, Skinner served as Illinois co-chairman of Bush’s unsuccessful presidential campaign in 1980. Skinner also headed his successful campaign here in 1988.

Skinner served as chairman of the Regional Transportation Authority from 1984 to 1988.

The following year, Bush appointed Skinner, a licensed pilot, as secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

In that role, Skinner oversaw a more than \$30 billion budget and 105,000 employees.

Skinner became the president’s troubleshooter on matters such as the Exxon

Valdez oil spill, the Northern California earthquake and a 1991 national rail strike.

He considers his main accomplishment in that role to be the creation of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. That legislation was intended to create jobs, ease congestion and rebuild the nation’s transportation infrastructure.

“It revolutionized the way we did planning and funding for transportation in this country,” Skinner said.

James B. Busey IV, a now-retired Navy admiral, served under Skinner as head of the Federal Aviation Administration and, later, as deputy transportation secretary.

Skinner developed strong working relationships with congressional committee chairs and White House officials, Busey said.

Skinner “surrounded himself with good people,” he said. “Sam was very effective on the (Capitol) Hill,” Busey said.

The corporate rung

In late 1991, Skinner became Bush’s chief of staff, which he called an around-the-clock and seven-day-a-week job. He held that position for one year.

He then returned to Chicago in 1993 and became president of Commonwealth Edison Co. and its holding company, Unicom Corp., for five years.

James J. O’Connor, the retired

CEO of Unicom and ComEd, described Skinner as tireless and a first-rate manager.

“He was incredibly good at synthesizing very complicated matters,” including regulatory issues,” O’Connor said. “He could take really complex issues, read the materials and form opinions that were extremely valuable to those working with him.”

Skinner next joined Hopkins & Sutter as its co-chairman. That firm is now part of Foley & Lardner LLP.

From 2000 until 2003, Skinner served as president and CEO of USF Corp.

Skinner said his legal skills helped him as a manager and corporate executive.

A newspaper reporter interviewed a defendant who called Skinner “the hammer.” That nickname stuck. ... “I try to be a compassionate hammer,” Skinner said.

“I think understanding public policy and how it works helps me advise corporations on how to deal with government policies,” he said. “And as government becomes more involved in corporate governance, it becomes more important as a valued skill set.”

At Greenberg, Traurig, Skinner heads the Chicago office’s government law and policy practice.

Earlier this month, he took on a new client, Takata Corp., which

faces a massive recall of allegedly defective vehicle airbags.

He’s overseeing an independent panel that will examine the company’s manufacturing and testing of vehicle airbags. The panel will then report its findings to the company and the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Skinner serves as chairman of the board of Echo Global Logistics Inc. and as vice chairman of the board of Virgin America airlines. He also serves as a director for Navigant and the Chicago Board Options Exchange.

Skinner is the father of five children. His son, Thomas V. Skinner, is a partner at Jones, Day’s Chicago office, and his son,

Steven K. Skinner, is CEO of golf course management company KemperSports. His daughter, Jane Skinner, a former Fox News anchor, is married to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell.

Skinner and his wife, Mary Jacobs Skinner, a Sidley partner, are also the parents of two college-age sons.

Throughout his varied career, Skinner has been known for his hard-charging style.

While a federal prosecutor, a newspaper reporter interviewed a defendant who called Skinner “the hammer.”

The nickname stuck.

“I would say that I try to be a compassionate hammer,” Skinner said.