

A Man Born Out of Season: Eddie Rickenbacker, Eastern Airlines, and the Civil Aeronautics Board

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Five years after aviation executive Edward V. (“Eddie”) Rickenbacker died in 1973, the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 became law. As an outspoken advocate of a free market economy, Rickenbacker would have welcomed the new statute, which was based on the premise that government regulation had stifled competition on the nation’s airways. Most of all, he would have relished the death sentence that the act imposed on the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), a federal agency with which he had repeatedly crossed swords during his long career as chief executive of Eastern Air Lines.¹

Rickenbacker’s attitudes reflected the “rugged individualism” of the late nineteenth century in which he was born. He believed that competition was the lifeblood of a free market economy. At most, he was willing to concede only a severely limited role for the government to play in corporate warfare, similar to that of a referee in a prize fight. Such a role, he believed, should stop well short of meddling, especially by favoring one competitor at another’s expense. Rickenbacker’s stormy experience with the CAB caused him to believe that, in the name of fostering competition, it rewarded high-cost, inefficient airlines at the expense of larger, better-managed ones, and thus violated the rules of fair play. His views were intensified by his hatred of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, which had spawned the CAB. Within a few years after the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938 was passed, Rickenbacker had become convinced that the CAB was part of a huge conspiracy against free enterprise. Born when Benjamin Harrison was president, he despised FDR and everything he stood for.

Rickenbacker’s strong commitment to a free market economy was evident early in his life. Born in poverty in October 1890 to Swiss immigrant parents in Columbus, Ohio, he quickly displayed pronounced entrepreneurial tendencies and a penchant for risk-taking. As he later stated, his business career began at the age of five when he collected rags, bones, and rusty nails and sold them to a junk dealer named Sam. Finding that bones weighed more when soaked in water, he swished them around in mud puddles before selling them. Suspecting that Sam

¹For a useful overview of the nature, background, and effects of the Airline Deregulation Act, see [16].

had improperly set his scales, Rickenbacker bought his own to make sure he would not be cheated out of a single penny.²

Rickenbacker was also deeply committed to the work ethic. He got his first job selling newspapers when he was ten years old. Every day, he got up early in the morning and walked two miles to get copies of the earliest edition of the *Columbus Dispatch* so that he could beat his competitors to the punch. Four years later, when his father was killed by an assailant, he dropped out of school to support his mother. He never forgot the thrill of giving her his first pay envelope, containing \$3.50 he had earned at a factory by working twelve hours a day, six days a week. His income rose as he became increasingly resourceful. Getting a job cleaning railroad passenger cars for \$1 per day, he doubled and tripled his income by finding coins that had fallen behind the seat cushions.

After taking a ride in a Model C Ford, Rickenbacker fell in love with automobiles and thus began a long association with one of the chief seedbeds of twentieth century enterprise. His upward climb resembled the plot of a Horatio Alger story. After taking a janitorial position at a shop that repaired motor vehicles, he moved on to the Oscar Lear Company, a Columbus-based firm that actually made automobiles. Refusing to give up when his first attempts to get a job with the company were rebuffed, he badgered the owners into hiring him by grabbing a broom, sweeping the floor, and asking for nothing as an indication of his willingness to work. His diligence and zeal to learn were phenomenal. Paying \$60 out of meager wages for a mail-order course in automotive technology, he arose at four o'clock every morning to study the lessons.

Rickenbacker's zest for achievement caught the attention of Lee Frayer, a mechanical engineer for Oscar Lear who designed racing cars. Under Frayer's guidance Rickenbacker mastered the basics of mechanical engineering and showed an instinctive feel for gasoline motors. When Frayer moved to a managerial position with a much bigger car manufacturer, the Columbus Buggy Company, he put his apprentice, now seventeen, in charge of its testing department, where Rickenbacker supervised a staff of fifteen or twenty workers.

Continuing his upward climb, Rickenbacker became a roving troubleshooter for the Columbus Buggy Company. At age nineteen he was put in charge of selling its Firestone-Columbus cars in five midwestern states, with six salesmen working under him. Meanwhile, Frayer, who not only designed but also drove racing cars, chose Rickenbacker to be his riding mechanic, a demanding job calling for steady nerves and quick reflexes. Rickenbacker never forgot Frayer's reaction when, after the latter had spent an entire year building a racing car for the Vanderbilt Cup Race, the vehicle overheated and had to leave the course in the first elimination run. Taking the setback calmly, Frayer turned to Rickenbacker and said, "Try like hell to win, but don't cry if you lose."

Soon Rickenbacker himself became a racing driver. Taking death-defying risks that other drivers shunned, he became one of America's foremost racers.

²Biographical information about Rickenbacker provided throughout this essay is taken chiefly from [8]. For further information see [11], which is not always accurate, and [2].

His first significant victory came in a 300-mile race at Sioux City, Iowa in 1914. More championships followed over the next two years. By 1916, Rickenbacker ranked third among all racers on the American tour with winnings of \$60,000.

After the United States entered World War I in 1917, Rickenbacker enlisted and went to France as a driver on General Pershing's staff. Impressing such powerful persons as air chief Billy Mitchell with his mechanical ability, he schemed his way into the Army's fledgling air service and became a combat pilot. In this role he again showed his deep competitive instincts and zest for taking death-defying risks in aerial dogfights on the Western Front. By shooting down twenty-six German aircraft, he became America's "Ace of Aces." His leadership skills won him command of the 94th Aero Pursuit Squadron, famed for its Hat-in-the-Ring emblem.

Coming home in 1919 as a national hero, Rickenbacker was adulated by throngs of admirers in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities. Soon he launched a business career. Intending at first to become an aircraft manufacturer, he saw that the time was not ripe for such a move because postwar markets were saturated with surplus planes. Falling back on the auto industry, he secured funding from Detroit millionaire Barney Everitt and created a high-speed, low-slung car, the Rickenbacker, named after himself.

Rickenbacker poured vast amounts of energy into making a car that was notable for technical innovations and imaginative styling. These features, however, were not well conceived for the mid-priced market niche he aimed to fill. Sales fell when a recession struck in 1925. Rickenbacker borrowed heavily to save the company, but it went bankrupt in 1927, leaving him in \$250,000 debt.

Showing unbounded faith in free enterprise, Rickenbacker plunged immediately into new ventures. He designed and promoted a lightweight five-cylinder radial engine to power a "flying flivver" that he conceived both as a car and an airplane. After this venture failed, a Detroit bank helped him buy the Indianapolis Speedway, which he developed into a major testing ground for automotive innovations. Soon thereafter he borrowed \$90,000 to acquire the Allison Engineering Company, which he sold at a substantial profit to Fisher Brothers. In 1926 he and one of his wartime comrades founded Florida Airways, which flew air mail between Atlanta and Miami. When it went bankrupt, he became vice president of a GM subsidiary, Fokker Aircraft, and negotiated a deal through which GM acquired the Pioneer Instrument Company – later to become better known as Bendix Aviation. He used his finder's fees to retire his debts, despite the fact that he was no longer liable for them as a result of going through bankruptcy.

The onset in 1929 of the worst depression in American history did nothing to diminish Rickenbacker's faith in free enterprise. When GM moved Fokker to Baltimore in 1932, he left a secure post to become vice president of the Aviation Corporation (AVCO), a rickety firm whose air routes ran mainly from east to west. Although AVCO was near bankruptcy, Rickenbacker fearlessly advocated a merger with Eastern Air Transport, another ailing company whose routes ran mostly north and south. Trying to implement the idea, AVCO's

chief investors, Averell Harriman and Robert Lehmann, got into a proxy fight with Wall Street operator Errett L. Cord. Rickenbacker picked the losing side by backing Harriman and Lehman, and was once more unemployed.

As usual he plunged ahead, persuading GM to acquire North American Aviation, a bankrupt conglomerate that owned a number of potentially valuable assets including Eastern Air Transport (EAT). When GM reorganized North American, Rickenbacker became general manager of EAT. Its main asset was a vacation route from New York to Miami, but its fleet was obsolete and its future extremely dim.

As he struggled to improve Eastern's prospects, Rickenbacker crossed swords with Franklin D. Roosevelt, for whom he had voted in the 1932 election because he believed that FDR would cut government spending. Rickenbacker, however, soon became disillusioned with FDR and the New Deal. In 1934, responding to alleged scandals in the awarding of airmail routes under the Hoover administration, FDR canceled all airmail contracts with privately-owned carriers and ordered the Army Air Corps to fly the mail. Knowing that Army pilots were poorly trained and unfamiliar with airmail operations, Rickenbacker foresaw that crashes would occur and accused FDR of plotting "legalized murder." On the last day of regular airmail operations, in a deliberate gesture of defiance aimed at FDR, he and TWA president Jack Frye flew a newly-built Douglas DC-1 across the country with a load of mail, setting a transcontinental speed record of thirteen hours and two minutes.³

As Rickenbacker had predicted, a mounting number of disasters occurred as army pilots crashed and died while flying the mail. As a result, FDR changed course and the federal government granted new airmail contracts to private carriers under a hastily-contrived law aimed at eliminating excess profits and disciplining the industry. Despite the restrictions imposed by the new law, Rickenbacker turned Eastern around by acquiring up-to-date planes, expanding its route structure, doubling its work force, attracting passengers, and improving employee morale with better wages and fringe benefits. As a result, Eastern became profitable. Its new planes, known as the "Great Silver Fleet," symbolized its corporate pride.⁴

Rickenbacker's success was all the more impressive because conditions in the airline industry generally had deteriorated while Eastern's fortunes improved. In 1938, however, he learned that Ernest Breech, North American Aviation's president, planned to sell Eastern for \$3 million to a group headed by car rental magnate John Hertz. Rickenbacker, feeling that Eastern could not have been offered for such a price except for the work he had done rebuilding the airline, was enraged. Going over Breech's head, he secured from GM's chief executive, Alfred Sloan, an option to keep control of Eastern if he could raise

³ In addition to the biographical works previously cited, see also [12]. As Serling states, Rickenbacker "went along for the ride" and "hardly touched the controls" during the flight.

⁴ On Eastern's progress in this period, see [3] and North American Aviation [10].

\$3.5 million within thirty days. With customary doggedness, Rickenbacker secured enough backing to implement the plan from a syndicate including Laurance S. Rockefeller, who became the chief stockholder in a new corporate entity known as Eastern Air Lines. In April, 1938, Rickenbacker became its chief executive officer.

The takeover engineered by Rickenbacker coincided with a momentous change in the way the federal government regulated commercial aviation. Because most airlines were unprofitable, FDR appointed a committee to find ways to remedy the situation. The advent of the Douglas DC-3, the first airliner that could operate profitably on passenger revenue alone, particularly disturbed existing carriers because any group of investors who could afford to buy DC-3s could now invade the airways at will and displace enterprises that had gone to great expense developing the industry.

Responding to this situation, Congress passed the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938, which went into effect shortly after Rickenbacker and his allies took charge of Eastern. Under this law, which historian Henry Ladd Smith called “the most important piece of air legislation ever passed,” a five-member Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) received broad powers to regulate airfares and airline routes. In exchange for agreeing to an unprecedented degree of federal regulation, existing airlines received permanent rights to their routes and protection from interlopers. From this point on, no airline could fly a given route without the approval of the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), created in 1940. Once given the right to fly a route, a carrier could not abandon it without the CAB’s permission. No airline merger could take place without CAB approval. The CAB also had power to determine fair rates of compensation for carrying airmail, and to fix passenger fares. Price competition was no longer possible. The only ways in which airlines could compete were by offering more convenient schedules, better equipment, and superior service.⁵

Rickenbacker scored a notable triumph just before the new law went into effect. In one of its last actions while it was still in control of awarding airmail contracts, the Post Office Department opened bids on a contract for service between Houston, San Antonio, and Brownsville, Texas. Because the winner of the contract would be in a good position to get a route to Mexico City, two carriers, Eastern and Braniff, fought furiously to get it. Finding that Eastern planned to bid one cent per mile, Braniff bid less than one mill. Learning about Braniff’s plan, Rickenbacker offered to carry mail over the new route for nothing, and got the contract.

Rickenbacker initially supported the Civil Aeronautics Act, arguing that it was needed to prevent unfair competition from “wildcat” airlines threatening chaos in the industry. Eastern’s annual report for 1938 anticipated “sound regulation” under the new law. Relations with the CAA and CAB were

⁵For a useful overview of the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938 and the circumstances surrounding its passage, see [15, pp. 301-309].

temporarily amicable as Eastern won several new routes. St. Louis, added to its system in 1939, was a particularly welcome prize [1, 1938, p. 9; 1, 1940, p. 6].

That same year, however, the CAB instituted a proceeding to determine whether the airmail rates paid to Eastern and several other airlines were "fair and reasonable." At the time, Eastern received \$1.20 per ton-mile, the lowest rate earned by any domestic carrier. Despite Rickenbacker's protests, however, CAB examiners recommended a 50% reduction in Eastern's mail rates and asked for a recapture of fees for the previous three years that would have cost the carrier \$2.5 million. Charging that the proposal "failed to recognize the efficiency and economy of our Company's operations," Rickenbacker won a major concession when the CAB dropped the recapture demand, but the agency cut Eastern's mail rate in half [1, 1941, pp. 5-6; 1, 1942, pp. 1-2].

While the rate case was pending, Rickenbacker underwent a terrible ordeal when a plane on which he was flying into Atlanta crashed in February, 1941, leaving him with multiple injuries including a crushed hip socket, a broken pelvis, and a fractured knee. Initially given up for dead, he clung to life and was walking again, with a permanent limp, by summer. He was still recuperating in December, when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into World War II. Despite his physical condition, he volunteered for a series of special missions for the head of the Army Air Corps, "Hap" Arnold, starting with an inspection tour of American domestic military bases in March and April, 1942. He then undertook another mission in September to inspect installations in England and to report to Arnold on ways in which American planes could be improved.

In October, Secretary of War Stimson asked Rickenbacker to take a secret message to General MacArthur, who was stationed in New Guinea. En route from Hawaii to a refueling stop at Canton Island, a Boeing B-17 on which Rickenbacker was flying had to be ditched in the Pacific Ocean because of a navigational error that led it off course and caused it to run out of gas. For more than three weeks, Rickenbacker and seven companions, one of whom died, drifted through shark-infested waters and endured extreme suffering from hunger, thirst, and exposure to the elements. By the time the party was finally rescued, Rickenbacker had lost fifty-four pounds and was dehydrated. Showing his accustomed resilience, he went to New Guinea after being briefly hospitalized, took Stimson's message to MacArthur, and came home to a frenzied welcome in mid-December.

After recovering from his ordeal, Rickenbacker went on two more missions for Stimson. One took him to North Africa, Iran, India, China, and the Soviet Union in 1943; the other, to the Aleutian Islands in 1944. While he was gone, two subordinates ran Eastern. Like other American carriers, it gave up most of its planes to transport military supplies and maintained its domestic schedules with a reduced fleet and shrunken staff.

Returning to take charge of Eastern after his adventures, Rickenbacker presided over the nation's most profitable airline. During the late 1940s, its earnings exceeded those of the rest of the industry combined. But the seeds of its later decline were already present, and Rickenbacker was partly responsible.

Although his phenomenal vitality remained as strong as ever, his body had been ravaged by the experiences he had endured. His interactions with powerful world leaders had also inflated an already powerful ego, intensifying a tendency to be overbearing and abrasive in his dealings with others. His temper was too quick, his judgment was too hasty, and he made costly errors based on emotion and sentiment rather than sound business judgment. One such error was a speech that he gave at Havana in 1944 after the death of FDR, in which he said that he was glad Roosevelt had died. Such indiscretions hurt Eastern's chances in important route cases conducted by the CAB, whose members continued to be chosen by a Democratic president, Harry S. Truman. Writing about this time in Rickenbacker's life, aviation writer Robert Serling stated that "Eastern entered the postwar era...with a time bomb buried in the inflexible personality of the man who ruled the Great Silver Fleet" [12, p. 204].

During the war the CAB awarded Eastern a route from St. Louis to Washington and extended its Miami-New York route into Boston. But the Board also issued Eastern and three other well-established airlines a show-cause order asking why their mail rates should not be cut from sixty to thirty-two cents per ton-mile. Infuriated, Rickenbacker charged that the CAB was ignoring Eastern's "superior economy and efficiency." The proposed new rate, he stated, would eliminate any incentive for Eastern to excel. The CAB settled for forty-five cents per ton-mile, but he felt aggrieved [1, 1944, pp. 5,10; 1, 1945, p. 5].

Anticipating dramatic growth in air travel after the war, the CAB had already begun to encourage competition on routes that were formerly limited to only one carrier. In 1944 it authorized National Airlines to fly from New York to Miami, ending Eastern's exclusive control of that route. In August, 1945, it terminated Eastern's single-carrier status from Chicago to Miami by giving Delta the right to compete in that market. Despite favoring fair competition, Rickenbacker resented the fact that Eastern would now have to share two lucrative vacation routes with much smaller carriers that would need large airmail subsidies to develop them.

In 1946 the CAB again hurt Eastern by denying it permission to inaugurate a potentially lucrative vacation route from Florida to Cuba, Jamaica, Colombia, and the Canal Zone [1, 1946, pp. 6-7; 1, 1947, pp. 7-8]. Rickenbacker became increasingly indignant because of such decisions. At one point he stormed into the office of CAB chairman L. Welch Pogue and launched a tirade. Pounding Pogue's desk with his fist, he impetuously swept a row of books onto the floor with his other hand. But he also winked at Pogue's secretary as he left. At least in part, he had been putting on an act [5]. But he was also seriously upset.

As time went on, other carriers, including Capital, Colonial, and Chicago and Southern, were certificated by the CAB to compete with Eastern on routes it had once had to itself. As Pogue later stated, one of the reasons why the CAB authorized such competition was a growing number of complaints about the quality of service Eastern provided [5]. During the postwar era, Rickenbacker's belief that Eastern owed travelers nothing except moving them dependably from one place to another on time won the company the unenviable distinction of

being the only carrier in the industry whose passengers formed an organization to vent their feelings about the brusque treatment they received from Eastern. It was known as WHEAL, an acronym for "We Hate Eastern Air Lines" [12, p. 277].

After making another mistake by allowing Delta and National to beat him to the punch in using four-engine Douglas DC-4s on the New York- Miami and Chicago-Miami routes, Rickenbacker did better in the vital area of aircraft selection, fighting his two rivals on even terms by pitting Lockheed L-649 and L-749 Constellations and L-1049 Super-Constellations against their Douglas DC-6s and DC-7s. But he made a poor decision in the crucial matter of aircraft utilization. When the CAA required airlines to employ a three-man cockpit crew in four-engine aircraft, he complied by using two pilots and a flight mechanic, representing two different unions. C. E. Woolman, Delta's CEO, wisely used a cockpit crew of three pilots, one of whom was trained as a flight mechanic but belonged to the pilots' union. Woolman thus avoided costly jurisdictional strikes that shut Eastern down while Delta continued to fly.⁶

Rickenbacker lost another battle when the CAB decided in the late 1940s to sanction the creation of "feederlines" to provide air service to small cities. Earlier, Eastern had won permission from the CAB to serve such destinations as Brunswick, Georgia, Muscle Shoals, Alabama, and Spartanburg, South Carolina. Now, it was obliged to continue serving these small markets while competing with newly-established feederlines that received much larger airmail compensation than Eastern did. The CAB followed the same strategy in the 1950s when it continued to favor smaller trunklines like Delta and National in key route decisions and denied most of Eastern's applications. The only way Rickenbacker could expand Eastern's route system was by acquiring small carriers like Colonial in mergers. But this solution was hazardous. Although Eastern did manage to gain a few large markets like Bermuda and Montreal in the Colonial merger, it also inherited a hodgepodge of small towns in the Northeast, such as Rutland, Vt. and Lancaster, Pa., that could not be effectively integrated with the larger cities that the airline served [12, pp. 244-251; 1, 1954, route map].

Having to compete with smaller carriers that had much higher costs per route-mile and therefore received federal subsidies was particularly galling to Rickenbacker because Eastern was well known as the most frugal airline in the industry. As Pogue admitted, "Eastern's costs were simply on a different plateau" compared with those of its competitors [5]. In 1949, Rickenbacker wrote a letter to the Senate Finance Committee offering to operate the domestic systems of Delta, National, Chicago and Southern, Capital, and Colonial for sixty-five cents per ton-mile instead of the \$4.45 they were actually receiving. He estimated that Eastern could carry 2.7 million tons of mail, for which these firms had received \$12 million in 1948, for only \$1.6 million, saving taxpayers

⁶For a comprehensive account of the postwar rivalry between Eastern and Delta, emphasizing aircraft selection, labor policies, and the results of route cases in which these two airlines became engaged, see [9, pp. 109-115, 120-131, 251-261, 283-346].

\$10.4 million. He later professed surprise that the five named carriers "did not accept this generous offer."⁷

As he fumed about CAB policies, Rickenbacker became more and more vehement in speeches attacking the alleged misdeeds of federal bureaucrats. As a CAB lawyer later stated, Rickenbacker and his corporate attorneys did not mince words, telling CAB staff members to their faces that they were incompetent. Rickenbacker declared openly that such persons worked for the government instead of going into private enterprise because they lacked the ability to succeed in business. CAB officials in turn sternly lectured Eastern's representatives, saying that the company should be more respectful and was damaging its own interests by alienating the CAB's staff [7].

Eastern's position in the airline industry continued to deteriorate. In 1955, capitalizing on the power that southern senators and representatives could bring to bear on the CAB while the South still voted solidly Democratic, Delta won a case giving it the right to compete with Eastern in the Atlanta-Washington-Baltimore-Philadelphia-New York corridor, which Woolman called America's "Main Street." Another blow came in 1961 in a hotly-contested transcontinental route case in which the CAB gave Delta and National access to San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other western cities while denying Eastern's application to serve these places. Rickenbacker severely damaged Eastern's chances while the case was in progress by giving a speech in which he bitterly attacked John F. Kennedy, who had just become president. The decision was a major setback for Eastern, which could not fly west of Texas and desperately needed long transcontinental routes for efficient aircraft utilization [9, pp. 251-261, 283-302; 12, p. 323].

Rickenbacker also made serious errors as the airline industry entered the jet age. Instead of acquiring jet aircraft, he chose to purchase Lockheed Electra turboprops while Delta bought Douglas DC-8 and Convair 880 jetliners. Although the Electra became an outstanding plane after initial defects were eliminated, Eastern suffered badly when Electras owned by Braniff and Northwest, due to flaws in their wing structure, crashed soon after entering service. Amid the resulting public clamor, the FAA placed speed restrictions on the plane that made it impossible for Eastern to compete with Delta's new jets on long-haul flights. Ironically, Eastern could have had DC-8s like the ones owned by Delta, but Rickenbacker had decided to wait for a later model with more powerful engines [9, pp. 262-282; 12, *passim*].

In 1953 Eastern's increasingly frustrated directors moved Rickenbacker up to chairman of the board and named a new president and CEO, Malcolm MacIntyre. Rickenbacker, however, could not give up the control he had held for so long and interfered constantly with MacIntyre's attempts to run the firm. As Eastern went through one debacle after another, Laurance Rockefeller decided that the only way out of its problems was a merger with one of the country's two

⁷"Comments on Air Mail Subsidy and Competition," dated April 4, 1949, attached to [1, 1949] and [11, p. 402].

largest carriers, American Airlines. Again, however, the need to secure CAB approval stymied Eastern's hopes. Led by Delta, the rest of the industry vigorously attacked the plan. Meanwhile, it became clear that John F. Kennedy's brother, Robert, would veto the merger on anti-trust grounds in his capacity as attorney general, even if the CAB did not. The merger plan was therefore scuttled [12, pp. 310-347; 9, p. 343].

Rockefeller had hoped that the attempted merger would permit him to replace Rickenbacker and MacIntyre with American's chief executive, C. R. Smith, whose managerial abilities were legendary. When the merger failed, Rockefeller appointed a search committee to find a new leader. After the committee chose Floyd D. Hall, an executive at TWA, MacIntyre was fired and Rickenbacker was summoned to a meeting at which he was asked to retire. Rickenbacker took the news badly, requiring a second meeting – this time attended by Rockefeller – before the embattled executive agreed to step down. Mustering much graciousness in relinquishing command to Hall, Rickenbacker left his office at Rockefeller Center and never returned to it again [12, pp. 383-385; 4; 6]. He spent the rest of his life in retirement before dying in 1973.

It is easy to blame Rickenbacker for his own downfall. It is clear that he made a series of bad judgments after he came back from World War II suffering permanent ill effects from the Atlanta crash and the 1942 raft episode. But this is not the whole story. The American political and economic system he had known early in his life had been radically transformed by the Great Depression and the New Deal. Given his deep belief in free enterprise, his strong conviction that Eastern was being treated unfairly by the CAB, and his tendency to speak his mind, he was in an impossible situation. His failures of judgment should be seen in this light. One of his friends characterized him as “an outstanding leader of a small to medium-sized company” who was “mentally unequipped to move into an era when air transportation was on the verge of becoming mass transportation.” Robert Serling called him a “nineteenth century American trying hard to cope with the twentieth century – a task in which he achieved both magnificent success and dismal failure” [12, pp. 305, 309].

But was Rickenbacker simply an anachronism? Or was he born out of season not only *after* his time but also *before* it? Had he been able to move boldly into new markets under deregulation, his record might have been much different. Temperamentally unable to deal with the imperatives of service competition, he might have thrived at the helm of a no-frills airline after 1978, when his zeal for low costs would have been well suited to bitter fare wars that the CAB would not have allowed. One thing is certain. As an avid foe of liberalism who lived to see the dawning of resurgent ultraconservatism in the 1960s, he would be much more at home in the political and economic climate of the 1990s than he was at the time he died. In this perspective, he was both a casualty of the age in which he lived and a forerunner of an era yet to come.

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