

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



Hydroaeroplane Guarding the American Fleet in Home Waters.

U. S. Committee on Public Information

By RICHARD BARRY.

NO 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 invigorating and as revolutionary as the aircraft science itself. First we have vast promises, great expectations, buoyant hopes. Then equally vast charges of scandal, quieted only by the appointment as arbitrary judge of a person of no less consequence than Mr. Hughes.

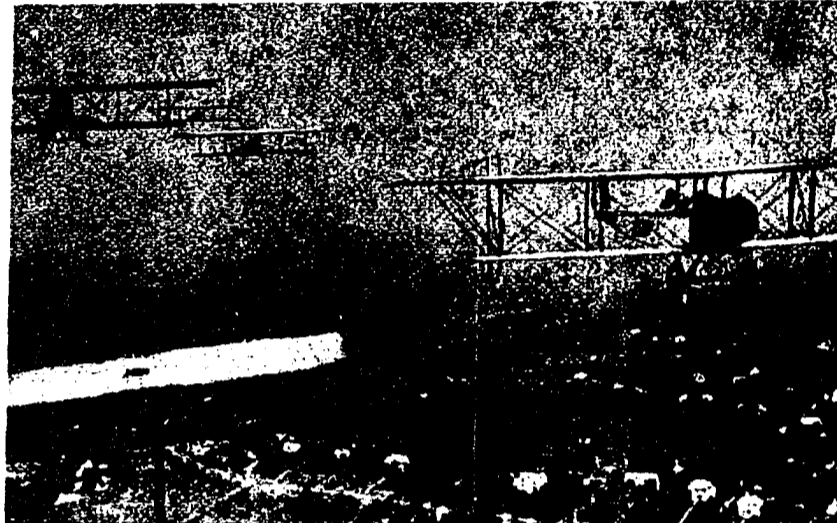
Now, within the last ten days, has come a vigorous and more or less authoritative appeal for a separate Air Ministry, a cabinet Ministry of Aeronautics fathered by Senator Reed, propelled by Senator New, aided and abetted here and there by various persons both in this country and in England. These champions 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 transcendent importance and of such complex detail that a separate Cabinet Minister should be appointed with plenary powers.

Another group of far seeing co-ordinators do not stop with agitation for a separate Air Ministry for the United States. They desire an Interallied Aeronautic Ministry, to work under the direction of a Generalissimo of the Air as all the allied armies work under Foch and the allied navies under Beatty.

However, against these rearrangers of the status quo stands at present an insuperable obstacle—the Administration. Mr. Wilson, Mr. Baker, and Mr. Daniels do not think the time has come for a separate Air Ministry. They are content, for the present, to let things remain as they are, and in the present scheme of things that triumvirate—Wilson, Baker, and Daniels—speaks not only the first, but the last, word.

What, then, is the view of the Administration? Why is it so stubborn in resisting the multitude of appeals and recommendations which pour in upon it? The writer discussed this subject at length with several Senators, army and navy officers in Washington, and at all points found a great divergence of opinion. At length he discovered the only man of prominence in the matter who frankly declared he knew very little about the airplane problem. Curiously, this was the author of the act establishing the Aircraft Board, Morris Sheppard, Senator from Texas, and member of the Senate Military Affairs Committee. It seems worth while to record his views, 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, "and I am sure that the President is right in not recommending a separate ministry or bureau for the control of aviation, as was recommended to him last April by the majority report of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs. I had the honor of writing the mi-



Squadron of American Airplanes Flying in V Formation at Kelly Field, Texas.

U. S. Committee on Public Information



The Langley, a Giant Bombing Airplane Recently Completed for the U. S. Army.

U. S. Committee on Public Information

nority report (concurred in by Senators Myers and Kirby) in which I took exception to the opinion that the Signal Corps had been inefficient in its handling of airplanes. Since then my opinion has not changed. I still believe that in the face of unparalleled difficulty there has been accomplished by our Government in aviation production an unparalleled task, and that it has been done with characteristic 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 seize on any recognized need of national or of international co-ordination, especially in view of his initiative in forcing the present allied control in France, to say nothing of the many measures for centralization he has put through in this country.

"The great 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 has run wild. Sometimes I wonder whether some of our people are not making the same mistake in banking 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 efficiency official and practically staked their all on that new development in warfare; while our promises of airplane efficiency have been at all times unofficial, superinduced by an eager hope on the part of the public, and fed by a volume of more or less imaginative journalistic speculation.

"Do not construe what I am saying as pessimistic. I am as eager as any one to see the airplane developed, 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 that what we have done already is marvelous and that nothing should be left undone to carry our air supremacy forward.

"However, let us be sane. Let us 'stay on the ground' in this matter. People have for so long been visualizing fleets of thousands of battleplanes blinding the Germans, stinging their armies to death, devastating their cities, ending the war dramatically by one overwhelming onslaught from the air, that I think it folly to continue in this self-deception. I think we can gain the ascendancy 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—perhaps even of several hundred—on a bombing expedition over the German lines, even as far as Berlin. But when we accomplish such a thing it will be an absolutely stupendous achievement, one outranking almost every other achievement of the war.

"Think of what it means! Turning out battleplanes is not like turning out motor cars; it is more like turning out

battleships. What would be said 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 battleplane is one of the most highly technical, delicate, and complicated machines known to man. In no other form of machinery is absolute and painstaking accuracy in the smallest details more indispensable. A battleplane has about 4,000 parts and requires from 1,800 to 2,800 different drawings in the preparation for its manufacture, almost as many drawings as are required for a battleship. Every part is strained to the utmost while the machine is in the air, and the slightest break almost anywhere means instant disaster. When it is remembered how often the wheels of railway trains, due to hot boxes, &c., parts of railway and automobile engines, tires on automobiles, &c., go wrong, necessitating immediate repair, and that any similar break on an airplane would mean, as a rule, death to its occupants, some part of the difficulty and responsibility involved in making a finished plane may be understood.

"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, speed indicators, special gauges, barometers, compasses, altimeters, &c.

"Bearing all this in mind, together with the fact that prior to the war the United States Government had purchased altogether less than 200 airplanes in its entire history, and that of the few airplane factories in the country not one was making over five or six a month, it is a fairly startling statement to say, what is only the truth, that we now have a steady and adequate production of airplanes, 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 the impossible? These gentlemen who are looking for flaws in organization and distribution, and striving to allay the anxiety of the public mind with some new showy scheme of management, like the establishment of a new Cabinet Minister, are, I fear, permitting themselves to forget the fundamentals in the case. There is about the whole business, it seems, an airy carelessness of statement, of expectation, and of allegation.

"Those who advocate a Cabinet member for Aeronautics, despite the contrary opinion of the President, seem to me no less reckless than the pilot who takes the air without examining his petrol 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 on him what may be only a complication?

"As for an Interallied Ministry of the

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Is an Air Ministry Necessary?

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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 ner-

vous 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?"