



Report flays FAA role in Texas affair

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David Balloff, a Knoxville who's assistant administrator for government and industry affairs for the Federal Aviation Administration, has been admonished by top officials for getting the FAA involved in a partisan squabble in Texas.

Balloff, who was a part owner of the former Balloff clothing stores in Knoxville, is a former press secretary to U.S. Rep. John J. Duncan Jr., R-Knoxville, who assisted the congressman on aviation issues.

Balloff's role in the Texas affair is detailed in a report by Kenneth Mead, inspector general of the U.S. Department of Transportation, to Sen. Joseph Lieberman, ranking minority member of the Senate's Committee on Governmental Affairs.

Here are details from the report and from an article in the Washington Post:

Balloff responded to a request from the office of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, for information about an airplane DeLay suspected was carrying Texas Democrats from the state legislature to Oklahoma in May. Ultimately, the FAA issued a special lookout for the plane, U.S. officials said.

The plane was owned by state Rep. James E. "Pete" Laney, who, with other Texas House Democrats, was trying to evade an edict by the state's Republican legislators for his arrest and forced attendance at a meeting in Austin. DeLay's allies needed a quorum to pass a congressional redistricting plan that favored the election of more Republicans to Congress.

The GOP effort failed because the Democrats hid at a motel in Oklahoma.

A report found that DeLay's request set off a search that lasted more than eight hours and involved at least 13 FAA employees.

The report found that Balloff did not violate any federal rules or regulations. Balloff said he did not know the purpose of the request from DeLay's staff.

Inspector General Mead said: "We do not understand why he did not ask the staffer about the purpose ... particularly since he told us he thought it might involve a safety issue."

In addition, Balloff failed to inform the FAA administrator promptly of his actions, the report said.

Under a section labeled remedial action, Mead said the FAA administrator and chief counsel would speak with Balloff "to counsel him concerning issues in regard to his judgment in this matter."

Mead's report adds to the public record in Washington concerning a murky incident, in which Democrats alleged that federal counterterrorism and law enforcement authorities were inappropriately enlisted to aid a Republican political effort.

The FAA issued new rules last week which would forbid FAA employees from revealing the whereabouts of a plane unless the request is for an official government purpose or for safety or efficiency reasons.

Balloff was unavailable for further comment. The FAA public-affairs office said the agency is letting "the inspector general's report speak for itself."

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