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The Cargo Plane Question

by RAYMOND MOLEY

LOS ANGELES—The decision of Donald Nelson to authorize Henry J. Kaiser to build three giant cargo planes in collaboration with Howard Hughes seems to make a good deal of sense. The interest aroused by this news and by the long and informative discussions that preceded it has done a great deal to make people appreciate the value of large cargo-flying ships. The experimental work now authorized will teach us all much that will be useful in the war effort and in transportation after the war.

It is obvious that when an entirely new design is contemplated it takes time to produce even experimental models. It is estimated by Mr. Kaiser and Mr. Hughes that the three will not be finished for two years—the first in 15 months, the second in 20 months and the third in 25 months. If it is then decided to put them into production, some months must elapse before they roll off the line.

The public has been informed from time to time of quite understandable differences of opinion about the feasibility and desirability of building this type of plane at this time. One of the reasons for misunderstanding has been the fact that ideas as well as specific plans have been continually changing throughout the period of discussion. At all times, many complicated technical problems of management and engineering have been involved.

After wide discussion in Washington and elsewhere, a meeting was held here about four weeks ago between Mr. Kaiser, a WPB representative and a committee of three leaders in the airplane industry. This committee was acting upon a suggestion of the WPB to talk the matter over with Mr. Kaiser and to report on their findings and conclusions. No specific plan came out of the meeting. This was not because the industry itself was lacking in a desire to cooperate. It is the settled rule in the industry that any manufacturer will make available any plans, engineering ideas, advice and technical personnel at his disposal to any other manufacturer who actually has an order from the government to build planes. At that time Mr. Kaiser had no such order, and there was a good deal of uncertainty as to the plane that was to be built and

the organization which was to do the building.

In these circumstances, it was urged that Mr. Kaiser give his unquestioned manufacturing ability to the mass production of some model already designed. But it seems that Mr. Kaiser thought it best to build a new plane. Leaders of the industry pointed out the great outlay of time and the requirements of critical materials, engineering personnel and labor needed for the development of an entirely new model. It is said that in the automobile industry a new model takes close to three years from the original idea to mass production. Something of the same effort is required in the case of a new plane. To undertake mass production of a new plane would draw heavily upon the strained resources of an already overburdened industry. This apparently became clear not only to the industry but to the various authorities in the government.

There is no disposition to deny that vastly bigger planes can be built than any that now exist, or to deny that they will fly and that they will carry a lot of stuff. When a certain manufacturer was asked how big a cargo plane could be built, his answer was: "Just tell me how much land or water is available to take off from or to land in." Such questions as this, as well as the number and type of cargo planes that will be needed, are matters of strategy to be decided by the Army and the Navy.

There is no reason now to assume that this war will have to be fought with the exact types of plane already in production. But it does seem likely that whatever is new or startling in the planes that will come off the production line for some time to come will be a modification and improvement of basic designs that now exist.

Leaders in the industry here and elsewhere have been stressing the importance of carriers for a long time, and point to the number of excellent cargo planes already in production. The campaign of Mr. Kaiser has heavily underscored their importance. He can have the immense satisfaction of knowing that he has directed the nation's attention to the value of large carriers. Everyone will wish him well in his new project.