

Here's how to fix our air-traffic control problems

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FAA officials work in the Dulles International Airport control tower in Sterling, Va. A plan to privatize air traffic control operations has hit turbulence in the House, raising questions about whether one of President Donald Trump's infrastructure priorities can survive. (File photo)

For over 30 years the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has tried — and failed — to modernize America's woefully dysfunctional air traffic control system (ATC). It is time to get ATC out from under the thumbs of federal bureaucrats and partisan politicians, and create a completely new structure that will get U.S. air traffic moving.

American ATC is stuck in the 1950s. Unbelievably enough, in the age of computers, U.S. air traffic controllers still hand each other little slips of paper¹ to track aircraft locations. Pilots are forced to fly from one radar point to another² (a 70-year old technology), instead of following the

¹ aiR footnote: This is a gross misrepresentation. Paper flight strips are auto-printed and rigorously posted and updated at the radar sector. However, this is **NOT** to track locations; instead, these paper strips are a redundant safety feature as well as a hard paper record available for audits, investigations, etc. Also, two key reasons that paper strips persist are (1) to serve as a fallback in case the computers fail; and (2) to add to controller workload (thus translating to job security: more ATC positions, and more revenue for NATCA).

² aiR footnote: Another gross misrepresentation, aimed at suckering readers into believing the fraud that the U.S. ATC system is archaic. Both ATC and flight crews have relied primarily on long, direct routes for the past five decades, and they are able to do this safely and efficiently using radar to monitor aircraft positions.

most direct routes from A to B. Our air space is so congested it takes 20 percent longer to fly to most places today than it did 20 years ago.³

The solution to this problem, a common-sense fix that has been on the table for years, is to divorce ATC functions from FAA's mission of ensuring air safety. This would rescue reform efforts from stifling FAA bureaucracy, federal procurement and personnel rules, and partisan politics. A private/public partnership — not a for-profit privatization — would enable us to move to a more workable system, similar to those that have been doing an exemplary job of controlling air traffic flows in more than 50 other countries for years. Including our good neighbor Canada.

Canada created an independent, nonprofit ATC user cooperative, NAV CANADA, in 1996. It has been extremely successful, not only in moving air passengers and cargo, but also in reducing costs for consumers.⁴ Over the last 20 years, fees have decreased 30 percent, with surplus revenues invested back into new technologies. Comparative Canadian airline flights of similar distances can be provided with ATC services for a little more than half of what we spend in the U.S.⁵

A modern, “next gen” ATC system utilizing satellite technology, advanced software, and text and data tools⁶ would reduce U.S. travel times, flight delays, and cancellations. It would even decrease the excess carbon emissions⁷ created by airplanes flying longer than necessary routes. Funded by reasonable user fees that ensure everyone pays their fair share, a reinvented ATC system would save taxpayers and flyers billions of dollars.⁸

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(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add analysis & clarification)

³ aiR footnote: This statement needs to be backed up with specific examples. Almost certainly, if there are *ANY* airport pairs where flight times are now 20% longer, it is due to one of two causes: (1) FAA allowing the dominant airline to schedule far too many flights at those airports; and (2) the airlines padding flight times on their advertised schedules, to avoid paying penalties and as a workaround at the few slot-managed airports.

⁴ aiR footnote: If costs for Canadian consumers have improved, why is it that so many Canadians drive for hours and pay steep parking fees to start and end their trips out of U.S. airports near the border, such as Bellingham, Detroit, Buffalo, Plattsburgh, etc.?

⁵ aiR footnote: No valid comparisons can be made, as there are too many major differences between these two nations: extent of airport network, fraction of revenues from overflights along major international routes, national policies supporting national carriers, national provision of healthcare and other labor costs, etc.

⁶ aiR footnote: This system has existed, and these specific system elements have been in wide use, for well over a decade. Plus, these technologies continue to evolve, and will do so even without funding NextGen or privatizing ATC. People need to understand that the ongoing ‘push’ for NextGen is not really about achieving anything new; it is about getting Congress to authorize lots more spending at FAA and for aviation-industry stakeholders; and, the ongoing ‘push’ for ATC privatization only aims to further empower the airlines while insulating an industry and its regulator (FAA) from Congressional oversight.

⁷ aiR footnote: The worst offenders in the area of ‘excess carbon emissions’ are the elite bizjets zipping even just one passenger between airports. One wonders, how does Steve Forbes travel, and how much? If he is truly concerned about climate change, is he abandoning all air travel, or at least his own excessive air travel?

⁸ aiR footnote: ATC privatization in the U.S. is *NOT* aimed at helping consumers and the environment; the true goal, which Forbes and others are careful to never state, is to serve aviation money: the airlines, the manufacturers, the airport authorities, and their lobby and other attendants.