IS AN AIR MINISTRY NECESSARY?

Senator Sheppard of the Military Affairs Committee, an Administration Man, Tells Why He Thinks Not—Production Adequate, Public Tension Unjustified

By RICHARD BARRY.

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N 0 other subject connected with the war is so much up in the air (no pun intended) as aviation. Every few weeks the public is regaled with a fresh development, as innovating and as revolutionary as the aircraft science itself. First we have vast promises, great expectations, and the constant threat of scandals, unquenched only by the appointment as arbitrary judge of a person of no less consequence than Mr. Hoover.

Now, within the last ten days, has come a vigorous and more or less somber indication that appeal for a separate Air Ministry, a cabinet Ministry of Aeronautics, was advocated by Senator Reed, propelled by Senator New, aided and abetted here and there by various persons both in this country and in England. These champions of a super-air program contend that control of aircraft should no longer be in the hands of either army or navy; that it is of such transcendental importance and of such colossal detail that a separate Cabinet Ministry should be appointed with plenary powers.

Another group of the seeing co-ordination must turn out not aligning for a separate Air Ministry for the United States. They desire an Interstitial Aeronautic Ministry, to work under the direction of a Generalissimo of the Air as all the allied armies work under Foch and the allied navy under Jellicoe. However, against these rearrangements is a very strong and impervious obstacle—the Administration. Mr. Wilson, Mr. Baker, and Mr. Daniels do not think a separate Air Ministry. They are content, for the present, to let things remain as they are and the present scheme of things that triaminate—Wilson, Baker, and Daniels—speaks not for a separate Air Ministry.

What, then, is the view of the Administration? Why is it so indifferent in resisting the movement for control of the Ministry? These are the recommendations which pour in upon it. The writer discussed this subject at length with various officers of the navy, officers in Washington, and at all points found a great divergence of opinion. At least there was a general opinion that the man of prominence in the matter who frankly declared he knew very little about the airship problem. Curiously, this was the author of the act establishing the Air Force Board, Morris Sheppard, Senator from Texas, and member of the Senate Military Affairs Committee. It seemed rather surprising, especially as they may be accepted as the viewpoint of a steady supporter of the Administration in the Senate.

"There is no genuine reason for agitation of the aircraft situation at the present time," said Senator Sheppard. "I am sure that the President is right in not recommending a separate ministry for the control of aviation, as was recommended to him last April by the majority report of the Senate Select Committee. All I had the honor of writing the minority report (concurred in by Senators Myron and Kirby) in which I took exception to the opinion that that that a special Air Croupa had been inefficient in the handling of airplanes. Since then my opinion has not changed. I still believe that the face of unaltered difficulties has not been accomplished by our Government in aviation production an unaltered task, and that it must be done with characteristics that the American energy, capacity, patriotism, and enthusiasm.

Moreover, at the present time I see no reason for taking out of the hands of the Secretary of War and of the Secretary of the Navy and of the Aircraft Production Board the various controls which now emanate from them. To my mind that would only add a complication instead of removing one. In any event, the President is the best one to judge of these necessities. No one can justly charge him with slowness to see on any recognized need of national or international cooperation, especially in view of his initiative in forcing the present allied control in France, to say nothing of the many measures for control in the country which he has put through in this country.

"The greatest difficulty in this matter is more fundamental than the general public realizes. For many months, in fact ever since we entered the war, speculation about airplanes and the possibilities of runs has run wild. Sometimes I wonder whether some of our people are not making the same mistake in basing on the airplane that the whole German Nation made in banking on the submarine. "Our advantage, and it is basic, as one can readily see, is this: The Germans made their promises of submarine ef- ficiency official and practically asked all the new development in war- fare; while our promises of airplane of- ficiency have been at all times unof-ficial, superceded by an eager hope on the part of the public, and fed by a volume of more or less imaginative journalistic ardor.

"Do not construe what I am saying as pessimistic. I am as eager as any to see the airplanes produced, and was one of the first to suggest a separate department, and to introduce a bill to that effect. Later I found it impracticable for the present. And I think what we have done already is marvelous and that nothing should be left undone to carry our air supremacy forward. However, let us be we are, and let us "stay on the job" in this matter. People have for so long been visualizing fleets of thousands of airplanes blinding the German, blunting their armi- ments to death, devastating their cities, ending the war dramatically by one overwhelm- ing onslaught from the air, that I think it fully continues in this self-deception. I think we can gain the supremacy in the air, and that we will gain it. I think that, possibly by next Spring, we may be able to send a formidable fleet of planes—even perhaps of several hundred —on a bombing expedition over the Ger- man lines, even as far as Berlin. But when we accomplish such a thing it will be an absolutely stupendous achieve- ment, one outstruggling almost every other achievement of the war.

"Think of what it means! Turning out battleships what would be if we were asked to turn out 10,000 battleships within a year, or 20,000 to 30,000, as many expected, by the present time. The battleship is one of the most highly technical, delicate, and complicated ma- chines of which machinery is absolute and painstakingly secure in the smallest details more important may be a small motor car, worth 4,000 parts and requires from 1,000 to 2,000 different drawings in the prepara- tion. One battleship drawing has 4,000 parts and requires from 1,000 to 2,000 different drawings as are required for a battel- ship. Every part is strained to the utmost, and the slightest break anywhere means instant disaster. When it is re- moved from the wheels of railroad trains, due to hot boxes, &c., pieces of railroad and automobile engines, tires on automobiles, &c., the slightest break in their mechanism, and the slightest break almost anywhere means instant disaster. When it is re- moved from the wheels of railroad trains, due to hot boxes, &c., pieces of railroad and automobile engines, tires on automobiles, &c., the slightest break almost anywhere means instant disaster. When it is re- moved from the wheels of railroad trains, due to hot boxes, &c., pieces of railroad and automobile engines, tires on automobiles, &c., the slightest break almost anywhere means instant disaster. When it is re- moved from the wheels of railroad trains, due to hot boxes, &c., pieces of railroad and automobile engines, tires on automobiles, &c., the slightest break almost anywhere means instant disaster. When it is re- moved from the wheels of railroad trains, due to hot boxes, &c., pieces of railroad and automobile engines, tires on automobiles, &c., the slightest break almost anywhere means instant disaster.

Then remember that every fighting plane must have machine guns, synchronizing devices, special telescope, airplane sights, wireless apparatus, cameras of special type, electric heating devices for clothing, oxygen apparatus, special landing gear, special gauges, barometers, com- pensators, altimeters, &c.

No one can understand, in my mind, together with the fact that prior to the war the United States Government had purchased not another less than 280 airplanes in its entire history, the whole of the few airplane factories in the country not one was making over five or six a month, it is a betrayal of the facts, and yet, that is only the truth, that we now have a steady and adequate production of air- planes, with their equipment. No more difficult or responsible task has ever fallen to the hand and brain of man. When the whole history of the war is written I am sure it will be stated that we have met it adequately.

"But why exact is this responsibility? Those on the floor are looking for a local, organization and distribution, and striving to lay the shackles of production and mindful with some new sh wey scheme of management, like the establishment of a new Cabinet Minister, we, I fear, every- muting themselves to forget the funda- mentals in the case. There is about the whole business, it seems to me, a lack of es- sence of statement, of definition, and of alleviation."

"Thus we advocate a Cabinet mem- her for Aeronautics, despite the contrary opinion of the President, seem to me to less reckless than the pilot who takes the air without examining his pet tank. If the President desires so radical a change in Governmental machinery, and if it becomes necessary he will desire it—then he will ask for it; and, of course, then he shall have it. But why impose it upon him? What is the only compensation?"

"As for Inter- a committee of the Military Forces, the opinion of the President must have been accepted. It is to be feared that the Senate, who are too busy to study the subject, have not made up their minds upon the subject."

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Air we already have practically the same thing in the board which sits in Paris to facilitate the satisfaction of all airplane requirements.

While I have no desire to minimize the value or the possibilities of aerial warfare it seems to me that the establishment of a new Cabinet portfolio to govern it would be a bit of rather fevered legislation. While the airplane is highly important and while its quick production and development may even be vital to our military success, it is, and must be in its last analysis, only an adjunct to the army and navy. It seems to me a total misconception of its functions to segregate its production or its distribution from the routine work of the two great military branches of the Government. That cannot be done any more than you can segregate its work in action from that of the army and navy. It can only operate in the field under the protection of the army and on the sea from the haven of the fleet. Why should it be regarded as a thing apart, a latter-day miracle, which is to wing us to victory in some marvelous manner, above our soldiers, beyond our ships?

"I understand the very natural public eagerness about the airplane. The nervous tension under which we, as a nation, are laboring in conducting the war is constantly looking for relief, and that relief seems often most readily apparent if we only had an overwhelming fleet of battleplanes. Because the field is so new, because the airplane itself is so little understood generally, aeronautics presents a lively ground for legislative as it does for journalistic speculation.

"However, we must not lose sight of the essential facts, as I am sure the President has not. Let us remember that the average life of the battle motor is very limited; that for every plane in the air there must be two on the ground; that the plane is most delicate and costly in construction and infinitely difficult to operate, that for every pilot to operate it ten to fifteen skilled mechanics are required to make and to maintain it; that it is quite useless without well-equipped hangars and airdromes and that these can exist near enough to the enemy to be of any advantage only as adjuncts of the army and navy.

"All of this being true, how then can the airplane be considered as separate from the army and navy? If we need a Ministry of Aeronautics, why not have also a Ministry of Submarines, or a Ministry of Military Food Supply, or a Ministry of Clothing, or a Ministry of Ordnance?"

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