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F-111 CRASHES

Would you fly on an airplane if you knew there was one chance out of ten that it would crash? Not many people would care to play those kind of odds. Yet one out of ten is the chance taken by our pilots who fly the F-111 plane. The 52nd crash out of some 500 F-111 s that have been bui 1t occurred earlier this month in England.

The F-lll is the controversial plane originally called the TFX ard sometimes referred to a.s the Flying Edsel. When the contract was let by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara (former Ford Motor Company President) in 1963, it was the largest contract in the history of Federal spending.

After eight years of investigation, the Senate Government Opera ions Committee in December 1970 issued a 93-page report called the 11TFX Contract ln''estigation" which speller. out the sordid story of waste and conflict of interest. The report called the TFX a "fiscal blunder of the greatest magnitude," laying the blame directly on McNamara and his civilian aides.

The record proves that there was not a single sound technical reason for the McNamara decision to award the F-111 contract to General Dynamics instead of to Boeing, which every expert had unanimously recommended. Four separate service evaluation studies plus'the Pentagon Source Selection Board had all concluded that the Boeing uid promised a superior plane at a lower price.

But McNr.mara, on the basis of figures he allegedly "carried in his head" and could not produce for General Accounting Office investigators, awarded the plane to General Dynamics. The F-111 contract was nailed down at a White House conference at 4:30 p.m. on November 13, 1963, attended only by President Kennedy, Secretary McNamara, and Deputy De·:'ense Secretary Roswe71 Gilpatric.

The Sen te Committee report makes it clear what Gilpatric1s motive was. While he was Deputy Secretary of Defense, he was receiving $21,000 per year from his New York

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law firm which was the general counsel for General Dynamics at a retainer fee of $100,000 per year.

With President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara, the political fac..:ors were undoubtedly more persuasive. The General Dynamics bid said that thE F-111 would be built in Fort Worth, Texas, the home state of Vice President Lyndon Johnson (24 electoral votes), with the Navy version to be built in New York (45 electoral votes). The largest single stockholder and chairman of the Executive Committee of General Dynamics was Henry Crown of Chicago, one of the financial powers of :he Democratic Party in Illinois (then 27 electoral votes).

Boeing had the misfortune to be headquartered in Seattle, Washington (only 9 electoral votes), and would have built the plane in Wichita, Kansas (only 8 electoral votes). There is a big political difference between 96 electoral votes and 17.

In the very close presidential election of 1960, Washington and Kansas had voted for Richard Nixon, so they were not eli.gible for Federal favors. Texas, Illinois and New York, however, had all voted for the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. Texas and Illinois were carried by the narrowest of margins amid widespread charges of vote frauds.

The Senate hearings proved conclusively that the original F-111 decision was a corrupt award to the high bidder for an inferior plane which could n ver meet its specificatior,s. The Navy version was completely canceled in 1968, adwitted by everyone to be a total failure, inferior to the plane the Navy already had, the McDonnell Phantom.

The Air Force F-111 was continued, and crew after crew flew on to their deaths. Meanwhile the Pentagon civilians who made the mistakes were rewarded with promotions. Robert McNamara became president of the World Bank, a powerful posit1on he has held onto for eleven years. When the F-111 contract was awarded in 1963, Harold Brown was Director of Defense Research and Engineering and Cyrus R. Vance was Secretary of the Army. Today Brown is Secretary of Defense and Vance is Secretary of State.

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