

Poster

Breaking

The Bank

And the

Sound

Barrier

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

The Big Boomer had fought his way to the witness stand and was jettisoning it. "A good public servant is getting the ax because of a conspiracy in the Air Force . . . the scoundrels in the Air Force are trying to frame Mr. Fitzgerald . . . the brutality of the military bureaucracy."

These biased indictments rolled up out of Clark Mollenhoff's torso in the Civil Service Commission's hearing room where A. Ernest Fitzgerald, the man who first exposed the Lockheed C-5A and got fired for it, was trying to get his Pentagon job back. Mollenhoff, righteous even unto self-righteousness, was destroying the hearing's atmosphere of false seriousness, the polite, slightly nasty deportment of an ecclesiastical trial's certainty of foregone conclusion, of a priori judgment.

Each time the Big Boomer would let go with another epithet, Col. Teagarden, the Air Force's lawyer, would coil backwards and, like a prosecutorial abbot, turn his head away and smile the corners of his mouth downward in sweet disdain. He and the government had tried to keep the heretical Mollenhoff from testifying, but he was there bellowing reproofs at them so they tried to make him out as a maniac, with a crazy hair inside irritating his gut.

Mollenhoff was an unaccountable mistake. One of the premier investigative reporters in Washington and a loudly honest man, Nixon had appointed him as special counsel to the President at the beginning of his first term. He is back with The Des Moines Register and Tribune now. But while at the White House he handled the Fitzgerald case and concluded the Air Force was out to get the former Pentagon official for making public the story of the lost Lockheed

C-5A billions. To keep Mollenhoff from talking at Civil Service hearings the Air Force tried to exercise privilege on the man against his will.

That was too raw even for the hearing examiner, yet what the Big Boomer had to say may still significantly understate the culpability of some very high-ranking people in the five-sided palace of death.

Fitzgerald's revelations concern the cost overruns which have jumped the per-plane cost of the great jet-assisted gooney bird from \$28 to \$56 million. But cost overrun may be a euphemism for far graver acts. Or thus it seemed to Lockheed executive Henry M. Durham who popped up with evidence showing that C-5As were coming off the production line with literally thousands of parts missing.

He told the inevitable Senate committee investigating the nearly useless aircraft that, "The subterfuge began on Saturday, March 12, 1968, with the roll-out of Ship 0001 and continued. It rolled out with slave landing gear, false leading edges, dummy visor (the nose of the aircraft) and other faked components."

This and a series of other charges including an Air Force overpayment of a billion dollars to Lockheed, were substantiated by a General Accounting Office audit.

They forgot to give Durham a medal for this. Although his evidence might have prevented some of the cracked wings and the 3,000, yes, 3,000, landing gear failures the plane has experienced, he got it worse than Fitzgerald.

At first nobody would even pay attention to him. "I wrote to 86 senators and congressman. I haven't heard from them yet. I received only 16 replies and they were 'dear friend' letters," he says but finally he did reach Morton Mintz of The Washington Post. The facts got out and Durham lost his job.

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The C-5A Flap

COMMENTARY FROM

"I've spent practically all my life working for Lockheed," says Durham who reports that he is working on a low-salary temporary position. Although his predicament has been aired on network television weekly for three months, he has been blackballed, explains Durham, who is an ex-employee of a private firm. He doesn't have Fitzgerald's recourse to the Civil Service.

After Durham there was yet more in March the Congressional Quarterly published comments by Lockheed executives who said that the problems were caused by company management. The company provided material not covered by company contracts to cover the production of the C-5A. The material was of original aircraft parts and that frequently this was done with metal that had not undergone hardening through a critical heat treatment process.

"I would not want to be a passenger on one of our C-5A flying coffins," one of the workers was quoted as saying.

And who is correct, and who is not? Fitzgerald with the Big Boomer shouting maledictions while the Air Force Abbot makes silent snickers.

No one has gone to jail for the C-5A. No one's been indicted. There has never been a grand jury investigation. The Justice Department has tried to determine if fraud, theft, kick-backs, bribery or embezzlement have been committed, but the Secretary of the Air Force is content to put soldiers in a plane that's considered a death trap by men who helped build it.

While waiting to see if one will go down with 400 American soldiers on board, we civilians can share the excitement and suspense of modern air travel by flying in the Lockheed-built L-1011 commercial jumbo jet. For the fainthearted there is the Boeing 747, but thumbs up and happy landings everyone.