

Major Trump to Ground Control

The President's good idea for improving U.S. air traffic.

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President Trump often sounds off about America's terrible roads or "third-world airports," and he's landed on one excellent idea: Spinning off air-traffic control from the Federal Aviation Administration. A new report explains how this could bring innovation and efficiency to airspace that the federal government is struggling to manage.

Mr. Trump's budget proposes converting the FAA's air-traffic outfit into "an independent, non-governmental organization," as Canada has done, and dozens of other countries have similar models. House Transportation Chairman Bill Shuster last year introduced a bill to turn air-traffic control over to a nonprofit corporation run by a board with seats for airlines, the pilot's union, hobbyist aviators and more, but it stalled without presidential support.

Pilots currently bounce from one radio point to the next,¹ which can result in roundabout routes and wasted fuel. The Transportation Department's Inspector General airdrops the occasional damning report on FAA's NextGen modernization program, whose "total costs and timelines remain unclear," according to the November installment. FAA may finish the project a decade after the 2025 deadline—or 20 years after its technology is obsolete.

The agency seems impervious to improvement. Laws in the 1990s freed the FAA from personnel and procurement rules and introduced performance-based compensation. According to the IG, the agency's budget increased 95% between 1996 and 2012. "FAA's organizational culture, which has been resistant to change, further deters its reform efforts," the report notes with some understatement.

This record is one reason calls for change are bipartisan. A February report from the Eno Center for Transportation endorsed a government-chartered or nonprofit corporation, and one chairman of the working group is former Sen. Byron Dorgan, who was one of the most pro-union Democrats in Congress.²

Speaking of unions, the air-traffic controllers are also on board. The president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association told Congress in 2015 that Canada's nonprofit air-traffic corporation, Nav Canada, is "developing probably the best equipment out there." The union no doubt wants the same for its workers.³

The Eno report details how Nav Canada and other nations collect user fees, not taxes, which forces management to be more cost-effective. The U.S. air-traffic trust fund rakes in money from

¹ aiR footnote: Wall Street Journal has bought the biggest lie of all, hook-line-and-sinker: the idea that commercial flights today 'bounce from navaid to navaid' is utter bullshit, and proof is posted online tens of thousands of times each day. All you have to do is go to Flightaware and other ATC flight data websites and study arrivals and departures at any major U.S. airport.

² aiR footnote: Take note of how all the pro-NextGen studies are created and pushed by revolving door types – former FAA officials, former Congressmen, etc., retired and massively supplementing their retirement pensions while serving as lobbyists.

³ aiR footnote: No. What 'the union wants' is to feather the nests of its most senior officials. A privatized ATC system would allow for ATC pay, already among the very highest in civil services, to exceed Congressional pay limits. Bonuses could flow, too. The top of the NATCA heap now will benefit, while the majority of other controllers will lose pay under a much lower split pay scale.

the domestic passenger ticket tax (7.5%); the commercial fuel tax (\$0.043 per gallon);⁴ and other fees. FAA also receives money from Congress, and so funding is a political football in fights like the 2013 government shutdown, which furloughed controllers. Nav Canada operates independently with a 15-member board.

Fears in Canada that fees would increase without government oversight haven't panned out. Consumer charges have dropped by one-third compared with the previous tax scheme. Canada handles 50% more traffic with 30% fewer employees, according to a 2015 Brookings Institution report. Nav Canada even sells some of its new technology and reinvests the proceeds.

No one credible argues that a corporate air-traffic system would undermine safety; installing GPS in the cockpit and other updates would make flying safer.⁵ A private air-traffic outfit would allow FAA to devote its limited resources to overseeing safety and certification.

The idea will still be tough to get through Congress: Democrats who oppose anything corporate or private are flying formation with conservative activists who say the bill is a "union giveaway." This is a strange objection on the right to a plan that would result in 30,000 fewer federal employees. The Shuster legislation⁶ extended current law that prohibits strikes or slowdowns. A union that called a strike would risk its certification.

Another objection is that the bill would hand too much power to the airline industry, which largely supports change and under the Shuster proposal had four seats on the 13-member board. But the airlines will have to wrangle for influence with two representatives from the Transportation Department, one from the airline pilots union, one from the air-traffic controllers union and others.

Perhaps the most significant feat will be convincing appropriators in Congress to relinquish their power. But President Trump has on several occasions noted his intention to make America's roads and bridges "the best in the world," and unleashing innovation in airspace is a golden opportunity.

⁴ aiR footnote: Ponder this for a moment: why would a carbon-intensive industry be allowed to operate with a tax of only 4.3 cents per gallon? If the goal is to optimize efficiency, wouldn't it make a lot of sense to have a much steeper fuel tax (and lower ticket tax rates to compensate), so that the airlines will be pressured to offer fewer indirect flights through over-crowded hubs and more direct and nonstop routes (which also does wonders for passenger happiness, by the way!)?

⁵ aiR footnote: The implication here is GPS does not exist in today's airplanes, yet it has been in nearly all U.S. planes for decades. Just how gullible do the Wall Street Journal editors think their readers are?

⁶ aiR footnote: Let's be clear: this is not 'Shuster legislation'; this is Shuster carrying water for the elite few in FAA and in industry, who have already reaped great profits from the NextGen fraud, and stand to gain even more with privatization.