

Myths and Facts

Regarding the Privatization of U.S. Air Traffic Control



For more than 20 years, a handful of major airlines have been attempting to seize control of the U.S. air traffic control system so that they could exercise more control over who uses it, how they use it, and when they use it.

Because the truth doesn't support this ill-conceived scheme, the airlines and other proponents of ATC privatization have developed a series of myths that they are peddling to rationalize this brazen power-grab. We urge you to familiarize yourself with these fictions and actively challenge them when and where you can.

Myth

U.S. ATC must be privatized to improve and modernize air traffic control in this country.

Fact

Privatization and modernization are unrelated. The International Council of Air Shows and virtually every other general aviation organization in the country strongly support the FAA's ongoing modernization efforts, but suggesting that these modernization efforts can only happen if ATC is privatized is factually incorrect and disproven by the steady progress that FAA has been making on modernization during the last decade.

Myth

Corporatizing air traffic control makes sense because a lot of countries do it.

Fact

Where they exist, these privatized ATC systems support much smaller aviation communities, creating minimum surveillance where none previously existed. Our neighbor to the north created NavCanada to address a budgetary crisis, not to improve or modernize ATC.

Myth

U.S. government research show that privatizing ATC operations creates increased efficiencies.

Fact

No such research exists. In fact, a recent Congressional Research Service report said, "There does not appear to be conclusive evidence that any of these (privatized ATC) models is either superior or inferior to others or to existing government-run air traffic services, including FAA, with respect to productivity, cost effectiveness, service quality, and safety and security." In 2016, the Government Accountability Office also found that, "To maintain operations, the Canadian ANSP (Nav Canada) cut costs and raised its user fees."

Myth

Delays and cancelled airline flights cost the U.S. economy \$30 billion annually. ATC privatization will correct these problems.

Fact

The two issues have almost nothing to do with one another. According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, air carrier delays and weather account for nearly 80% of all delays. Even the most ardent privatization advocate must admit that this 80% portion of delays cannot be impacted one way or another by ATC privatization.

ATC Privatization: Myths and Facts

Myth

The current U.S. air traffic control system uses World War II technology.

Fact

From the FAA Command Center in Warrenton, Virginia and the Hughes Technical Center in Atlantic City, New Jersey to any of the high-tech Terminal Radar Approach Control facilities all over the country, the FAA puts 21st century to work to control our nation's air traffic every day. While radar is one of the technologies used to provide aircraft surveillance, other technologies (GPS-based ADS-B, multi-lateration) are also being "fused" with radar data at these high-tech facilities.

Just because a particular technology endures, does not necessarily mean it is antiquated or obsolete. Electricity was introduced into American homes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and – more than a century later – that technology is still working well for us. Reducing ATC modernization to catchy soundbites that resonate with legislators might be an effective political tactic, but we know better and must make it clear that America has the safest and most efficient air traffic control system in the world.

Myth

A diverse board of directors representing all aviation stakeholders guarantees fairness.

Fact

It is grossly inappropriate to turn over the public airspace to a group of special interests. While the proposed governing body may include a diverse group of aviation stakeholders, 90% of the corporation's revenues will be derived from a very small number of those stakeholders: commercial and cargo airlines. Logic dictates that the interests of commercial and cargo airlines will be the priority of this new organization. And our elected officials will have abdicated their responsibility to manage this public property, the national airspace.

Myth

NextGen, the current program to modernize air traffic control, is a failure.

Fact

After a difficult start-up, NextGen is hitting its stride. A recent FAA report to the Senate Commerce Committee notes that the turning point program came in 2010, with the establishment of the NextGen Advisory Committee, an industry-wide, aviation stakeholder group that has subsequently driven where and when the NextGen technologies are deployed. Since the creation of this group, the FAA and industry have a combined 96.2% (102 of 106) success rate on meeting and delivering expected outcomes for each commitment. By 2030, total NextGen benefits are expected to exceed \$160 billion, based on an investment cost of \$35.8 billion by the FAA and the aviation industry. If only the rest of the government could "fail" like this.

Myth

The current budget process is inadequate to meeting the funding needs of air traffic control.

Fact

This is a narrative that has been peddled by pro-privatization advocates for more than two decades. And it is simply not true. A recent bipartisan letter from the Senate Appropriations Committee documents that-- since 2008 -- Congress has funded air traffic functions at over 99% of the requested amount.

ATC Privatization: Myths and Facts

Myth

The FAA needs a “stable” funding stream.

Fact

In this myth, “stable funding” is code for unlimited funding without oversight or conditions. Like many other federal agencies, the FAA has been adversely impacted by multiple, prolonged congressional budget impasses. But “stable funding” cannot come at the expense of congressional oversight. “Solving” political problems and congressional inaction by privatizing our national airspace is not just a bad idea, it’s ludicrous.

Myth

The public will be represented despite taking Congress out of the decision-making process

Fact

False. The federal government’s ability to intervene on behalf of the public is at serious risk in a corporatized structure. Privatization has been pushed by the airlines for many reasons, but one of them is to escape from the annoying congressional oversight that has hampered their ability to consistently get what they want, when they want it. This legislation creates a corporation that manages our national airspace without Congressional oversight.

Myth

Rural America will benefit from the creation of an air traffic control corporation.

Fact

This bit of fiction maintains that our air traffic control system will be operated more efficiently if it is run like a business. The same thing was said during discussions to privatize the postal system and Amtrak. And none of those supposed efficiencies and improvements were ever realized. Nor will privatized ATC benefit from those market forces. And that’s because ATC is necessarily a monopoly and a public service, not a traditional business. And it is not subject to the typical pressures and forces that generally direct and drive “normal” businesses.

Myth

The government cannot develop and deploy cutting edge technology.

Fact

Rubbish! Need a few examples: The Internet. The atom bomb. GPS. Stealth technology. Landing a man on the moon. All federal programs. Moreover, when it comes to ATC in this country, the FAA and its industry partners are already having significant and measurable success in deploying NextGen technology. The fact is that privatization will interrupt a modernization process that is already well underway as everybody involved stops what they’re doing to create an entirely new organization and structure and then learns how to work within that new environment. This airline scheme to seize control of the nation’s air traffic control system will almost certainly increase the time it takes to deploy NextGen technology and other modernization efforts.

Myth

There needs to be a wall between safety regulation and air traffic operations.

Fact

Not only is this contradicted by the fact that safety regulators and controllers have successfully interacted for decades to produce the safest and most efficient air traffic control system in the world, the assertion makes no sense to anybody involved in aviation. Close cooperation between safety regulators and ATC personnel is part of what has made our system so safe and efficient. Separating those two entities will almost certainly create unintended consequences that will compromise the system that has operated so successfully for many years.