

Bill would benefit Cold War Pilots
By SAMANTHA YOUNG STEPHENS
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WASHINGTON -- Hundreds of pilots who flew covert missions in southeast Asia on behalf of a U.S. government-sponsored airline could reap federal retirement benefits under legislation before Congress.

Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., this week took up their cause by introducing a bill granting payment to an estimated 500 employees contracted by the CIA during the Cold War years.

"The employees of Air America helped the U.S. win the Cold War, but we have given them the cold shoulder when it comes to federal retirement benefits," Berkley said in a statement.

The bill would award federal benefits to the mechanics, crew members and pilots who worked for Air America Inc., the Taiwan-based airline contracted by the CIA from the 1950s to the 1970s. Similar federal benefits are given to workers of other government-owned corporations.

Las Vegas Ward Reimer, who worked as a mechanic for the airline, said compensation is long overdue. "I would say this has been in the works for 30 years," said Reimer, who only recently could reveal that he had worked for the airline.

Berkley modeled her bill after a measure introduced last year by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev. Reid spokeswoman Tessa Hafen said the senator plans to reintroduce his bill. The Senate did not consider the measure last year.

The airline, founded by retired Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault of the Flying Tigers and American entrepreneur Whiting Willauer, first operated in China as a cargo corporation called Civil Air Transport.

Its pilots carried supplies throughout China after World War II to nationalist Chinese troops battling the communists. In 1950, the CIA bought the airline for clandestine missions across Asia.

"The employees of Air America risked life and limb for our nation, and they should be recognized for the role they played in our military efforts in East Asia," Berkley said.