

FAA ADMINISTRATOR NAJEEB HALABY

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The second FAA Administrator, Najeeb Elias Halaby, popularly known as “Jeeb,” possessed some of the compelling characteristics of the man who appointed him FAA Administrator – President John F. Kennedy. Like Kennedy, Halaby brought much originality, charisma and derring-do to anything he laid his hands on. A risk-taking leader, he was a bold visionary, an agent of change, and a man who cut a dashing figure.

Halaby was born in Dallas, Texas, on November 19, 1915. His mother was a native Texan with southern roots; his father was a Lebanese-Syrian Christian who, as a youth in 1891, immigrated to the United States. At one time, his parents owned and operated a rug boutique and interior decorating shop at the luxury department store Neiman Marcus in Dallas. The family was prosperous.

Despite his family’s financial success and a father accepted into the elite Dallas Athletic Club, the younger Halaby was often called “Rug Merchant” at school. No doubt being teased with this nickname left an impression on the boy; he understood what it was like to be regarded as “different.” The seeds were thus planted for Halaby to develop into the committed equal opportunity advocate that he became later in his life when in positions of authority. In a 1979 interview, he stated that even though he was oftentimes referred to as an “Arab-American,” he just “always wanted to be an American, not a hyphenated.”

As a youngster, Halaby became interested in aviation when Charles Lindbergh made his successful Atlantic crossing. Halaby’s father took him to a tickertape parade in Dallas honoring Lindbergh, and the young boy was “jumping up and down and screaming in the back seat of the family car as Lindbergh went by.” Halaby was 16 when he completed his first solo flight in an open-cockpit biplane at Mines Field (now the site of Los Angeles International Airport). As the story goes, during the flight he nearly collided with a Waco cabin plane carrying the actor and personality Will Rogers. Before he turned 18 in 1933, Halaby received his pilot’s license.

When his father died, Halaby was only 13. In later years, he described his father as a gifted entrepreneur who “could have sold Stars of David in the middle of Baghdad.” After his mother remarried, the family moved to California.

Although described by one source as an indifferent student, Halaby was educated at prestigious schools. In 1937, he received his bachelor’s degree in political science from Stanford, where he was captain of the golf team, and by 1940, he had earned a law degree from Yale.

While practicing law at the Los Angeles firm of O’Melveny & Myers from 1940-42, he took flying lessons. His abiding interest in aviation served Halaby well during World War II.

In the U.S. Navy, he rose quickly as a flight instructor, served as a Navy test pilot for the Lockheed Aircraft Corp., flew the first operational American jet plane, and, in 1945, made the first continuous transcontinental jet flight in U.S. history. With such drive, Halaby was obviously going to distinguish himself in some manner during his lifetime. He was bound to become more than just another Yale-educated lawyer.

After the war, Halaby held a number of responsible positions in the federal government. He was Foreign Affairs Advisor to Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, and vice chairman of the Aviation Facilities Study Group. He assisted in writing NSC-68, the top-secret policy paper drawn up by the United States National Security Council. Distinguishing himself once again in an entirely different sphere, he was selected as the Junior Chamber of Commerce’s “Outstanding Young Man in Federal Service” in 1953. At this juncture in his career, he resigned to join Laurance Rockefeller’s family business enterprises, where he reviewed investments in civil aviation. Throughout his professional history, aviation always beckoned.

It was the late 1950s when Halaby became part of a social circle that interacted with John and Jacqueline Kennedy. He campaigned hard for Kennedy, who appointed him head of the FAA right before his inauguration. Public opinion held Halaby in high regard because he knew something about the business he was selected to regulate.

He took over as FAA Administrator on March 3, 1961. There were already great challenges ahead as this was the start of the age of jet-powered transport, plus FAA had recently doubled in size. Even though such a scenario could be overwhelming for a newly installed Administrator, matters would become even more severe. Within two months of Halaby’s taking office, the first series of aircraft hijackings in the United States began.

Despite having to “hit the ground running,” in his four-year tenure as Administrator (the longest period of any of the first 13 Administrators), he definitely left his mark in a positive way.

Immediately after his appointment, Halaby, who believed in a collaborative approach to dealing with the new challenges in aviation, sent over 300,000 “Dear Fellow Airman” letters to certified pilots as he searched for new ideas.

Within days of assuming the post, President Kennedy asked Halaby “to conduct a scientific, engineering review of our aviation facilities and related research and development and to

prepare a practicable long-range plan to insure efficient and safe control of all air traffic within the United States.”



Halaby oversaw the modernization of the American air traffic system. In July 1961, FAA commissioned the first Doppler VOR system. It was developed for installation at sites where standard VORs could not be used. Standard instrument departure (SID) procedures were put into effect for the first time for civil aircraft at New York International Airport (now John F. Kennedy International Airport). The FAA also approved, in principle, the use of Doppler radar and other flight deck nav aids to guide airliners across the North Atlantic. At about the same time, the Agency began modernizing aeronautic communications in the Alaskan area.

One of the most forward-thinking projects at this time was the joint FAA-DOD-NAS effort for developing Supersonic Transport (SST) aircraft. Halaby, who proved his willingness to go increasingly faster in his days as a test pilot, was an ideal proponent of this initiative.

In August 1961, spurred by a spate of hijackings, the Federal government for the first time employed armed guards on civilian airplanes. The first such guards were border patrolmen from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. In addition, Halaby introduced security measures at airports to thwart hijackings. He was present in March 1962 when the first FAA “peace officers” were sworn in as Special U.S. Deputy Marshals by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

A further safety enhancement was the passage in 1964 of the FAA rule that required the closing and locking of crew compartment doors of scheduled air carriers and other large commercial aircraft in flight, an action meant to deter passengers from entering the flight deck.

Also revealing Halaby as a proactive leader was his proposed legislation for the creation of a Federal Aviation Service (FAS) that would assume the continuity of essential airway services during a national emergency.

It was during his time as head of FAA that the Agency was decentralized. As part of this restructuring, FAA transferred additional responsibilities to its seven regions. Halaby also approved a standard organizational configuration (resembling that of FAA Headquarters) for each region's headquarters.

This was the era when the Civil Rights movement gained prominence, and Halaby, who knew from childhood experience what it was like to be singled out in a negative manner, was the agent who desegregated all American air terminals. During this period, African Americans were not refused flights but they were not given acceptable accommodations in terminals, which discouraged them from flying.

To his credit, the perceptive Halaby also helped establish a Psychiatric Services Staff within FAA's Aviation Medical Services.

The first Boeing 727 flew during his time as Agency head. Halaby pushed for the creation of the FAA Flight Academy in Oklahoma City and was a force behind the development of a National Aircraft Accident Investigative School, which was jointly established by FAA and the Civil Aeronautics Board.

Fortifying his profile as a bold and original leader even more, Halaby was a proponent for the creation of the Department of Transportation. Many other "firsts" occurred during his productive tenure: the weekly FAA newsletter *Intercom* first appeared, and it was produced until the 21st century when it was replaced by updated vehicles for FAA communication; he established the aviation mechanic safety awards; and the Agency completed its codification of previous aviation regulatory issuances into a single body of rules, the *Federal Aviation Regulations* (FARS).

Halaby was Administrator when the Washington headquarters staff began moving into its new location at Federal Office Building 10A, 800 Independence Ave., S.W, on November 22, 1963. What should have been a joyous move-in day was abruptly transformed into one of sorrow when President Kennedy was assassinated on that fateful day.

Underscoring Halaby's reputation as a fiercely independent thinker was the way he went about making a final decision on whether sky diving should be regulated: He took a parachute jump to assess the experience for himself and then make an informed decision. As Administrator, he was certainly one of a kind. Halaby left the Agency when General William F. McKee, an appointee of President Lyndon B. Johnson, took the reins on July 1, 1965.

By all appearances, Jeeb Halaby had an appetite for challenge. So his decision in 1969 to join Pan American Airways (Pan Am), the principal and largest international air carrier in the United States at that time, was every bit in character for him. He linked up with the prestigious outfit as a senior vice-president while founder Juan Trippe was still there. In time, he and Trippe locked horns, especially when some of Halaby's business decisions proved disastrous for the company. Halaby introduced the first fleet of Boeing 747s but refused to purchase the Concorde.

His unsuccessful tenure at Pan Am ended with an enforced resignation in 1973. After Pan Am, Halaby headed his own New York-based investment business (Halaby International) that specialized in Middle East aviation ventures. His Arab roots became an important part of this new stage in his life as a businessman, and in the personal life of his daughter, Lisa.

Jordan's King Hussein invited Halaby to create an Arab Air Academy, and he accepted. In 1977, Hussein and Lisa Halaby met at a ceremony in Amman to mark the delivery of the Jordanian airline's first jumbo jet. The couple married a year later, and she took the name Queen Noor.

Much was unusual in Najeeb Halaby's life. Having a Texan mother whose family came from Tennessee and a father who emigrated from the Middle East certainly made for an interesting start in life. To have a daughter who became a queen is, of course, an astounding entry into one's biography. Add to these unusual descriptors the many areas where this high-energy individual distinguished himself. What really stands out, however, is his speaking out for equal treatment for others when a voice from his sector of society was seldom heard. Atypical for a businessman of his era, Halaby was an avowed liberal who pressed for equal treatment for air crews of Hispanic descent and other minorities, including crew assignments to South Africa. All this in addition to having desegregated air terminals in the United States. In the end, maybe his fights for equality in the world of aviation were his greatest accomplishments.

In retirement, Najeeb Halaby served on various public and charitable institutions and continued to fly into his 80s. He died at his home in McLean, Va., on July 2, 2003.