

“America First in the Air”: The National Aeronautic Association and Aviation Culture in the United States during the 1920s

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Introduction

In American aviation history, the interwar years are often characterized as a period during which a profound enthusiasm for aviation, commonly referred to as “air-mindedness,” emerged among the public. The term, used by contemporaries to denote active public engagement, reflected how the era’s technological optimism was projected onto aviation during its rapid development.¹ Several high-profile events helped fuel this enthusiasm: The Army Air Corps’ round-the-world flight in 1924, the Army and Navy’s victories in the Schneider Cup from 1923 to 1925, Richard Byrd’s North Pole expedition in 1926, and Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic crossing in 1927. As historian Joseph Corn has noted, it was Lindbergh’s flight, amplified by extensive press coverage, that turned the aviation craze into a nationwide phenomenon.² This wave of enthusiasm drew many individuals into the field, spurred industrial demand, and attracted substantial financial investment, laying the foundation for the aviation industry’s growth in the 1930s.³ Yet the institutional dimensions of the spectacles and practices that sustained the spirit of “air-mindedness,” such as competitive flights, public air events, and aviation education, have often been overlooked in historical accounts, even though they played a formative role in shaping American aviation in the 1920s.

This paper attempts to provide a more precise description of the “air-mindedness” phenomenon by focusing on the actions of national and international elites, and their communities who sought to disseminate an enthusiasm for aviation within American society, with particular attention to the National Aeronautic Association (NAA). The

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¹ Joseph Corn’s book provides a seminal introduction to the term in aviation history. Joseph J. Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America’s Romance with Aviation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

² Ibid, 17-27.

³ Lindbergh’s flight, combined with the Wall Street boom, contributed to financial expansion of aviation industry. F. R. Van der Linden, *Airlines and Air Mail: The Post Office and the Birth of the Commercial Aviation Industry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 35-36.

NAA, which succeeded the Aero Club of America (ACA) in 1922 to unify aviation administration in the United States, continues to serve as the official air sport organization and custodian of flight records. As a member of the World Air Sports Federation (Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, FAI), an international sporting federation of national aero clubs, the NAA's main role was to sanction and host aviation events and to certify official flight records, which required communication with a range of national and international actors to ensure systematic management. Aviation sporting events lay at the core of aviation's progress, serving both as indicators of technological advancement and as vehicles for promoting aviation's importance to the broader public. Along with numerous local events, the National Air Races became the major annual events of the interwar years, drawing huge crowds of tourists and investors to host cities. Administered under officially sanctioned rules and overseen by official timekeepers, these races reflected the NAA's emphasis on safe and fair competition in its pursuit of "sound sport."

The history of air races and the NAA has not been the subject of a comprehensive scholarship, partly due to the considerable size of the aviation industry during the 1920s. During the interwar period, both government agencies—most notably the Army and Navy Air Forces, the NACA, and the U.S. Postal Service—and private aviation companies collaborated to promote commercial air transport. Drawing on their World War I experience, the Army and Navy became fervent promoters of aviation, while the NACA contributed to technological advancement and the Postal Service supported practical applications in the industry.⁴ Compared with these actors, air races and the NAA's cultural enterprises have often been seen as belonging to the "cultural" and leisurely sphere of aviation. Nevertheless, public enthusiasm was crucial to technological progress, particularly during the 1920s, when there was skepticism about the practicality of air transportation. Since the inception of aviation, proponents recognized the importance of fostering public support, and the concept of air-mindedness emerged not only from the subliminal belief in human progress but was also from promotion by the early "pioneers" of aviation.

The cultural history of aviation has been a popular topic since the 2000s; however, the history of air races and the NAA still requires further exploration.⁵ One notable work on the ACA and NAA by Bill Robie illuminates their central role in American aviation, including settling disputes among industrialists in the early years, supporting the organization of flying corps, and lobbying the federal government for

⁴ Roger Bilstein's works give good introduction in American aviation history. Roger E. Bilstein, *The American Aerospace Industry: From Workshop to Global Enterprise* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), Roger E. Bilstein, *Flight in America: From the Wrights to the Astronauts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Van der Linden has highlighted the pivotal role of post office in the progress of American airlines. Van der Linden, *op. cit.*

⁵ Dominick A. Pisano eds., *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

aviation safety regulations.⁶ This paper, however, focuses more closely on the cultural enterprise of the NAA, particularly its roles in managing air events and records, as well as its educational endeavors. Consistent with its motto “America first in the air,” the NAA sought to advance national aerial transportation and promote collaboration toward that goal. More importantly, this paper examines the international dimension of the authorities and institutions governing world records, showing how groundbreaking achievements by famous aviators were recognized, and how these international objectives became integrated into national undertakings.

As the NAA’s membership in the FAI suggests, a focus on air races requires framing aviation as an internationally conducted enterprise. While it has often been claimed that air-mindedness emerged among the American public through their enthusiastic support for aviation, recent studies show that it was in fact a universal phenomenon: aviation was widely regarded as a vital mission, both for humanity and for nations.⁷ The rapid development of aviation technologies since World War I, combined with post-war patriotism, inspired enthusiasm across major powers, weaker countries, and colonies as a means of enhancing military strength and demonstrating technological prowess. Yet this aviation enthusiasm cannot be reduced solely to military or nationalistic motives, as it was also bound up with the internationalist conviction that the development of aviation technology represented a universal advancement for humankind. Investigations of the NAA in relation to the FAI thus reveal how international institutions and practices shaped American aviation.

The NAA, however, was distinctive in its character as a civic association that actively promoted aviation to a broad public. Unlike other national aero clubs such as the *Aéro-Club de France*, the *Aero Club d’Italia*, or the *Royal Aero Club*, it pursued a more explicitly public mission, emphasizing communication and education. These cultural and educational efforts were rooted in a longer American tradition of non-governmental organizations exercising political influence within defined social spheres and embedding themselves in local communities. As Brian Balogh has argued through the concept of the “associational state,” American governance often delegated significant authority to private actors and organizations, with the state shaping politics through cooperation with these entities.⁸ This tradition

⁶ Bill Robie, *For the Greatest Achievement: A History of the Aero Club of America and the National Aeronautic Association* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

⁷ M. McCluskey & L. Seaber, *Aviation in the Literature and Culture of Interwar Britain* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Jürgen P. Melzer, *Wings for the Rising Sun: A Transnational History of Japanese Aviation* (Boston: Brill, 2021); Marc Alsina, “Argentine Wings: The State, Popular Culture, and the Creation of a Technological Future in Argentina, 1910-1955” (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2022).

⁸ As some historians have recently argued, American citizens have been reluctant to be governed by the federal government since the country’s founding, leading to the state exercising governance through more subtle, invisible, yet powerful means, such as laws, infrastructure, policies, and

culminated in the practice of associationism under Herbert Hoover's leadership as Secretary of Commerce, when the Department of Commerce encouraged collaboration with industrial associations, private companies, and other non-governmental organizations, delegating responsibilities to these entities. Within this context, the NAA, vested with authority to sanction and manage sporting events, worked with a wide range of institutions to advance American aviation. Through its nine districts, it helped build the material and institutional arrangements that supported air travel prior to the consolidation of commercial airlines and the establishment of the Aeronautical Branch in the Department of Commerce in 1926. What distinguished the NAA most, however, was its initiative to cultivate public values in support of aviation. Just as American associations had long established themselves as benevolent institutions fostering civic participation, the NAA advanced a nationwide cultural program that gave aviation a prominent place in civic life. Examining the NAA's role in attaching prestige to the pursuit of aviation provides insight into how the "air-mindedness" became embedded in American cultural and social domains.

Focusing on the NAA's distinctive character as both an international organization and a national association, this paper seeks to write the history of aviation as both a national project and an international collaboration. In pursuit of American aviation progress, the NAA had to navigate and seek collaborations among various groups at regional, national, and international levels. This paper analyzes how the association addressed these diverse constituencies and values in its international settings and cultural activities. It first introduces the institutional settings and orientations of the FAI, highlighting the internationalism of aviation sport and its influence on the ACA and NAA as governing institutions in aviation events. Next, it examines the educational character of the NAA, which distinguished it from other FAI member clubs. It then considers the association's principal functions—record-setting and event organization—and how these sporting activities contributed to nationwide "air-mindedness." Finally, by investigating how NAA chapters and the Contest Committee collaborated with local actors in hosting aviation events and building airfields, the paper reveals not only the NAA's enterprise in promoting aviation as a national endeavor, but also the institutional and political dimensions of "air-mindedness" as an emergent phenomenon in American public culture.

subsidies. William J. Novak, "The Myth of the 'Weak' American State," *The American Historical Review* 113:3 (2008), 752-772; Brian Balogh, *The Associational State: American Governance in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale and the Establishment of the National Aeronautic Association in 1922

The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI), established in 1905, began as an international organization focused on coordinating ballooning sports among affluent, elite balloonists. With the advent of practical airplanes in 1909, the FAI quickly positioned itself as the leading international aeronautical authority, setting regulations for global aviation, particularly in the sphere of sporting events. Its principal activities included organizing the Gordon Bennett Cup races in both ballooning and aviation, as well as maintaining official world records to promote the competitive yet peaceful development of aeronautics.⁹ Because airplanes were still in their infancy and the aviation industry was just emerging, such sporting competitions were considered crucial for advancing technology, positioning the FAI as a central international authority during this pioneering phase of flight. In countries actively engaged in the early development of aviation, governance of air sports was delegated to national aero clubs affiliated with the FAI, including the Aero Club of America. As a sporting federation devoted to advancing aeronautics, the FAI maintained an internationalist vision, framing aviation as a shared global enterprise.

Following the suspension of sporting events during World War I, the FAI reconvened in Brussels in October 1919 with officials and delegates from eleven countries to reaffirm its international orientation.¹⁰ At the meeting, this commitment to internationalism was formally restated, and national aero clubs were encouraged to share developments in their respective countries through the FAI, even on matters involving military secrecy. The organization remained dominated by its former cosmopolitan elite balloonists but now focused on promoting international aeronautical sport, with the broader aim of opening a network of interconnected global airways. National initiatives to advance aviation were actively encouraged, as

⁹ Patrick de Oliveira's work provides a thorough examination of the development of ballooning as a sport in the late 19th century France and the historical context of the Aéro Club de France. Patrick de Oliveira, *Ascending Republic: The Ballooning Revival in Nineteenth-century France* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2025); Dauncy and Hare's paper provides a comprehensive introduction to the origins of the Gordon Bennett Cup, placing it within the broader context of 19th-century technological optimism and cosmopolitanism. H. Dauncy and G. Hare, "Cosmopolitanism United by Electricity and Sport: James Gordon Bennett Jr and the Paris *Herald* as Sites of Internationalism and Cultural Mediation in Belle Époque France," *French Cultural Studies* 25:1 (2014), 38-53.

¹⁰ The United States, Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden. Brazil, Portugal, Spain, Egypt, Argentina, Russia were also member countries but not present. "Procès Verbal De La Conférence," *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 1:1 (1920), 3.

their successes could provide the foundation for pioneering international air routes, and the FAI endorsed these efforts as contributions to the collective progress of humanity. After member states gave their final consent, the official collection of world records resumed in January 1920.¹¹

The establishment of the International Commission for Air Navigation under the auspices of the League of Nations, as part of the Paris Convention of 1919, marked the transfer of legal authority over aerial navigation to a newly created international body. Despite this shift, the FAI actively participated in the Commission's formation and maintained a close relationship with it, preserving its central role within the global aviation community. Its sporting orientation did not diminish its prominence; its administrative strength rested on managing aviation world records and sporting regulations. After the rapid technological advances of World War I, aviation sport experienced renewed opportunities, with aviators striving for increasingly challenging flight records as indicators of progress. The FAI also sought to lead the development of international aerial tours, identifying aerial tourism as a significant part of its agenda. Officials compiled comprehensive information on international air transport, including flight frequencies, cargo volumes, passenger numbers, and distances traveled. They also collected systematic data on newly constructed airfields to support aviators pioneering new international routes. Together with maps, practical details were circulated in bulletins and booklets, covering location, altitude, dimensions, landing obstacles, hangars, fuel, water, telephone, telegraph, and nearby hotels.¹²

The FAI held the authority to define criteria for aviation records and to officially recognize them. The record system was generally divided into three categories: airplane, spherical balloon, and dirigible balloon. For airplanes, multiple mission types were recognized, including altitude, speed, distance, and duration, each of which could be further classified by payload. Prior to the war, records achieved by female aviators were maintained separately, but this practice was later abandoned in response to growing resistance.¹³ The FAI's official licenses were issued through national aero clubs to aviators participating in sporting events, and records had to be measured by authorized timekeepers using chronometers certified by nationally designated observatories.¹⁴ The FAI further reinforced its authority by organizing the most prominent international competitions of the era, including the Gordon Bennett

¹¹ "Liberté De L'air," *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 1:1 (1920), 28.

¹² Aéro-Club de France, *FAI Premier guide de Grand Tourisme Aérien*, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Richelieu, Département des Manuscrits, GE F PIECE-10785.

¹³ "Records Féminins," *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 1:1 (1920), 17.

¹⁴ Examples of such observatories include the Naval Observatory of the United States, Besançon in France, the Kew in Britain, Geneva and Neufchâtel in Switzerland, and Uccle in Belgium.

Cup, the Michelin Cup, and the Schneider Cup, while also supporting numerous prize-based contests that attracted wide participation.

The formal character of aviation sports embodied a moralized belief in technological progress. Although many countries had begun earnest efforts in aeronautical development, the technology was still considered too immature to sustain international air routes. Aviation was therefore seen as requiring pioneers who would challenge records, with such endeavors regarded as a noble mission both nationally and internationally. Internationalists stressed that such progress should be seen as part of a collective human enterprise rather than solely national achievement.¹⁵ The development of commercial air routes was seen as a shared global undertaking, demanding cross-border exchange of technical knowledge and infrastructure. Yet growing national competition increasingly jeopardized these internationalist and peaceful ideals, as aviation came to be viewed more as a matter of national rivalry. Therefore, when the question arose whether the FAI should formally celebrate every national achievement, it was decided that the organization's proper role was to “proudly record the collective effort accomplished by all the countries” and to substitute formal congratulation with the awarding of appropriate distinctions.¹⁶ This established the practice of setting missions and awarding prizes for top achievements as a key strategy for aviation promoters, a practice that continued to influence national initiatives as well.

The Aero Club of America (ACA) was founded in 1905 by a group of elite sportsmen from the Auto Club of America who had recently turned their attention to spherical ballooning. As in several European countries, members of motoring clubs played a leading role in establishing national aero clubs. For these individuals, participation in aeronautical sports offered a socially distinctive way to engage with technological modernity, reflecting the period's broader enthusiasm for new technologies.¹⁷ What distinguished this air sport society from others was its authoritative approach to shaping aviation culture.¹⁸ As a member of the FAI, the

¹⁵ The following papers explore the internationalism and cosmopolitanism of early aeronautics: Dauncy and Hare, “Cosmopolitanism United by Electricity and Sport” (note 9); Michael Eckert, “Strategic Internationalism and the Transfer of Technical Knowledge: The United States, Germany, and Aerodynamics after World War I,” *Technology and Culture* 46:1 (2005), 104-31; Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air : Aviation and the American Ascendancy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ “Propositions Des Etats-Unis D'amérique,” *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 1:1 (1920), 26.

¹⁷ Patrick de Oliveira expounds on how French social elites adopted balloon as a means of social distinction. Oliveira, *Ascending Republic* (note 9), Ch. 4.

¹⁸ Following works dealt with the conflicts in aviation society aroused by authoritative approaches of the ACA. Timothy Trevor, “A Circus in the Sky: Birdmen, Barnstormers, and the Era of Spectacular Aviation in the United States, 1910-1926” (M.A. thesis, California State University, 2021); Dominick Pisano, “The Greatest Show Not on Earth,” in Dominick Pisano eds., *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

ACA aimed to play a central role in the national aviation landscape by issuing pilot licenses, managing aviation meets, and advising on matters related to aviation.

During World War I, the influence of the ACA diminished as the military assumed a central role in American aviation. Nevertheless, the ACA advised the War Department on establishing an aviation corps, helped shape the Army Air Service, and recommended increased federal and Navy funding for aviation. It also created the National Aeroplane Fund to support aviation institutions and facilitate the formation of an aviation unit in the New York National Guard, strengthening ties between the military and the ACA.¹⁹ In the postwar years, the American Flying Club—a sports flying group composed of military pilots—emerged as a significant challenge to the ACA. Believing that civilian aviators could not match their skills, the Club’s pilots organized their own Contest Committee and began holding transcontinental air races.²⁰ Amid this growing competition, aviation officials recognized the need for a unified national aviation body, reinforced by FAI-related challenges and the requirement to comply with international competition standards. Because the American Flying Club lacked official FAI status, it was not authorized to participate in international meetings. During debates over the 1920 Gordon Bennett Cup, the Club’s proposal on contest rules was rejected and had to be processed through the ACA, highlighting the potential for unifying American aviation sports institutions.²¹

Between 1921 and 1922, the NAA was established through the integration of the two clubs, and Howard E. Coffin, founder of the Hudson Motor Car Company and former chair of the Aircraft Production Board during the war, was elected president. The NAA was organized into nine chapters corresponding to the nine military aviation corps, with provisions for additional chapters upon request.²² Through these processes, American aviation sport entered a phase of closer interaction with the military, and the rise of military aviators unfolded within the broader context of sporting aviation.

Another reason a nationwide association became necessary was the strength of local enthusiasm, which made it difficult for the ACA to monitor and regulate local clubs and events. The NAA asserted its authority to sanction air races across the country and serve as a tribunal for competitions, while organizing major aviation contests and securing homologation of records from the FAI. Building on the ACA’s earlier engagement with European aviation officials through the Foreign Service

¹⁹ Letter from Alan Hawley to Charles D. Walcott, Aug. 10, 1916, National Air and Space Museum Technical Reference Files: Organizations, Aero Club of America, National Air and Space Museum (NASM) Archives; Robie, op. cit., Ch. 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 98

²¹ “Affaire Du Flying-Club,” *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 1:2 (1920), 38–39.

²² “Affiliation D’un Nouveau Pouvoir Sportif Aux États-Unis,” *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 4:13 (1923), 11.

Committee in Paris, the NAA quickly became one of the most active FAI members, participating in contest rule negotiations and overseeing numerous aviation events in the U.S. under FAI-approved regulations.²³ Gradually adopting a more systematic and institutional character, the NAA also undertook cultural and educational initiatives to promote the development of aviation technology. In this dual capacity—organizing major contests and fostering aviation education—the NAA functioned as a primary channel of communication between the public and the American aviation community.

Cultural Enterprise and Nurturing Air-Minded Youth

Despite the presence of many other aeronautical organizations, the demand for a cultural institution in American aviation came from the promoters who sought to encourage the public to support aeronautics. From the outset, ACA officials went beyond merely promoting the technology they enjoyed; they undertook educational efforts aimed at raising awareness of aviation’s social value and encouraging collective action toward a safe aviation culture. In the years following the ACA’s establishment in 1905, the group primarily exhibited aviation technology at expositions, which after the war became regular events.²⁴ The founders believed these events would educate the public about aviation and its potential. Promoting a safe aviation culture was also part of the club’s educational mission, but its orientation toward unilateral regulation of all aviation activities in the United States soon provoked conflicts with industrialists.²⁵

As the aviation industry expanded during the late 1910s and into the early 1920s, pressure mounted for the ACA to become more open to the public. In contrast to the ACA’s earlier exclusivity, the NAA was established as a national public association dedicated to cultivating “air-mindedness” among the broader population. Reflecting the increasingly complex aviation landscape, the newly founded NAA opened its membership to all citizens and sought active participation and cooperation with every aeronautical actor in the United States.²⁶ Under the motto “America First in the Air,” its primary roles centered on social and cultural promotion and on

²³ Letter from Unknown author to Hon. Robert Lansing, Oct. 10, 1919, Augustus Post Papers, Correspondence, 1919, MssCol 2461, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

²⁴ “Balloons the Feature of Armory Auto Show,” *The New York Times*, 1906. 1. 14; “Autos for Free Rides Popular at the Shows” *The New York Times*, 1906. 1. 16.

²⁵ Robie, *For the Greatest Achievement* (note 6); Dominick Pisano, “The Greatest Show Not on Earth” (note 18).

²⁶ “The District Governors of the National Aeronautic Ass’n Appeal to all Americans to Join the Ass’n,” *Aerodigest* 4:1 (1924), 34.

facilitating cooperation among diverse aviation stakeholders. The association aimed, in its own words, “to crystallize public sentiment for and to co-ordinate all efforts ... towards making our motto an accomplished fact.”²⁷ NAA chapters functioned as local professional organizations, collaborating on the construction of airports and the organization of aviation events. As Bill Robie observed in his historical work on NAA, spreading air-mindedness among the general public was also emphasized for reasons of safety. The association conducted campaigns to prevent aviation accidents by encouraging local communities to paint roofs and standpipes with checkerboard patterns.²⁸ Individuals and local governments alike adopted the practice of inscribing their locality’s name and directional markers within these patterns as a way of expressing their “air-mindedness.”

Youth education was also an important project for building an air-minded nation under the ACA and later the NAA. From its early years, the ACA established a Junior Aero Club under its wing, offering educational programs such as model airplane construction. Emma L. Todd, described at the time as the only woman devoted to aeronautical experimentation, organized the Junior Aero Club to instruct children in designing airplanes and balloons. Her initiative was inspired by the youth aviation culture in Paris, which staged a massive junior balloon contest in 1907 with more than three hundred entries. In addition to Todd’s instruction, the ACA Advisory Committee—including figures such as Thomas Baldwin and Albert Leo Stevens—provided mentoring, and junior aeronautic contests were regularly held.²⁹ These efforts influenced the emerging fashion of the model airplane industry. Percy Winslow Pierce, whose toy glider business became highly successful in the 1920s, had been a member of the Junior Aero Club in 1908 and began selling high-quality model airplanes at age of fifteen in 1910. His Pierce Flyer kit proved especially popular and helped establish aeromodelling as a widespread hobby in the 1910s and 1920s.³⁰

The fashion for youth aviation education extended beyond the influence of the NAA and spread widely throughout American society. Model airplane programs were incorporated into technical education in youth groups and schools across the nation. The first model airplane competition in the United States was held in 1909 by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), which had begun providing aeronautical instruction as early as that year.³¹ After successfully hosting numerous regional contests, the ACA consolidated these efforts by launching the National

²⁷ Bernard H. Mulvihill, “Do We Need a National Aeronautic Association?” *Aerodigest* 3:3 (1923), 144.

²⁸ Robie, *op.cit.*

²⁹ “Balloon Flying for Young People,” *New York Times*, 1908. 2. 10.

³⁰ Aaron L. Alcorn, “Flying into Modernity: Model Airplanes, Consumer Culture, and the Making of Modern Boyhood in the Early Twentieth Century,” *History and Technology* 25:2 (2009), 115-146.

³¹ “Y.M.C.A. To Teach Flying,” *New York Times*, 1909. 9. 5.

Model Aeroplane Competition in 1915, establishing it as a nationwide event that continued for three years. From the 1920s, the Boy Scouts of America integrated aviation into its core educational programs, while toy airplane business flourished, further popularizing aviation among young people. Many ACA members took an interest in youth education and collaborated with these organizations. Augustus Post, one of ACA’s founders and an early hero of American aeronautics who had won the 1910 Gordon Bennett Cup in ballooning, also co-founded the Boy Scouts in the same year. He was a proficient lecturer and frequently addressed youth groups that showed strong interest in aviation and were eager to hear about aviation from an expert. Actively engaged in charitable work, Post continued to be invited by educational, cultural, or philanthropic organizations to speak on the value of aviation well into the 1930s.³²

As historian Aaron Alcorn has noted, this phenomenon can be situated within the rise of popular middle-class culture in the early twentieth century.³³ Technical education for boys reflected parents’ aspirations to raise their sons as modern young men, endowed not only with physical strength but also with superior knowledge and skills in technology. Aviation was represented as a means of overcoming nature by harnessing both intellectual capacity and bodily vigor. This ideal of modern masculinity resonated strongly with the ethos of the Boy Scouts. James E. West, who served for many years as the chief executive of the Boy Scouts, remarked that the Scouts “are building the kind of the man the aeronautical profession needs, men of the very highest type, red-blooded men; men resourceful and alert, trained for the emergency when it arises.”³⁴ He further explained that training Scouts who could survive in the wilderness, cook, build shelters, and find their way independently also contributed to preparing “the flyers and record breakers of tomorrow.”³⁵ In this sense, the Boy Scouts of America became one of the major collaborators of the NAA in nurturing an air-minded public. In cooperation with other aeronautical organizations in the United States, including the NAA, the Boy Scouts offered the most extensive aeronautical education, ranging from providing courses and booklets to forming groups that served directly at aeronautical sites.

Model airplanes contests constituted one of the principal areas of the cooperation between the NAA and the Boy Scouts of America. Although local model aviation clubs organized competitions in various regions, a national-level event provided a stronger incentive for participation. In 1923, Bernard Mulvihill, the vice president

³² Most of the correspondence preserved in the Augustus Post Papers (1913–1947) from the years 1913 to 1935 consists of invitations from American societies to speak on aviation, as well as requests for journal contributions or consultations for aviation programs. Augustus Post Papers, 1913–1947, MssCol 2461, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.

³³ Alcorn, “Flying into Modernity” (note 30).

³⁴ James E. West, “The Boys and the Men of Tomorrow,” *Aerodigest* 3:2 (1923), 67–69.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

of the NAA, established the Mulvihill Trophy, to be awarded at the annual National Air Races. The event was a duration contest for rubber-powered model airplanes, offering several hundred dollars in prizes.³⁶ The majority of contestants were Boy Scouts, and elimination rounds were conducted across the country.³⁷ The Mulvihill Trophy remained the leading model airplane competition in the U.S. until 1936, when the Model Aircraft Association was founded and assumed authority over sanctioning such contests.

Setting Records and Military Cooperation

During the interwar years, aviators often saw themselves as pioneers of a new modern era, striving for “faster, further, and higher” flights as well as the challenge of flying through the night. As David Courtwright has argued, this relentless pursuit of new records represented a cultural search for a “new frontier” in America, one that had effectively closed on land by the end of the nineteenth century.³⁸ In this sense, record flights were not only demonstrations of technical capability but also symbolic acts that generated heroic masculinity and placed the aviator at the center of modern technological progress.³⁹ The quest for records brought fame and fortune to individual pilots while simultaneously shaping a public imagination in which aviation embodied ideals of human advancement, freedom, and international peace. At the same time, however, this culture of record-setting also underscored the nationalist and strategic dimensions of flight, since aviation achievements were closely tied to the cause of national defense. As aviation historian Jenifer Van Vleck has noted, conceptualizing interwar U.S. aviation within John Fousek’s notion of “nationalist globalism,” this duality defined the field: it proclaimed peaceful and internationalist connections across the world, while simultaneously advancing nationalist and imperialist projects.⁴⁰

The prominent role of military personnel in aviation sports exemplified this duality. Military pilots often aimed not merely at preparing for war but advancing

³⁶ “40 Pilots Set for Big Air Events: Fatal Crash at Mitchel Field Fails to Damp Enthusiasm,” *San Antonio Light*, 1925. 10. 9.

³⁷ “Students of Art Schools Are Invited by the National Aeronautic Association,” *Aerodigest* 3:1 (1923), 42.

³⁸ David T. Courtwright, *Sky as Frontier: Adventure, Aviation, and Empire* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

³⁹ For heroism and heroic masculinity in early American aviation, see the following works: Marianne Cronin, “Richard Byrd, Technological Explorer: Polar Exploration, the Machine, and Heroic Masculinity in Interwar America,” *Technology and Culture* 57:2 (2016), 322-352; Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁴⁰ Van Vleck, op. cit. (note 15).

the frontiers of flight and displaying their superiority in the skies. They were the most ardent collaborators with the NAA in air races, particularly in the early and mid-1920s, when they flew the most advanced aircraft available in the United States. With the memory of World War I still vivid, aviation came to embody a patriotic project of heroic airmen pioneering new aerial frontiers. At the same time, many of these aviators saw themselves as promoters of international cooperation in the name of “human progress” and “civilization.” They participated in, and often led, record-breaking missions organized by the NAA. A telling example was the 1924 Around-the-World Flight of the U.S. Army, carried out with the specially developed Douglas World Cruiser, which realized a long-cherished goal of aviation sporting institutions worldwide. The ACA had repeatedly sought to sponsor such a mission: in 1915, officials of Panama-Pacific Exposition cooperated with the ACA to raise \$1,000,000 in prize money for an Around-the-World Flight, and in 1920 the ACA arranged another prize of \$500,000 in close correspondence with the FAI, even preparing detailed maps of air routes and landing fields.⁴¹ Although the 1924 Around-the-World Flight was ultimately not a prize competition, it was carried out in cooperation with the NAA and was celebrated with the Collier Trophy, awarded that year to the “greatest achievement in aviation in America.”

The Schneider Trophy race, the most prominent international seaplane speed competition, offers another example of collaboration between the NAA and the U.S. military in aviation sports. Managed by the FAI, the event brought together the world’s fastest military aircraft until 1931. Each year, the hosting national aero club determined the rules and mapped out the courses, typically triangular routes that included two stretches over water. After Lieutenant David Rittenhouse of the U.S. Navy won the 1923 race in Cowes, England, flying a Curtiss CR-3, the NAA assumed responsibility for hosting the next two contests. This resulted from James Doolittle of the U.S. Army Air Corps capturing the 1925 race in a Curtiss R3C-2, following the postponement of the 1924 event. During these years, the NAA worked closely with the Army, Navy, the War Department, and local aero clubs to determine race sites, courses, and detailed procedures.⁴² The Schneider Cup contributed to shaping America’s sense of aerial supremacy and marked the beginning of Doolittle’s rise as a celebrated aviator. However, the enormous military

⁴¹ “\$1,000,000 Prize Plan: Hope to Interest Air Clubs Everywhere in Round-the-World Flight,” *New York Times*, 1914. 2. 8; “Million in Prizes for Aerial Racing,” *San Jose Mercury Herald*, 1914. 2. 8; “Course Autour Du Monde Organisée Par L’aéro-Club D’amérique,” *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 1:2 (1920), 38-39.

⁴² Letter from F. A. Pope, Lieut. Col., Corps of Engineers, to C. F. Schory, Contest Committee, Dec. 1, 1926, National Aeronautic Association (NAA) Archives, Box 76, Folder 2, NASM Archives.

expenditures—estimated at \$433 million over five years—provoked considerable public criticism.⁴³

Lieutenant Oakley Kelly and John Macready's non-stop transcontinental flight from New York to San Diego was another record-breaking achievement, notable for pioneering the possibility of transcontinental air travel. The flight was carried out in close collaboration with the NAA, which dispatched representatives to Roosevelt Field and Rockwell Field to time the takeoff with watches synchronized to Western Union time and communicated by wire.⁴⁴ Because of the United States' vast geography, a non-stop transcontinental flight from coast to coast could itself stand as a record-setting achievement, unlike in smaller countries where round trips were necessary. Yet under contemporary FAI rules, fliers were required to return to their takeoff point to set a distance record, so Kelly and Macready's one-way flight was not initially recognized. After persistent requests by the NAA, the rules were finally revised, allowing the flight to be officially accepted as a world record.⁴⁵ Kelly and Macready's journey received wide press coverage, most notably in *National Geographic Magazine*, which featured extensive aerial photographs taken by the U.S. Army Air Service.⁴⁶ The American geography visible from the air greatly advertised aviation as a civilizing and modern enterprise to the public. Macready himself contributed an article in the magazine, envisioning the prospect of having "lunch in New York one day and lunch in San Diego the next."⁴⁷ Such rhetorical flourishes illustrate how aviators acted not only as technological pioneers but also as public promoters of aviation, framing record flights as a reordering of everyday life and dramatizing the revolutionary potential of air transport.

Beginning in the late 1920s, the U.S. Army and Navy retreated from developing record-breaking airplanes because of the high costs, recognizing that supremacy in records did not necessarily translate into supremacy in military power.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, military aviators remained active in major national competitions, and the patriotic image they projected continued to fuel the aviation craze in the years that followed.

⁴³ "Says We Lead World in Aircraft Advance," *New York Times*, 1925. 3. 9, as cited in Robie, op.cit., 114 (note 6).

⁴⁴ Letter from Russell Shaw, Contest Committee, to Mason M. Patrick, U.S. Air Service, May 7, 1923, NAA Archives, Box 105, Folder 7, NASM Archives.

⁴⁵ "Records Officiels du Monde au 31 Mars 1925," *Bulletin Officiel de la Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* 6:21 (1925), 13.

⁴⁶ Lieut. John A. Macready, "The Non-Stop Flight across America," *The National Geographic Magazine* 46:1 (1924), 1-84.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 1.

⁴⁸ Letter from David Ingalls to F. H. Laguardia, Feb. 4, 1931, NAA Archives, Box 76, Folder 2, NASM Archives.

Air Races and Nationwide Cooperation for Aviation

In line with the FAI’s strategy of promoting aeronautical development through air races, the NAA adopted air races and aviation prizes as a central cultural enterprise to advance aviation in sound, safe, and progressive directions. From the earliest years of powered flight, international air races had been a well-established tradition in global aviation. Alongside the major trophy races managed by the FAI, events such as the 1910 Los Angeles International Aviation Meet and the 1911 Chicago International Aviation Meet fueled the nationwide enthusiasm for aviation in the United States until the outbreak of the war. In the postwar years, as public fascination with aviation deepened, international air races increasingly came to be seen as prime opportunities for aviation promoters and local business interests alike.

Although aviation sports were closely related to stunt flying—and indeed incorporated some stunt elements into formal competition—air races were nonetheless regarded as distinct from stunts and barnstorming. Since 1909, the ACA had sought to steer aviation away from spectacle, warning industries and establishing regulations to ensure that airplane sports developed into legitimate competitions rather than popular entertainment.⁴⁹ Many early aviators resisted this stance, perceiving the ACA as elitist and overly authoritative. The tension over stunt flying persisted throughout the NAA years, with officials repeatedly insisting on the need to “eliminate stunt flying.”⁵⁰ They argued that aviation events should not devolve into mere shows, but rather serve to demonstrate technological practicality and advancement. In other words, air races were meant not only to capture public attention, but to demonstrate aviation’s practical value and safety in the service of national progress.

Air races went hand in hand with awards. The ACA and NAA often collaborated on the management of prizes, particularly in relation to the operation of air races held across the country, with some awards entrusted to them by donors. Contributing to aviation prizes was not regarded as the eccentric pursuit of a few individuals but rather encouraged as a respectable act in support of technological and human progress. Since the beginning of aeronautics, journalists and media outlets have been major contributors as sponsors. Examples include the Gordon Bennett Cup, established by *New York Herald* owner James Gordon Bennett Jr.; the Scientific American Trophy; and the Detroit News Trophy, which was awarded during the

⁴⁹ On criticisms of the ACA’s authoritarian character, see note 18. The military, too, maintained an oppositional stance toward stunt flying from an early stage. “Our Army Aviators in Race with Death,” *The New York Times*, 1914. 5. 25.

⁵⁰ “The National Aeronautic Association’s Prospectus for Its Recently Organized Membership Campaign Throughout the United States Truthfully Says,” *Aerodigest* 2:4 (1923), 262.

National Air Races. These players were interested in exclusive reports and in enhancing the public image of their journals by supporting leading technologies. Through their heroic portrayals in the press, aviators quickly rose to prominence as both national and global icons.⁵¹ Local aero clubs, aviation companies, and other aviation-related enterprises soon followed suit in offering prizes. After the war, figures from the tourism industry emerged as major sponsors. For instance, in 1919 Augustus Post persuaded New York hotelier Raymond Orteig to endow the Orteig Prize through the ACA for the first nonstop transatlantic flight, eventually won by Charles Lindbergh in 1927. Similarly, Hawai'i pineapple magnate James Dole sponsored the 1927 Dole Air Race from Oakland to Honolulu. Aerial tourism, indeed, became one of the most significant catalysts for the air industry in the 1920s.

National and International Air Races became major festivals that gathered diverse prizes and awards to attract nationwide interest in aviation. Beginning in 1920, the ACA organized International Air Races with the Pulitzer Trophy as the centerpiece, making the event a regular national fixture. Donated by Ralph, Joseph Jr., and Herbert Pulitzer, the trophy was managed by the ACA and awarded to the NAA chapter represented by the winning pilot, with the condition that it be returned a month before the next contest. To participate, pilots needed both an FAI license and an annual certificate from the NAA Contest Committee. According to the rules, the trophy was awarded to the local aero club or chapter of the NAA represented by the winning pilot and was to be returned to the ACA/NAA one month before the next competition. Initially held in 1919 as the longest nonstop flight competition for military fliers, around 1920 and 1921 it became a major speed competition and the centerpiece of the International Air Races, which took place over several days and identified the year's fastest aircraft and most skilled fliers.⁵² Since the fastest planes were military, Army and Navy pilots dominated the races, often competing with the same aircraft used in the Schneider Trophy contests.

Although the events became more widely known as the "National Air Races" after 1926, they were initially open to international participants, which is why they were originally titled "International Air Races." The Pulitzer Trophy race in particular drew foreign military aviators with its prestige and prize of over \$1,000. At the 1923 St. Louis and 1924 Dayton races, foreign entries began to compete directly with American pilots. In St. Louis, Captain Georges T. Thenault, the French military attaché for aeronautics, helped organize the events and ensured that he and other French aces would enter the Pulitzer Trophy race.⁵³ Although Al Williams ultimately won, aviators from France, Britain, and Italy posed serious challenges, prompting a

⁵¹ Robène and Bodin have noted that with the emergence of airplane races, aviators began to be portrayed as heroic figures through the media in France. Luc Robène et Dominique Bodin, "Le Feuilletton Aéronautique à La Belle Époque," *Le Temps des médias* 9:2 (2007), 47-62.

⁵² "Fliers to Compete for Pulitzer Prize," *The Sun*, 1919. 8. 6.

⁵³ W. M. Ledbetter, "The International Air Races," *Aerodigest* 2:6 (1923), 424.

revision of the Pulitzer rules to include provisions for the case of a foreign victor.⁵⁴ After the 1925 race, however, the Pulitzer Trophy was discontinued, leaving room for many civilian competitions within the National Air Races.

Distinctive races featured in the National Air Races from the early years. Among them were the “on-to-city” races, in which contestants were required to fly to the venue in any type of aircraft—for example, the on-to-Detroit race in 1922 and the on-to-St. Louis race in 1923. Other notable additions included the Mulvihill Trophy race for model airplanes beginning in 1923, nonstop air derbies between cities starting in 1927, and the National Women’s Air Derby of 1929, where Amelia Earhart rose to national prominence. While most competitions focused on speed, they encompassed a broad range of aircraft, engines, payloads, and purposes, thus allowing wide participation. Many light airplane races, such as the Dayton Daily News Light Airplane Trophy, the Aero Digest Trophy, the Betsy Ross Trophy, and the Aviation Town and Country Club of Detroit Trophy—all featured in the 1926 Cleveland meet—were designed to promote low-powered, low-cost aircraft. Exclusive contests were also held for civilian, military, or airmail pilots, with civilian races in particular expanding steadily; in 1926, for instance, 12 of the 19 events were restricted to civilian entrants.⁵⁵ Ultimately, the National Air Races were more than sporting spectacles: they served as vital platforms where aviators could secure financial backing, build reputations, and ascend to national celebrity, turning aviation into a recognized path of social advancement.

Through the National Air Races, “air-mindedness” was promoted on a regional basis, reflecting the rise of aviation regionalism. They created opportunities for cities to build or renovate municipal airfields, reflecting civic ambitions to become transportation hubs. The several days of the national festival also brought large national and international crowds into host cities, advertising them as centers of aviation. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered every year to watch the races, including many who avoided admission fees and watched from outside the field. Around the season, the entire city prepared to accommodate tourists. During the 1924 Dayton races, for example, all hotels were reported to be fully booked, camp beds filled lobbies, and as many as 25,000 private homes were converted into lodgings.⁵⁶ Because of these economic effects, bidding among cities to host the races intensified until Cleveland was established as the permanent venue in the 1930s. This civic enthusiasm became one of the principal ways in which air-mindedness

⁵⁴ Letter from Hugh W. Robertson to Russell Shaw, May 16, 1924; and Letter from Russell Shaw to Hugh W. Robertson, May 24, 1924, NAA Archives, Box 75, Folder 17, NASM Archives.

⁵⁵ “The 1926 National Air Races,” *Slipstream* 7:7 (1926), 11-14.

⁵⁶ “Five Cities Bid for Aviation Races: Dayton Finds Itself Overflowing with Visitors in Air Event,” *The Washington Times*, 1924. 10. 1.

was expressed, as the term was often applied to cities eager to promote aeronautical development.⁵⁷

In this respect, the air races were important venues where the NAA worked with regional aviation centers to transform local enthusiasm into national success. Annual Air Race Committees, composed of national and local officials as well as industrialists, maintained close coordination with the NAA Contest Committee, which supervised all proceedings. With local aviation clubs and business leaders contributing to the growing scale of the events, the races ultimately became a crucial mechanism of national cooperation, channeling diverse regional energies into a shared purpose: the advancement of American aviation.

Conclusion

Aviation has always developed in tandem with public fascination, accompanied by an ambivalence between lofty human ideals and the realities of warfare. This ambivalence becomes clearer when international aviation sports competitions are incorporated into the historical narrative of aviation. This paper has examined how the international settings of aviation sport shaped the development of American aviation, while also emphasizing how they unfolded within the American context. Racing, record-breaking, and the promotion of aviation technology through awards were not merely national undertakings but practices embedded in a broader, universal culture. A common aspiration among international aviation elites was the construction of a global aviation network premised on peace in the skies. Within this transnational network, the Aero Club of America was created to promote American aviation culture as a safe, gentlemanly, and competitive sport. Although the ACA faced difficulties in maintaining its leadership amid the growing diversity of actors in the American aviation landscape, it nevertheless forged a close relationship with the federal government as the nation's representative aviation society. Moreover, the international requirement that each country have a single representative body within the FAI further shaped the creation of an association that unified American aviation organizations.

Despite its international orientation, however, the National Aeronautic Association distinguished itself from other aviation clubs by emphasizing educational and cultural promotion. NAA officials believed that national cooperation was essential for the development of commercial aviation in the United States. Under the motto "America First in the Air," the association pursued a wide array of initiatives through its regional branches, combining the promotion of

⁵⁷ "Holmes Lauds Local Spirit For Aviation," *Douglas Daily Dispatch*, 1927. 10. 29; "Bradley Pays Warm Tribute to Local Men," *The Daily Alaska Empire*, 1928. 6. 22.

national technological progress with efforts to encourage broad civic and community participation. Responding to the growing enthusiasm of young people for aviation, the NAA also supported educational programs and played a central role in popularizing model aircraft competitions nationwide through major contests and awards.

Aviation sports competitions and record-setting flights, the principal projects of the NAA, became key arenas where national and international interests collided. Achieving superior aviation records enhanced a nation's standing in the international community, as such feats were widely regarded as a universal good, at least among the core members of the global aviation network. The heavy participation of military pilots in record-setting attempts, as well as the spirited contests between airmen in the Schneider Trophy races, illustrates this ambivalence. Militarism in this context was less about an inclination to wage war than about embodying the patriotic spirit of sacrifice expected of soldiers. Military pilots who competed in record events believed they were advancing international cooperation and human progress while simultaneously enhancing national prestige. The contemporary aviation enthusiasm, therefore, must be understood in light of these tensions between internationalist ideals and imperialist realities. By collaborating with military fliers in record-breaking, the NAA positioned itself at the heart of American aviation, transforming this duality into a program for national, civilizing progress.

The stories of how records were created and how aviation sports competitions were staged should be examined in this light, moving beyond heroic narratives of military personnel and civilian aviators. The history of the NAA shows collaborative efforts in national aviation development as well as the diverse interests that shaped it. In the 1920s, air races provided capitalists with opportunities to invest in technological advancement and to collaborate with the aviation community. The National Air Races grew steadily in popularity, featuring contests for military personnel, civilians, postal pilots, and even children, while drawing increasing numbers of participants and capital. Their appeal was reflected in the large crowds that flocked to host cities and in the prominence of the winners. For local officials and industrialists, the races also provided opportunities to promote regional aviation infrastructure. Just as nations sought to establish themselves as aviation powers through international air races, the United States witnessed the rise of aviation hub cities through “aviation regionalism.” The races spurred the renovation of airports and the development of facilities for pilots and travelers, accompanied by the expansion of the tourism industry. Aviation was established as a local industrial and cultural project by the interaction between local NAA branches and regional aviation hubs.

In the 1920s, many actors began to view aviation as important project, but it is equally crucial to consider the institutional and cultural mechanisms that made this possible. Social and cultural tools such as air races, records, and awards not only

attracted financial investment but also conferred social credit to those who took up the challenge. Although the NAA's identity as a cultural association has often led to its exclusion from narratives of aviation history, cultural planning was in fact a significant force in shaping aviation culture at the time. While many regarded aviation as a public good that could drive both technological and social progress, the NAA played a central role in fostering social cooperation toward that goal. The cultural politics of these civil associations was distinctive in the United States, offering insight into why citizens engaged so deeply with aviation in their local communities during the 1920s. The rise of American aviation in the interwar years thus stemmed as much from cultural politics and associational infrastructure as from technological advancement alone.

Abstract

This paper examines how “air-mindedness,” the widespread public enthusiasm for aviation in 1920s America, was cultivated through institutional, cultural, and social practices. Rather than emphasizing technological innovation or achievements, it highlights the National Aeronautic Association (NAA)—the official U.S. representative to the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI)—and its collaboration with international, military, and local actors to achieve these goals. The NAA administered air sports by certifying records and coordinating races, while also seeking to embed aviation in everyday life through education and community engagement. While internationalist ideals coexisted with nationalist and imperial ambitions during interwar years, the NAA framed aviation progress as the outcome of fair international competition under the motto “America First in the Air.” The Association translated these ambitions into a form of cultural politics, mobilizing civic participation and creating public value for aviation across the country. Events such as the National Air Races not only attracted mass audiences and capital but also encouraged infrastructure development. By analyzing the NAA’s cultural strategies, this paper reinterprets the rise of American aviation during the interwar period as the product of associational politics linking international networks to domestic imperatives.

Keywords: air-mindedness, air races, American aviation, Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, National Aeronautic Association, record-breaking flights