

Michael J. Hershman

A LEGACY OF SERVICE, A GATEKEEPER OF INTEGRITY IN THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF ENFORCING AND PROTECTING WHAT IS RIGHT

By Ava Roosevelt



Michael J. Hershman
Photographer Udo Spreitzenbarth

The Fairfax Group

Michael Hershman is an internationally recognized expert on matters relating to transparency, accountability, and governance. The Fairfax Group, which he founded in 1983, has been engaged by governments, corporations, law firms, and international financial institutions to assist on matters related to the conduct of senior-level officials and the entities with which they do business.

Michael began his career in intelligence and investigations in Europe during the late 1960's, as a special agent with U.S. Military Intelligence, specializing in counterterrorism. After leaving the military, he moved to investigations of government misconduct and financial fraud for the New York State Attorney General's Office and the Office of the Mayor of New York City.

The break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington, D.C. at the Watergate Office Building positioned Michael face-to face with President Richard Nixon. Fighting to salvage his Presidency, Nixon (the most formidable adversary himself) was defended by a battery of the best legal minds in the business of politics. Watergate has become one of the most publicized high-profile investigations in the US, earning its well-deserved place in the history books.

Michael, a senior staff investigator for the Senate Watergate Committee, participated in the hearings which eventually prompted Nixon's resignation. The Koreagate scandal followed, including widespread bribery in the U.S. House of Representatives, which led Michael to the position of Chief Investigator of the Federal Election Commission.

Michael is also a co-founder of Transparency International, the largest independent, not-for-profit coalition promoting transparency and accountability in business and in government, as well as a member of the Board of the International Anti-Corruption Conference Committee. Following his involvement with the Koreagate investigations and several high-profile scandals, Michael was appointed to the Independent Governance Committee for the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA).

To name the scope of Michael's decades-long accomplishments as awe-inspiring would be an understatement. When I boarded my Delta flight from Nice to New York in July, 1996, I was none the wiser as to who Michael Hershman was. It was days after the suspicious crash of TWA Flight 800 from New York to Paris, which claimed 583 lives. The mystery surrounding the explosion was palpable and kept all of the passengers on my flight on edge, including me. By contrast, the man seated next to me exuded calm. He looked somewhat familiar. I could not fathom that this chance meeting was going to irrevocably alter the course of my professional life. He shook my hand and introduced himself.

"Don't be nervous, nothing is going to happen," Hershman declared.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"It is my business to know. "

"You must be working for the FBI."

"No, but I wouldn't tell you if I was."

"What is your business, then?"

"Fairfax Group, a private investigation and corporate compliance firm."

"That sounds very mysterious. Do you work for the bad guys?"

"Never. I apprehend and prosecute them. You would be surprised how many white-collar criminals might be sitting on this plane." Obviously, there was a lot more to this peaceful individual sharing my overseas flight. With each passing hour I felt like I was being interviewed, especially when Michael asked me what I did and what interested me. "Creative writing, real estate in Manhattan and Palm Beach, and philanthropy." My then husband, William Donner Roosevelt, sat on the Board of the William Donner Foundation, and we both were very involved with the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach, serving on its Board of Directors.

"Would you like to work for me as the Director of Business Development at Fairfax?"

"I know nothing about your business."

"What matters is who you know. I'll teach you the rest."

A few days later, we made a handshake deal on the corner of Park Avenue and 58th street. Michael kept his promise. The years spent at Fairfax, until my husband's terminal illness, which prevented me from working there, were the most informative. I felt I was part of something bigger than myself. Working with Michael, assisting him to eliminate the blurry lines between right and wrong, was inspiring, rewarding, and flat out exciting.

AVA

Please tell us about your first assignment out of the military and how it led to becoming focused on counterterrorism?

MICHAEL

My first job out of the military was not associated with counterterrorism but rather corruption. I would go back to my counterterrorism routes some years later. I first joined the NYC Department of Investigation and then the New York State Special Corruption Prosecutors Office. Both agencies were involved in preventing, investigating, and prosecuting corruption within City Agencies, and in the case of the Special Prosecutor's Office, within the criminal justice system. This was the time of the famous Serpico case, when a very brave young detective fought against imbedded corruption within the NYC Police Department's Anti Narcotics unit. As a result, he was shot in the head. And, in the end, most of the detectives in that unit were indicted on corruption charges. If you haven't seen the movie Serpico, you should watch it.

AVA

Going after the bad guys, fraud and misconduct in local and state government must have been both dangerous and exhilarating. Did you ever feel afraid?

MICHAEL

Not necessarily afraid, but very careful. You tend to be very observant as to what is going on around you. And you try not to let "cowboyism" overtake you. Always have back up if you are unsure.

AVA

Do you feel that you played a role in President Nixon's resignation, and what does it mean to you today, 50 years later?



Michael J. Hershman, Matt Rich & Ava Roosevelt
Photo Credit: Christopher M. Twardy

MICHAEL

I took a leave of absence from the Special Prosecutor's Office to go down and help what was then just a break-in at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters. Told my boss I would be back in a couple of weeks. Little did I know that I would be embarking on one of the most important investigations in American history. I was new to national politics, and for the first month or so, worried that we were harming the country by going after the President. However, as the facts began to emerge, my concern turned to anger. Witnessing the abuse of power, the sense that the President and his men thought they were above the law—well I knew we had to finish, to preserve our democratic principles. Since then, I have been absorbed in promoting transparency, accountability and integrity, both in government and business. Democracy can be fragile, and we must remain vigilant to protect it.

SOLOVIEV GROUP

During my tenure at Fairfax, we met the late Sheldon Solow, the feared and revered New York Real Estate mogul who created an empire of the most prestigious holdings, culminating with the iconic 9 West 57th street in Manhattan. He hired Michael and Fairfax to assist him initially in the matters of compliance.

AVA

Please tell us about your relationship with Sheldon, and how it led to your present position of Chief Executive Officer of the Soloviev Group, the vast conglomerate of railroads and agriculture holdings across the West, including real estate development, energy and hospitality services.

MICHAEL

Sheldon was a character. When I first met him more than 30 years ago it was specifically in a professional setting. I provided litigation support, business risk advice and acquisition due diligence. As time went by, we became good friends. He represented the true American dream story—rags to riches. He was a man of integrity from the old school. A handshake meant more than a contract. But he was also very stubborn, and would sue at the drop of a hat if he thought he had been wronged.

Sheldon became very ill in 2020 and his son Stefan asked if I would help, considering his father's pending demise. I thought I would give my support for a short time, but it has now been over 3 years and I am still the CEO of the Soloviev Group (his son Stefan adopted his grandfather's original name when they immigrated from Europe). And yes, it is a multi-billion-dollar multi-sector company with divisions including Real Estate Development and Management, Hospitality, Transportation, Renewable Energy, Agriculture and Ranching.

AVA

Which aspect of the vast Soloviev domain inspires you the most?

MICHAEL

What inspires me the most is the Soloviev Foundation, which is dedicated to socially responsible issues. We can give back to the communities in which we work and support the causes of everything from refugee assistance to promoting ethical values.

AVA

Please tell us about the Freedom Plaza, more than six acres of undeveloped land between East 38th and 41st Streets in Manhattan. How do you plan to compete to obtain one of the most coveted casino licenses, to create an expansive complex with the casino, hotel, retail, Democracy Museum and over 1,350 apartments?

MICHAEL

The site you refer to once was a Con Edison Power Generation location. It was purchased by Sheldon Solo around the year 2000 and fully mitigated and re-zoned. It is currently zoned for 4 high rise buildings, one commercial and three residential. Our vision



was changed when the State of New York announced that they would grant three downstate casino licenses. Our plan is to build an unobtrusive casino below grade, a 1250 room 5-star hotel with amenities including conference rooms, event space, with food and beverage as well as retail. Beyond that, we are committed to enhancing the local community by building and maintaining a 4.7-acre park (the largest park in the vicinity), constructing residential building with 1350 units, almost 40% of which would be affordable housing, and the first in the world museum dedicated to freedom and democracy. We have also agreed to pour millions of dollars back to the community to support projects of their choice.

AVA

Sadly, I had to miss the opening, but I understand that Field of Light at Freedom Plaza offers an array of 18,750 lowlight, fiber-optic stemmed spheres that illuminate with a slow subtle change of hue, enchanting over 250 thousand guests so far. Compliments of the Soloviev Foundation, an installation created by renowned artist Bruce Munro is open to the public, free of charge. Tell us about the inception and creation of this massive project?

MICHAEL

New York City, like so many cities around the country, has gone through a difficult time. Covid essentially turned the city into a ghost town. And many have not yet recovered from the losses, both human and business during that period. Finally past Covid, the city is still dealing with a series of problems, migrant issues, an uptick in crime and of course, the shadow of wars and the growth of authoritarianism. We thought, why not provide a gift to the city, to brighten their spirits, and show them a light at the end of the tunnel? So, we commissioned British artist Bruce Munro to create a light spectacular. In several short months, we have had over 15,000 visitors, with many more thousands on the way.



CUCINA 81/2

AVA

The transformation of the popular Cucina 8 ½ restaurant, located at 9 West 57th in Manhattan, during the height of the pandemic, was challenging. The result is a family and business-friendly Italian lunch and dinner experience, located in the heart of Midtown. To me, it feels like home. Please tell us about your relationship with August J. Ceradini Jr, the sophisticated, unflappable proprietor and gatekeeper of the now famed eatery to the rich, famous, and just average folks?

MICHAEL

The restaurant has a storied history. It was opened more than 20 years ago as a French Restaurant called Brasserie 81/2. It hosted scenes from the show Sex and the City when the girls would go out for Cosmopolitans. In fact, we still have a Sex and the City Cosmopolitan served at the bar. As many restaurants did, it closed during Covid, and we decided to give it a facelift and a new vision. Hence the Italian eatery Cucina 81/2. We wanted, however, to maintain the feeling of old New York where dining was an experience. August, as Chair of the Culinary institute of America, is recognized as one of the foremost restaurateurs in New York City. When I first met him, I knew immediately that he would bring old world charm to our new vision.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

AVA

You sit on the Board as a Member of the Soloviev Foundation, the charitable arm of the Soloviev Group. I noticed a large bequest from the Soloviev Foundation to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The Center is the brainchild of John Walsh of America's Most Wanted fame, and was created in the aftermath of the abduction and murder of his son Adam. During my visit, the Hotline never stopped ringing, as 2300 children are reported missing daily in the US alone. I will never forget the faces of thousands of abducted and murdered children displayed there. What was your first experience with the atrocities related to the abducting, exploiting, and murdering of children? Did it lead directly to this donation?

MICHAEL

I served on the Committee of the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children for several years. I also served as a Senior Advisor for 13 years to the Secretary General of INTERPOL. The issue of child exploitation is one that had been in my focus for many years. The child trafficking industry is insidious, and the world's attention has not reached a level with which I am satisfied. We must do everything within our power to stop the organized criminals who traffic these children and we are committed to supporting ICMEC in the hopes that we can make a difference.

AVA

What else do you plan to do to combat this world-wide epidemic claiming eight million missing children a year?

MICHAEL

Our Foundation is supporting the development of a movie that will highlight the problem and hopefully build world condemnation and change. I think back to the movie "Blood Diamond" and how it motivated a drastic change in an industry which exploited workers and created a human rights catastrophe.

Work & Home Life

AVA

Your 30th floor office in the now-famed 9 west 57th street in Manhattan floats over Central Park and offers the heart-stopping panorama of the Upper East Side. Standing there makes me want to live forever. How does it make you feel?

MICHAEL

Regardless of how tired or frustrated I am, when I look out of the window at the view of Central Park a sense of calm comes over me. Being a New Yorker, it reminds me of how great the city is. When I see folks walking, jogging, or just relaxing in the park, it reminds me how resilient the people of New York City are. The other day I witnessed folks jogging in the park in the snow. Only in New York!

AVA

Your two homes are in Delray, Florida and Asheville, NC. Yet, for as long as I have known you, it seems like you reside on a plane. How would you define yourself and your life today? Is it a whole new beginning?

MICHAEL

Lots of folk brag about the number of frequent flyer miles they have. I am embarrassed by it. I wish I didn't have to fly so much, but in my business, you go where the work is, or rather where the trouble is. I have lived in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and have worked in more than 140 countries. I very much like working in different environments. The varying cultures intrigue me and often provide challenges to my work effort. However, working out challenges in difficult situations keeps the mind active and hopefully the body young.

AVA

In the race of life, what is most important to you today? What do you aspire to add to the list of your extraordinary accomplishments?

MICHAEL

First and always, family is first. Beyond that, I just hope that I am remembered for trying my best to make a difference - to help the world be a safer and fairer place.

