

*Airlines and Air Mail: The Post Office and the Birth of the Commercial Aviation Industry.* F. Robert van der Linden. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. xv + 349 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-813-12219-8.

Reviewed by David D. Lee

During the 1920s and the early 1930s, a coalition of public policymakers and industry leaders launched two initiatives that laid the foundation for the emerging commercial aviation industry in the United States. To build public confidence in this new form of transportation, the Air Commerce Act of 1926 directed the federal government, largely through the Department of Commerce, to set and enforce safety standards for aircraft construction and operation. This legislation was passed immediately after the Kelly Air Mail Act of 1925, which authorized the Post Office Department to begin awarding airmail contracts to commercial carriers, thereby providing a subsidy for operators while they built a customer base of passengers and freight from the private sector.

Robert van der Linden, curator of air transportation at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum, has produced a first-rate study of the role the Post Office Department played in the growth of commercial aviation. As van der Linden notes, the most important figure in commercial aviation policy during this era was Herbert Hoover's postmaster general, Walter F. Brown, and he devotes considerable space to this often misunderstood figure. Van der Linden emphasizes Brown's progressive heritage in explaining the postmaster general's approach to commercial aviation. Deeply influenced by his close ties with Theodore Roosevelt, Brown brought the concepts of TR's New Nationalism to his work in commercial aviation, and he also applied Herbert Hoover's concept of an "associative state," which relied on voluntary cooperation between industry leaders and government officials to rationalize the industry with a minimum of overt federal regulation.

When Brown became postmaster general in 1929, he knew very little about flying, but his department's role in issuing airmail contracts automatically made him an important figure in aviation. He quickly realized that the new industry faced pressing financial problems, problems made even worse by the onset of the Great Depression just a few months after the Hoover administration took office. Brown also believed that a strong commercial aviation system was crucial to developing military aspects of flying, and he was determined to see this new transportation industry avoid the destructive competition and overbuilding that was associated with the development of the rail industry a half-century earlier.

Brown's solution was a drastic overhaul of the government's policy regarding airmail contracts. He envisioned a rational air transport system operated by well-established, well-financed companies that maximized the airplane's advantages by flying long routes and operating at night. He believed a policy that simply encouraged quick delivery of the mail was short sighted and would not develop the industry. Instead, he proposed to compensate the operators on the basis of the space available to haul the mail, an approach that encouraged carriers to operate larger, multiengine aircraft equipped with two-way radios, features that were all important to attracting passengers and private-sector shippers. Brown also concluded that competitive bidding on contracts was counterproductive, and he proposed to negotiate contracts with well-established firms.

Brown's proposal passed Congress as the Watres Act of 1930, although the proposal to eliminate competitive bidding proved controversial and was deleted from the legislation. The postmaster general implemented the new legislation zealously, with dramatic results. The number of scheduled aircraft miles and passenger miles increased rapidly, while the average rate per mile that the department paid to carriers fell by half. An integrated air-transport system emerged, based on three transcontinental routes and a series of north-south routes. The postmaster general virtually eliminated competitive bidding by negotiating aggressively—some would say highhandedly—with companies that were dependent on his favor to secure airmail contracts.

Brown's approach benefited the larger, better-funded companies, while smaller companies found themselves squeezed out of the market. Convinced that Brown was exceeding his legal authority, these firms allied themselves with the political opponents of the Hoover administration. When the Democrats came to power in 1933, Senator Hugo Black conducted an extensive, well-publicized investigation of the airmail contracts and concluded that Brown and the Post Office Department had acted illegally in awarding them. In early 1934, reacting to the publicity generated by the Black Committee hearings, the Post Office Department canceled the contracts, and the Roosevelt administration turned to the Army to fly the mail, although with disastrous results. The Black-McKellar Act of 1934 implemented a more competitive model for commercial aviation, but the industry languished until Congress passed the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938, which largely restored the underlying principles of the Hoover-Brown era. To a considerable extent, Brown's approach to developing commercial aviation undergirded federal policy until the end of regulations in 1978.

Van der Linden has written an enlightening book about this controversial era in the history of commercial aviation. Although scholars have long recognized the Brown's importance

in fostering commercial aviation, van der Linden is the first to examine his role in such detail. In doing so, he has not only documented Brown's work but has also articulated the philosophy that guided Brown's efforts. Quite rightly, he also concludes that the development of commercial aviation was a significant achievement of the Hoover administration that has gone unnoticed by scholars as well by as Hoover admirers. Thoroughly researched, *Airlines and Air Mail* draws on the author's extensive knowledge of American aviation. Writing on the eve of the centennial of powered flight, van der Linden has enlarged our understanding of a turning point in the history of commercial aviation in the United States.

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