



●●● TOP FIVE OPINION PIECES ON FAA REFORM

Editorials, op-eds and columns in support of FAA reform continue to roll-in. Here are our top five so far:

Can Air Traffic Reform Fly Higher Than Party Politics?

Jeff Jacoby
Boston Globe Columnist
June 14, 2017

Today's political climate being what it is, anything a president proposes gets condemned out of hand by lawmakers from the other party. So of course President Trump's proposal last week for privatizing the US air traffic control system was no sooner announced than a slew of top Democrats, including Senate minority leader Charles Schumer and his House counterpart, Nancy Pelosi, proclaimed their opposition.

But just this once, could we suspend the automatic partisan resistance? Devolving air traffic control operations from the Federal Aviation Administration to a self-funded nonprofit corporation really is a worthwhile idea, one lawmakers from both parties should get behind.

Here is a passage from the president's remarks at his infrastructure and aviation news conference. Focus on the actual content of the message instead of on the party of the man delivering it. Better still, suppose these words had come from a Democrat:

"We want to improve the efficiency of our infrastructure, particularly air traffic control. . . . The FAA's 20-year effort to modernize its air traffic control technology simply has not been able to keep pace with either the emergence of new technology or the growth and demand for air travel. And while we've made significant progress, as the horrendous — I don't know how else to say it — just the horrendous flight delay statistics demonstrate, we have not done nearly enough. . . .

"Flight delays have increased by more than 58 percent in the last 5 years; cancellations by 68 percent. In addition to widespread passenger frustration and anger, which I hear about wherever I go, these delays are costing airlines and passengers more than \$5 billion every year. Part of the problem is due to outdated technology. . . . But a more fundamental problem is also how the FAA operates."

Full disclosure: Those words were spoken by a Democrat — 17 years ago. It was President Bill Clinton who was frustrated by the nation's "horrendous" air travel problems and the FAA's failed "20-year effort to modernize." The key differences between then and now, party politics aside, is that the FAA's failure to launch has passed the 35-year mark — while a superb alternative to America's air traffic control system is flourishing on our doorstep.

The flaws with the US system have been exhaustively documented. It is technologically backward, with controllers still relying on paper strips instead of satellite-based GPS. Its funding is distorted by pork-barrel politics. The FAA struggles with staffing problem, and doesn't always have enough qualified controllers at the busiest airports. Contrary to aviation best

practices, the FAA is responsible for regulating air safety and providing air traffic services — an inherent conflict of interest. Dozens of countries have adopted a far better system: a self-supporting air traffic control corporation that operates privately under government oversight.

By common consent, the nation that does it best is Canada. As Bloomberg's Adam Minter writes, America's neighbor to the north "privatized its air traffic control system in 1996 and hasn't looked back since." Under the Canadian system, which is the model for the White House proposal, the operation is funded not by politicians, but by airlines and flight operators who pay fees for services rendered. The corporation is directed by a board made up of aviation "stakeholders" — passengers, airports, pilots, airlines, and traffic controllers themselves. Unlike Canada's system of socialized medicine, its aviation reforms are universally admired. NavCanada, the country's air traffic control provider, has time and again been honored as the world's finest.

NavCanada boasts state-of-the-art technology, financial stability, and market-based efficiencies that the FAA can only dream about. Even better, it has simultaneously reduced its fees and improved safety.

Certainly what is true of any legislative proposal is true of Trump's proposed FAA overhaul: The devil is in the details. But Canada seems to have worked the details out, and the results are beyond impressive. It's way past time America followed suit.

You've Been Cleared for a Faster Landing

Trump's air-traffic spinoff would be a great flight forward

Wall Street Journal

OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

June 5, 2017

An evening stranded on an O'Hare airport runway is enough to make anyone mad, and on Monday Donald Trump responded with a plan for improving American air travel. The President endorsed spinning off air-traffic control from the Federal Aviation Administration, a decades-old idea that would improve passenger experience and safety.

Mr. Trump announced principles for converting air-traffic control into a nonprofit. The new entity would be governed by a board of directors, including representatives for airlines, unions, airports and others. Instead of taxes, the outfit would be funded by user fees, which is how Canada has financed air-traffic services since 1996. The outline makes small tweaks to House Transportation Chairman Bill Shuster's proposal that stalled last year.

The proposal is being dismissed as one of Mr. Trump's eccentric obsessions, though Al Gore supported a version in the 1990s. President Trump is right that while "every passenger has GPS technology in their pockets, our air-traffic control system still runs on radar," circa 1945. The FAA's modernization program known as NextGen is expected to crash through its 2025 deadline by as much as a decade.

One illustration is electronic flight strips. U.S. towers use pieces of paper to monitor a flight's progress, even as FAA has promised to transition to digital slips, among other technology updates. How's that going? The product will be rolled out somewhere between 2020 and 2028—to only 89 of the busiest towers, as the Reason Foundation's Robert Poole has detailed. Canada's air-traffic system NavCanada deployed electronic strips a dozen years ago.

In May the Transportation Department Inspector General offered some reasons why the FAA so routinely fails to deliver new technology: "overambitious plans, unreliable cost and schedule estimates, unstable requirements, software development problems, poorly defined benefits, and ineffective contract and program management." Is that all?

FAA regulates itself, so a separation would end this conflict-of-interest and allow the agency to focus on safety and certification. This reform is endorsed by the International Civil Aviation Organization, and only the most cynical on the left could claim a spinoff threatens passenger safety. Democrats will say Mr. Trump is auctioning off air traffic to big business, but the principles are explicit that the entity must be a nonprofit. The outline gives airlines only two seats on the 13-member board.

Some on the right may also torpedo the plan. Among the complaints: The nonprofit would be given the air-traffic control assets at no cost, though no company would buy the equipment in this scrapyard. Another is the suspicion that anything supported by the air-traffic controller union must be unacceptable. Both the Shuster plan and the Trump principles say that current union contracts would be honored, which is hardly a major victory for labor.

Still, the more remarkable feat is how many in the industry agree on the basics: The airline trade group supports a spinoff, and last year so did the air-traffic controller's union, which said it will evaluate the specifics of any bill. Former FAA chief officers and Transportation Secretaries also signed on. That's a testament to how inefficient the current system is. And perhaps the traveling public can relate to Mr. Trump's venting on Monday about having "to circle for hours and hours" over an airport.

Trump Throws his Support Behind a Good Idea

Washington Post
Editorial Board
June 5, 2017

PRESIDENT TRUMP held a photo op Monday to restate his support for radical reform of the nation's air traffic control system, which he had mentioned in his "skinny budget" proposal three months ago. Brand-new or not, critics of the plan denounced "privatizing" this vital service. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) released a statement accusing Mr. Trump of recycling "a tired Republican plan that both sides of the aisle have rejected" and would "hand control of one of our nation's most important public assets to special interests and the big airlines."

Perhaps it would help to point out that spinning the air traffic control system off from the Federal Aviation Administration to a new nonprofit corporation is not actually Mr. Trump's idea. As a matter of fact, it's not even a "Republican plan," strictly speaking. Yes, the current iteration is mostly the product of legislative efforts by House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.). But the idea has a bipartisan pedigree going back a quarter-century to the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton. Then-Vice President Al Gore's 1993 government-reinvention project, the National Performance Review, recommended creating a government-owned air traffic control corporation supported by user fees and governed by stakeholders.

Except for the precise ownership structure, that's essentially what Mr. Shuster's bill proposes. Like Mr. Gore's version, it would retain a robust safety regulation role for the FAA; whether nominally public or private, the main advantage of a separate, self-governing nonprofit entity is to end the constant political bickering in Congress over the FAA's budget, thus freeing the entity to pursue much-needed technological modernization without worrying about government shutdowns and other hassles.

Mr. Trump's embrace of the Shuster plan also represents a rare and welcome, if implicit, departure from his bluster about "America First." As a matter of fact, it would be a case of America Last — basically an imitation of reforms Canada and Europe have already adopted, with considerable success. To depict this adaptation to international norms as a giveaway to special interests is especially inappropriate given that the fiercest opponents are the business and general aviation lobbies — i.e., corporate jet and private plane operators. They fear being forced to pay higher fees for less airspace access in a new dispensation where they would have a seat on the new entity's board of directors, but where access to Congress wouldn't count.

Notably, the air-traffic controllers' union has thrown its support behind Mr. Shuster's bill. True, major airlines might have the most clout in the new entity. But is that really so terrible? It is the airlines — not private planes and their disproportionately well-to-do users and owners — that are responsible for moving the millions and millions of ordinary people who fly each day. It's true, as Ms. Pelosi said, that air traffic control reform has failed repeatedly on Capitol Hill; that is a comment on the lobbying clout of the opponents, not the intrinsic merits of the idea, which are considerable even if Mr. Trump says so, too.

John Stossel: Fly Better — Privatize Air Traffic Control

By John Stossel
June 14, 2017
New Hampshire Union Leader

Wonder why your flight is late? Why planes keep circling? Why even after you've landed, you sometimes can't deplane?

Bad weather plays a role, but flying is also nastier because American airports use 50-year-old technology.

Government bureaucracies are always slow. It's not Federal Aviation Administration workers' fault. They're just following the government rulebook.

The FAA's new NextGen system was designed to make the system more efficient by using satellites instead of ground-based radar. It would let planes fly closer to each other, speeding up everything. This technology has existed for two decades.

"By the time the government gets the equipment, many times it's no longer state-of-the-art," complains Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao.

Outside government, progress happens. Uber replaces taxis because Uber is better and safer. Waze is better than paper maps. My laptop, on which I write this, is better than my typewriter.

Outside government, people constantly invent better computers, phones, foods, music...

Within government, people follow the old rules.

So President Trump did the right thing when he said he wants to privatize air-traffic control.

"Our air traffic control system is stuck, painfully, in the past," said the President. "Billions of tax dollars spent and the many years of delays, we're still stuck with an ancient, broken, antiquated, horrible system that doesn't work."

"Fees will go up, seat size will go down," complained Sen. Chuck Schumer.

He reminds me of the senators who warned that natural gas prices would "skyrocket" if Ronald Reagan lifted price controls. Prices dropped.

The private plane industry worries about paying higher landing fees. But that'd probably be fair. We small plane users freeload off commercial aviation. Hundreds of passengers on a big jet sometimes wait for a Cessna to land. Everyone should pay user fees to cover costs we impose.

Some resisters of change claim skies will become "chaos" because rival air-traffic control services won't talk to each other.

This is absurd. Privatization is not a risky libertarian experiment. Canada privatized 20 years ago. There's no "chaos." There are fewer delays. Sixty countries now have forms of user-fee-supported air-traffic control.

Some are developing ways for each plane to use computers to keep track of its proximity to other planes and change flight plans to avoid getting too close.

The Reason Foundation's Bob Poole has researched transportation alternatives for decades. He says, "Upgraded air traffic control technology would mean shorter lines for planes waiting to take off, more direct routes between cities and fewer delays for planes waiting to land. That would result in shorter trip times, less fuel used and fewer emissions."

In the 1980s and '90s, both Democrats and Republicans talked about privatizing air-traffic control. But that stopped after Sept. 11, 2001. When people are scared, they want government in control.

But government control means centralized control that avoids disaster by operating slowly, hyper-cautiously checking routes and runways one at a time, instead of adjusting instantaneously as weather or landing conditions change.

In today's world of satellite navigation and digital communications, pilots across America radio the same air-traffic controller to ask for permission to switch flight plans one by one. Controllers still put paper flight strips in little plastic holders and pass them from one controller to another, much like a bartender sliding a beer down a bar. All this human interaction sends ripples of delay through the crowded skies.

Private is better. It's already working elsewhere. There's no reason to keep customers — and exhausted air-traffic controllers — trapped in a primitive monopoly.

John Stossel is the author of “No They Can’t! Why Government Fails — But Individuals Succeed.”

Time to Fix Broken Air Traffic Control System

Chicago Tribune Editorial Board
June 6, 2017
Via the Tampa Bay Times

Weather causes some flight delays and disruptions. Others have a bureaucratic origin. The nation's air traffic control system, while safe, is gummed up by antiquated technology. American Airlines CEO Doug Parker said in a recent interview that a flight from Dallas to Philadelphia takes about 30 minutes longer than in 1979 because the system is "broken."

There is a fix, endorsed Monday by President Donald Trump: Reshape the Federal Aviation Administration by shifting air traffic control operations to a separate, nonprofit corporation. This new entity would fund itself by charging fees instead of having to beg Congress for money. With a more predictable revenue stream, it could do a much better job investing in new technology. The FAA, meanwhile, would continue to enforce safety regulations and provide grant money to airports. Trump hopes to put momentum behind legislation circling in Congress.

The best argument for this change is the new organization would — finally — be able to provide proper funding for NextGen, the long-awaited, \$40 billion air traffic system upgrade. NextGen involves switching from cumbersome radar and static-prone radios to satellite-based GPS tracking of aircraft and digital communications. This is a smarter way to fly because planes could be routed along more precise flight paths. Planes could fly safely while spaced closer together, too. The result: Passengers get to their destinations more quickly.

Speaking of delays, the FAA has been talking about modernization for 30 years. The problem is that Congress, despite its reputation for profligacy, actually doesn't like to spend money, or at least is bad at it. Funding the FAA doesn't give lawmakers anything to brag about. So the agency's requests wait too long for approval and are vulnerable to cutbacks. The government isn't much better at buying new gear, either. Believe it or not, U.S. air traffic controllers still keep track of planes by passing little strips of paper around.

If run as an independent nonprofit, the air traffic control system would charge fees to airlines and other users to cover costs instead of spending tax dollars. With that steady income stream, it could go to the bond market to borrow money to help pay for the new technology. The overall benefits would add up faster than a frequent flyer racks up mileage: fewer delays for passengers, jet fuel savings for airlines and much smarter, quicker decision-making by managers freed from bureaucratic molasses.

This would not be "privatizing" the skies, since the organization would be run akin to a regulated utility rather than a for-profit corporation. It's not a radical idea: Many developed countries already have made the switch.

The model to follow is Canada's air navigation operation, called Nav Canada, which spun off from the government in 1996. Nav Canada is respected for its safe operations and functions more efficiently with better technology, so its flight costs on a per-hour basis are 30 percent cheaper than the FAA's. Poole said that with its larger scale, the U.S. air traffic control system could achieve even greater efficiencies. He figures that swapping out current funding sources for an all-fee approach would provide necessary revenue at no greater cost to passengers because the fees would replace aviation taxes.

The Trump administration is studying Nav Canada. Changing the U.S. system to something comparable is a sensible idea. Congress, get on board.