8-13-1957

Statement before Aviation Subcommittee of Senate Commerce Committee

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Recommended Citation
Thurmond, Strom, "Statement before Aviation Subcommittee of Senate Commerce Committee" (1957). Strom Thurmond Collection, Mss100. 1485.
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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

I appreciate the opportunity of appearing this morning to testify in favor of S. 4, a bill which I consider to be one of the most vital safety measures facing the Congress today. This legislation, which I first introduced in the 84th Congress, is designed to prevent the service or consumption of alcoholic beverages aboard commercial passenger aircraft and military aircraft. Since its introduction, S. 4 has accounted for more of my mail than any other topic, including the huge volume of mail I received this year in favor of government economy and in opposition to the so-called civil rights bill.

Offers of support for this safety measure have come to me from every section of the country. These offers have come from both drinkers and non-drinkers who are concerned about the dangers which are inherent in the practice of serving cocktails while planes are in flight.

In an effort to kill this legislation, some have charged that this is a prohibition bill which was inspired by temperance and church groups. I want to say, Mr. Chairman, that neither of these groups prompted me to introduce this legislation, nor did the pilots or stewardesses. I saw in this practice an inherent danger that need not exist at all.

There are some dangers, Mr. Chairman, which I admit we must risk and permit to exist. But, I have never found any one who could give me one reason for permitting this hazard to continue, except for the purpose of meeting competition. And, if the serving or consumption of liquor on planes were outlawed altogether, then there would be no basis for even this flimsy argument. I ask you, Mr. Chairman, how many of our air lines do you believe would go out of business in the event this safety legislation were to be passed?
I did not introduce this legislation as a prohibition measure. I sponsored it for four principal reasons which I shall outline to you now.

First, I believe the unregulated consumption of liquor by air line passengers is a compromise with safety which we can ill afford. It is possible for an intoxicated passenger to seize control of an aircraft while in flight or to so distract the pilots from their duties so as to jeopardize many lives. Mr. Chairman, I need not remind the subcommittee that here we are dealing with an operation taking place several thousand feet above the earth, and generally, a plane crash means sure death for the passengers and those who might be in the path of the falling aircraft.

At this point, Mr. Chairman, I would like to read to the subcommittee an excerpt from an editorial which appeared in The State of Columbia, South Carolina, on October 15, 1955. This is one of a number of outstanding newspapers across the country that have taken a stand against the serving of alcoholic beverages aboard airliners. The editorial states:

"We see no reason to turn a plane into a bar or a cocktail lounge. At best the quarters are limited, and the possibility of an unruly passenger is always present if liquor is served ** *. There are enough potential dangers in flying without adding the possibility of the complications of the obnoxious drunk."

My second reason is that the serving of liquor to passengers places an unnecessary burden upon the flight crews who are charged with the safety and comfort of air line passengers. Miss Peterson, the representative of the stewardesses association, has told me of several embarrassing incidents that have occurred on airplanes due to the consumption of liquor by passengers. I shall not go into these incidents here except to remark that I am sure the members of this subcommittee are interested not only in the safety aspect involved here but also in protecting the dignity of the fine young ladies who serve as stewardesses on these aircraft.

As you will hear from the pilots, themselves, they do not
favor a continuation of this unsafe practice. I agree with an editorial which appeared in the September 12, 1955 issue of the Tribune of South Bend, Indiana, which made the following point:

"If the pilots believe a drink ban would reduce the danger of accidents, the Government ought to go along with them. The fliers are, after all, at a disadvantage. A night club manager can ask an unruly patron to leave. The crew of airborne liners can't do that."

My third reason is that drinking aboard airplanes creates a social problem in that the drinking passengers may offend or annoy other passengers. I would remind you, Mr. Chairman, that drinking in airplanes cannot be confined to club cars as on trains. In addition, there is the problem of children who accompany their parents and others on air flights. Moral decency impels us to exclude our children from barrooms and liquor stores. By the same token, our children should be protected from the "flying saloons" which now exist in most of the commercial aircraft now operating in the United States.

My final reason for introducing this legislation stemmed from a firm belief that alcohol and flying do not mix any more than do drinking and driving. It is a fact that the intoxicating effect of alcohol increases considerably as the oxygen in the air decreases and the air becomes thinner. This means, of course, that it takes a smaller quantity of alcohol to intoxicate at a high altitude than it would on the ground or at sea level.

I have heard it said on many occasions that there is a time and place for everything. If this saying is true, then the time and place for consuming alcoholic beverages is certainly not while an aircraft is in flight several thousand feet above the ground.

Those are my principal reasons for proposing this legislation. Since I introduced my previous bill in the 84th Congress and S. 4 in the 85th Congress, I have become more convinced than ever of the vital need for enactment of this legislation into law. As I said previously, I had not talked to the pilots and stewardesses
associations when I introduced my first bill. Also, I had not received the hundreds of letters, many of them relating personal experiences of danger in the "flying saloons." Since then, the practice of serving these beverages has become even more widespread.

I hold in my hand, Mr. Chairman, a page from the February 20, 1957 issue of The Washington Post and Times Herald which contains a very large advertisement by United Air Lines on its "red carpet" service to San Francisco. Included in the "red carpet" treatment furnished their passengers, according to the ad, is "the choice of cocktails."

Here is how the ad describes the "red carpet" service:

"You feel very special walking down the thick carpet to board the world's fastest airliner--the giant DC-7. And each new Red Carpet 'extra' adds to that feeling: Your soft, deep-cushioned seat. The choice of cocktails. The special meal that's placed before you--thick, juicy steak or other luxury entree with gourmet trimmings. The club-like lounge. The trays of French pastry and chilled fruit with rare cheeses. All these and more--and all at no extra fare! Enjoy Red Carpet Service the next time you travel."

Under this arrangement, Mr. Chairman, United Air Lines--and this is not the only air line serving cocktails aloft--is forcing their passengers who do not drink to share the barroom tab for those who do.

Besides that, Mr. Chairman, I have been informed by a spokesman for the Air Transport Association of America that the air lines are not supposed to include mention of alcoholic beverages in their advertisements. I understand that this is a part of the association's "two-drink-per-customer" voluntary code which was issued shortly after my bill was introduced and shortly after the House approved the Lane bill during the 84th Congress.

I charge here today, Mr. Chairman, that the voluntary code is a fraud and that it was adopted for the purpose of heading off passage of the Lane bill, which was approved by a unanimous vote in the House last year. According to information I have
received, the code is not being enforced in other respects. This assertion will be backed up by testimony to be given later in the hearings by flight crews from the various air lines who must bear the stigma of doubling as barmaids and flight stewardesses.

The flight crews have pointed out to me that even if the code were enforced properly there is nothing to prevent the passengers from bringing their own bottles and requesting chasers from the stewardesses. This is exactly the manner in which some passengers have successfully skirted the code in the instances when it was being enforced. My bill would take care of this loophole in the code by prohibiting the serving or consumption of alcohol while in flight.

In closing, I would like to say that this is not a question of whether one condones or condemns drinking. Personally, I do not indulge in the use of intoxicating beverages for my own reasons. The question to be answered, here, however, is in terms of safety and the welfare of our citizens who are using the airlines as a mode of transportation in increasing numbers every day. I hope this subcommittee will provide this needed protection as the House of Representatives attempted to do by a unanimous vote in the 84th Congress.

By the way, Mr. Chairman, it is my understanding that the full committee intended to favorably report the House bill during the waning hours of the 84th Congress but was unable to do so because of the last-minute rush to adjourn. I regret that I was temporarily out of the Senate at that time, and I hope that the rush to adjourn this year will not prevent favorable action by the subcommittee, the full committee, and the Senate.

I ask permission to have inserted in the hearings at this point several letters from among the hundreds I have received on this subject.