

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN
RANKING REPUBLICAN, SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
FULL COMMITTEE FIELD HEARING
ON CAPACITY ISSUES AT CHICAGO O'HARE
JUNE 15, 2001

- C As everyone who flies is well aware, air travel is reaching a crisis point. In critical areas around the nation, such as Chicago, the demand for air services is pushing existing capacity to its limits. Deregulation of the airline industry unleashed a great revolution in travel, one that greatly benefitted the flying public. As a consequence, the demand for flying is reaching new heights. But the lack of critical infrastructure is threatening to take us backward. Given the importance of aviation to our future, I do not think that this is an acceptable option.
- C The Chicago area will, without a doubt, play a key role in the future of the national air transportation system -- not including the work of the latest corporate giant to call the Windy City home. Because O'Hare is a major hub for the two largest airlines in the world, it plays a critical role in the efficiency of the whole air transportation system. While the airport can reasonably handle current demand on a good weather day, it is the reality of seasonal severe weather and the prospect of continued growth in air traffic that threaten Chicago and the nation with aviation gridlock in the not too distant future.
- C The bottom line is that we now face a serious national problem that requires numerous regional solutions. Right now, the federal government does not build airports or runways -- it merely assists local officials in doing so. But conflicts and indecision at the local level are threatening the economic well being of the nation. I fully recognize the difficulties associated with building new airports and expanding those in urban and suburban communities. Not-in-my-backyard attitudes are all too common, even among those who otherwise complain about airline delays. Progress in transportation is rarely easy, but any negative impacts are virtually always far outweighed by the benefits. Undoubtedly, some communities were harmed by the construction of the interstate highway system, but I think we all can agree that it produced a tremendous national gain. We must think of airport infrastructure in the same way.
- C Although I am no stranger to the controversies and politics surrounding airport development in this area, I do not come here to advocate a particular solution. I do not know whether it would be best to expand O'Hare, to build a new airport in Peotone, to expand existing facilities in outlying areas, or to directly undertake all of these actions. The only thing that is not an option is inaction on the part of state and local officials. While I am reluctant to interfere with local and

regional decision making in this area, failure to act could force the federal government to become involved in the situation. I think we have already seen the beginnings of that with the introduction of bills in Congress to take away certain elements of state control of expansion of O'Hare.

- C I am anxious to hear from today's witnesses. There are a wide variety of viewpoints represented here, and it should make for a spirited discussion. The one message I have at the outset is that something must be done soon. I strongly encourage everyone to work quickly and cooperatively toward a solution. If it is not to be done at the local level, the pressure to impose a result from above will grow rapidly.