

Private Plane Lobby Aids Congestion

By Drew Pearson
and Jack Anderson

Now that the Nation has gotten over the political hiccups at Chicago and Miami Beach Washington today will start grappling with the long delayed problem of congested airports.

In the Department of Transportation there is an electrically lighted map of the USA revealing that at 17 airports planes take off or land every one to two minutes. The map also shows 41 airports where planes take off or land every two to three minutes. In addition, there are 32 airports where planes take off or land every three to four minutes, and 92 airports where traffic goes in and out every six or so minutes.

By far the greatest congestion is between Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, together with the Midwest air metropolis of Chicago.

And probably the biggest problem Secretary of Transportation Alan Boyd has to cope with is the powerful lobby of the private airplanes. This lobby, the AOPA, the Aircraft Owners & Pilots Association, is the equivalent of the National Rifle Association in its influence over Congress. Its theory is that one executive in a private plane is more important than 180 tourists in a big jet 707. The big executive should land first.

Sixteen per cent of the traffic coming into Kennedy airport in New York is made up of private planes. The private traffic into LaGuardia and Newark is even greater—30 per cent. The flight rule that governs these airports is "first come, first served."

In other words, a small private plane able to fly below the clouds can hop in ahead of a big airliner arriving from London or Paris which has to remain stacked in the air space somewhere between New York and Boston. Or the big jets flying up from Washington sometimes have to circle over New Jersey for one to three hours while traffic piles up over LaGuardia and smaller private planes hop in ahead.

Air's "Holy Cow"

"General aviation," the term applied to private planes, is the "holy cow" of air traffic. The CAB doesn't like to discuss it. The Department of Transportation has nebulous power to control it. And Congress runs for cover whenever anyone tries to put commercial traffic ahead of private traffic.

One remedy for air traffic congestion obviously is more airports. This, however, takes money at a time when Congress has decreed a small budget. It also requires local communities to pick areas not too far from cities where real estate values are not too high

and where too many people do not object to moving. In addition, there is the problem of bird refuges which has cropped up in Morristown, N.J., where the New York Port Authority had planned to locate a big jet airport. The bird protectors of northern New Jersey ruled otherwise.

Westchester County, N.Y., has an excellent airport, but the business executives who own private planes object to landing there because it takes them 1½ hours to drive to their offices in Manhattan.

When it comes to building more airports or even improving the traffic regulation of existing airports, the Congress bows to the powerful AOPA lobby. The CAB had estimated that commercial aviation accounted for 50 per cent of traffic into airports; the military 30 per cent; and private planes, 20 per cent. On this basis it was proposed to tax gasoline used at airports in order to finance improved traffic facilities and future airports.

But even a tax of 6 cents a gallon was vetoed by AOPA and eventually by its friends in Congress. Six cents a gallon would have paid for only a fraction of the 20 per cent estimated private planes' usage of airports.

Foreign Airlines

Meanwhile, traffic continues to build up. Near misses, though unpublicized, continue

almost every day; and the United States is almost certain to hear from foreign airlines which have the right to expect reciprocal privileges in the United States. Since the Paris and London airports are nowhere as congested as New York, they are able to give immediate landing privileges to U.S. planes. Foreign planes claim they should have the same immediate right to land in New York rather than consuming gasoline and frustrating passengers while stacked over New England.

Chicago Aftermath

There were squawks at Chicago that President Johnson sent Federal workers there to help prepare for the Democratic convention. A Government truck was spotted unloading light fixtures at the convention hall, while nine carpenters and laborers on the Federal payroll were reported working at convention hall . . . This is true. They constructed a headquarters for the Secret Service . . . LBJ intimates have confided that President Johnson, an admirer of Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, might have kept out of the election campaign if the Republicans had nominated Gov. Rockefeller . . . A brain trust of more than 250 thinkers, directed by Washington economist Robert Nathan, has been grinding out position papers for Humphrey.

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