

Can the Air Force Be Relied Upon to Spend Its Billions Efficiently?

BY RAYMOND MOLEY

The storied and multi-ribboned generals of the Air Force, those gentlemen of the "wild blue yonder," are dedicated men. They are dedicated to the supremacy of our nation in the air and in the spaces beyond the air.

They have valiant exponents of the contention that the Air Force, along with the other services, needs more money for defense. Among these are members of Congress, generals—active and retired—and especially the Democratic aspirants for the Presidency.

The specifications of Air Force needs are lost on the average citizen because of demands of secrecy and the immense complications of such cosmic matters.

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But we can all understand something about the care and upkeep of automobiles and trucks. And most believe that the measure of a service's efficiency can be fairly well judged by what it is doing about such small matters. Insofar as a man is faithful in little things, so he will be in great things.

Among the civilians who can understand the care and upkeep of automobiles and trucks and the like is our highly active and efficient comptroller general of the United States, Joseph Campbell.

In a recent report to the

speaker of the House he had some interesting things to say about how the Air Force handles and mishandles ground-bound vehicles.

He notes that vehicle maintenance has cost the taxpayers an estimated \$5 million over the last three years because of the postponement of the purchase of new vehicles as replacements for those that were worn out.

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The terse advice of Calvin Coolidge to "wear 'em out, use 'em up," may commend itself to some. "Making-do" is an old American tradition. But the comptroller general points out how thriftless such a custom is in this instance.

He states that the Air Force had, as of September, 1957, an inventory of about 187,500 vehicles representing an investment of nearly \$1 billion. The failure of the Air Force to set up an adequate replacement program has cost \$5 million in depreciated market values and repairs—\$5 million more than it would have cost in combined repair and depreciation for new vehicles.

Now add to that \$5 million an additional \$3 million in increased costs of vehicles due to rising prices during the last three years.

And add to that total of \$8 million an additional \$2

million annually for the next several years because of the inadequacy of the Air Force's long-range program for replacing vehicles, a program that was adopted in the 1959 fiscal year.

This wanton loss of money did not take place because the eyes of the Air Force were exclusively turned upon the heavens in a search for satellites. The Air Force knew all along about this inadequacy of its vehicle replacement program. But it failed to explain it to Congress when its budget requests were considered in any of the years since 1956.

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Air Force repair costs for vehicles are among the highest, if they are not the highest, in the entire government. In one two-year period \$91,000 was spent for repairs on 37 vehicles which originally cost only \$68,000. On 11 of these vehicles the repair costs in one year exceeded the original cost.

A 1950 sedan which cost \$1,200 ran up repair costs in eight years of \$3,331. There are similar specifics. If a civilian businessman attempted to claim deductions on a company car at any such rate the Internal Revenue people would haul him in for a going-over.

If this improvidence is present in all Air Force expenditures we are losing billions.