

Ex-White House Aide Got Airline Job Through Transportation Safety Chief

By Jack Egan

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The chief operating officer of the National Transportation Safety Board confirmed yesterday in Senate hearings that in February, 1971, he recommended then outgoing White House patronage chief Harry Fleming for a part-time job with Continental Airlines because of Fleming's "strong entree" to various Cabinet departments and to presidential assistant Peter Flanigan.

Four fifths of the board's work involves airplane accidents. But Richard L. Spears, who is presently general manager of the safety board, testified that he saw no conflict of interest in his letter to Continental President Robert F. Six. Spears said he does not "influence substantive findings of the board."

However, Spears also told the special oversight hearings of the Senate Commerce Committee that Flemming helped him get his job at the safety board.

The committee is looking into charges of White House influence and interference with the supposedly independent regulatory agency, which investigates transportation accidents and makes safety recommendations.

Spears wrote Six that "Harry has expressed his interest to me quite casually and I can tell you he will be a valuable man for someone here in Washington since he has such strong entree at the Departments of Justice and State and enjoys the kind of rapport with Pete Flanigan that can be very productive."

Flemming, in a telephone interview, said yesterday that he never was contacted by Six or anyone at Continental. Six was unavailable for comment.

At the time the letter was sent, Spears was serving only as a special consultant to safety board Chairman John H. Reed on White House recommendation.

However, under Spears' signature on the letter is the title "executive director" of the agency, a position occupied at that time by a 30-year career civil servant who claims he was forced out of his post a month later to provide a patronage job for Spears.

Reed testified on Monday that, on White House urging, he changed the title of the executive director job to general manager, thereby shifting it from a Civil Service post to a policymaking political appointment position.

Spears yesterday denied that he intentionally used the

executive director title improperly, saying it must have been a secretarial error he overlooked. "I was not as careful about my p'san q's as I might have been," he told the committee.

While Spears claimed he had no policy influence at the safety board, C.O. Miller, who heads the Aviation Safety Bureau, told the hearing yesterday that his division had been subjected to "various forms of interference and harassment" since Spears' arrival which compromised the thoroughness of their work.

Miller said that Spears had tried to make him quit his job, and had in fact replaced him with an acting director while he was away at a federal executive institute earlier this year. This move was halted temporarily when Miller appealed to the full board, and further action is awaiting Spears' submission of a bill of particulars against Miller.