

The Mile-High Office

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BUSINESS jets are a force for good. Really.



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This may seem like an outrageous statement, especially right after the public hubbub that caused Citigroup — the beneficiary of billions in government bailout money — to cancel the delivery of a new \$42 million jet.

But consider this: The General Aviation Manufacturers Association estimates that more than one million people are employed manufacturing, maintaining, flying and managing business aircraft. In addition to keeping legions at work in top-paying jobs, business aircraft facilitate and expand commerce for their users and contribute \$150 billion to the American economy annually.

With that in mind, it's astounding to see members of Congress, the very people doling out hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars to failed companies, disparaging and even actively trying to curtail this industry, which is already reeling from the economic and credit crises. The business jet is merely a tool — one that, employed correctly, could help those same struggling institutions soar again and start paying back the money owed, with interest.

Perhaps a reality check would help: Envision a rectangle 11 feet long by 4 feet 9 inches wide. Now, stand in the center, scrunching down so the top of your head is no more than 57 ½ inches from the bottom of your heels. That's the cabin area of those riding in a Cessna Citation CJ1, which together with its predecessors, comprise the most populous model — by far — of business jet in the world.

The oval cabin has seats for five passengers. Up front is a mini-pantry with a coffee dispenser; in back, a compact lavatory. The space is roughly equivalent to a large family van, and while quite comfortable,

the jet is short on glamour and luxury.

Rather, the Cessna's popularity, along with that of its close competitors, centers on another data point: 3,250. That's the number of feet of runway required for the aircraft to accelerate to flying speed and take off or, should something catastrophic occur, slam on the brakes and still have pavement remaining.

That figure — 3,250 feet — means business aircraft can alight on any of the 5,000 or so public-use airports scattered throughout the nation's suburbs, small towns and back country, as well as land at small city airports abandoned by airlines decades ago. By contrast, the airlines fly to only about 500 airports, and of those, fewer than 70 get about three-quarters of all traffic.

If two companies are competing for business, the one using a business aircraft can fly directly to one of those smaller airports and get to lunch with the client before the other guys taking the commercial airlines show up.

And the business people with the corporate jet won't just arrive faster; they'll also show up better prepared. After all, most companies send teams of people, and in their own airplane they're free to discuss confidential information or polish up that PowerPoint presentation. What's more, they can use the phones, their BlackBerrys and the Internet en route. In other words, these jets are offices that move.

Just look at Wal-Mart. That company's success is due, in part, to its fleet of hard-working, bare-bones Learjets that shuttle managers, executives and sales staff from their headquarters in Arkansas to towns throughout the country. The reliance on business aircraft began with its founder, Sam Walton, flying a small single-engine plane (still the most common type of business aircraft) to scout out store locations.

Here's another thing: The aircraft and their systems are, for the most part, made here in the United States, by union and non-union workers, in places like Indianapolis and Cincinnati; Wichita, Kan.; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

And with their impressive performance and construction, they're prized throughout the world. In 2007, about half the business jets delivered by American manufacturers went to foreign buyers that paid more than \$3 billion for them. Manufacturers elsewhere, including in Japan and Germany, once tried to compete, but they were so utterly trounced by American ingenuity and craftsmanship that they simply gave up.

There are foreign-made business aircraft, to be sure; for example, Citigroup had planned to buy a Falcon, made by the highly regarded French company Dassault. But even those are stuffed with American-made avionics, engines, subsystems and interiors. Indeed, Dassault's largest plant is in Little Rock, Ark., where some 2,000 workers complete Falcon interiors and ready them for delivery.

Finally, the members of Congress who are so irate about Citigroup's almost-purchase would do well to remember this: business jets are also widely employed by our government for search and rescue missions, surveillance, medical evacuations and crew training.

Of course, their value as speedy, secure executive transports is also much appreciated and used by high-ranking military and civilian officials, including, yes, many congressmen. A business jet has even served, when the president needs something less than a jumbo, as a diminutive Air Force One.

If you truly need to be there and there and there and back by seven, business aircraft may provide the only way. This is an industry that helps further the country's commerce and interests — and it deserves a bright future, not a public drubbing.

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