

Judgment On Concorde

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON—There was a remarkable sight in Washington last week. A member of the Cabinet sat alone on the stage of a large government auditorium through one whole day, listening to arguments on a difficult question of public policy. And he promised to base his decision on the open record, not on secret pressures.

The Secretary of Transportation, William T. Coleman Jr., must decide whether to let Concorde, the British-French supersonic airliner, land at Kennedy and Dulles Airports. He had a particular purpose in approaching his decision through that open hearing: to persuade both sides on this agitated issue, no matter who wins, that the process was honest.

"I only hope," Mr. Coleman said at the hearing, "that . . . all will recognize that this decision will be made without prejudgment or bias, absent any prior commitment to any person, organization or government." It was doubtless a vain hope. The lawyers, aviation experts, environmentalists, foreign officials and journalists in that auditorium would have a hard time believing in anything so pure. One remarked, "It is all very interesting, but if only one could know the real story of what is going on at the White House. . . ."

In Paris and London, reactions to the hearing were cynical. A diplomat was quoted as saying that the United States government was trying to portray the forthcoming decision as "technical," which was humbug: "It is

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pure politics." Nor was that only a foreign reaction. One American columnist wrote that the White House wanted to say yes to Concorde, and Mr. Coleman would get the message.

Well, my belief is that the cynics do not know their man. It may sound naive, but I think William Coleman means it when he says he is going to decide this one on his own, and on the merits. He is that rarity, an official who does not lust for his office—he is quite ready to go back home to Philadelphia and practice law—and thus sees no need to sacrifice principle for it. Moreover, he has said privately that President Ford has put no pressure on him to decide this question one way or the other.

There could hardly be a better example than the Concorde project of the need for open, informed decisions in a democracy. For the way Britain and France have carried it on, over the years, shows how secret decisions on premises never explained in public may warp government policy to the point of irrationality.

Suppose, ten or fifteen years ago, the British and French publics had been asked to spend irrecoverable billions on a plane that could never fly commercially without subsidy. Suppose they had been told that the plane would be two to four times as noisy as existing jets, and use up to three times as much fuel per seat mile. Suppose they had known that the plane would carry only about 100 passengers, with barely the range to cross the Atlantic.

Such a proposal would have been scornfully rejected—indeed, would never have been made. The only way the Concorde project could be carried on was to keep the public unaware of its realities as long as possible, and then argue that too much had been invested to stop now.

When a new Labor Government took office in 1964 and discovered the horrible truth about Concorde, it immediately decided to cancel the project. But General de Gaulle threatened to veto, and Prime Minister Wilson caved in. The incident foreshadowed the general government weakness and deception that have so damaged Britain over the last dozen years.

A French official at the hearing, Claude Abraham, called Concorde "a symbol of the skill and tenacity of two great nations." Skill, yes. But above all Concorde is a symbol of stubborn bureaucratic resistance to reality. It exemplifies one of the fundamental problems of modern government: the difficulty, sometimes it seems the impossibility, of changing a bad decision once made.

Of course William Coleman is not entitled to tell Britain and France what is best for them, though a good many citizens and friends of those countries would be grateful if he stopped the Concorde folly. He has pledged to decide these applications as a judge would, on particular standards of law. He must weigh the carriers' rights, safety, the environment—all, as he said, in terms of the American people's interest. Mr. Coleman acted very much as a judge at the hearing, showing a close knowledge of the record. As judges often do, he asked questions that might make his task easier. For instance, he got the British and French to concede that no treaty dictated his decision. On the other side, he may have made it easier to say yes by winning agreement that only four daily flights are at issue now.

But good judges do not wear blinders. Mr. Coleman knows that more is really at stake than those four flights. His decision should say a good deal about the values underlying the dry words of our law. And he will be speaking to citizens who have come to feel that events are beyond their control, asking them for renewed confidence in the process of government.