

Up in the AIRR

Anyone who has sat through several iterations of a slide presentation by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) can't help but wonder if there isn't a better way to do things.

As speakers flip through an exhaustively vetted series of PowerPoint slides, squeezing out a new bullet point or two from one version to the next six months later, watching paint dry seems like a more productive — and briefer — use of one's time. The agency sometimes brings a whole new meaning to the concept of geological time.

This includes FAA's history in GNSS affairs. Those who suffered through the elongated rollout and multiplied cost of the GPS Wide Area Augmentation System (WAAS) cannot be surprised by the magnification of that experience with the GNSS-based NextGen program to modernize the U.S. air traffic management system.

That should not, however, lead us to think that the optimistically named Aviation Innovation, Reform, and Reauthorization Act (AIRR) represents a better way of doing things.

AIRR would put an airline industry-dominated enterprise in charge of air traffic control (ATC), while leaving the primary cost center of civil aviation — safety — as an FAA responsibility. The influence of the already much-agrieved flying public would effectively be reduced, muted.

The private ATC corporation could set ATC standards without public oversight, tax American consumers to pay for the system, and disregard operational issues such as aircraft noise and flight paths.

Anybody who has flown on a commercial airliner in the last 20 years knows the industry's devolutionary trajectory: pay more for the same benefit, pay the same for less benefit, pay less for much less benefit.

These are the same people who, once free of federal regulation, aban-

doned smaller airports, painfully compressed economy-class seating, and attached fees to every formerly free service they could break out from the ticket price, including in one case briefly charging for use of onboard toilets. Moreover, consolidation in the industry has created an unassailable oligopoly that has marginalized competition and controls prices, routes, and landing rights.

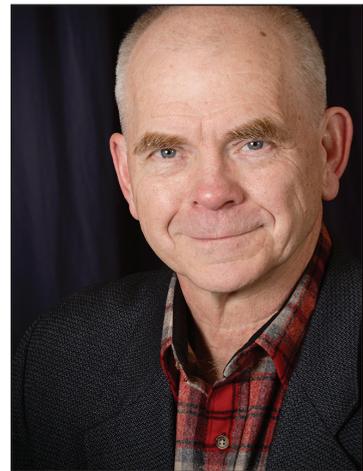
The airline industry also does not have a shining record when it comes to labor relations. The pilots who fly the increasingly complex aircraft, the mechanics who service them, to the flight attendants who hand out the beverages all have serious, recurring disputes with airline bosses.

If push came to shove in contract negotiations, can we expect that the AIRR decision-makers would do anything other than finish the job that

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President Reagan began in 1981 when he fired 11,000 air traffic controllers. Do we want to put them in charge of the folks who are responsible for safely coordinating tens of thousands of daily flights through the world's largest civil aviation system?

One AIRR advocate held up as shining examples of privatization in the power industry (see this month's Washington View column), "the nuclear power plants, and hydroelectric dams and coal-fired power plants" of our nation. Ah yes, enterprises that, respectively, need a very low cap on liability for damages to remain profitable, have driven to near-extinction dozens of species of salmon, and are the leading industrial contributor to global warming.



If I was going to make the case for privatization, I would have used the wireless communications industry that, after all, that built out an infrastructure and put affordable devices into the hands of consumers around the world.

Consider the track record of another industry-dominated mode of transportation, U.S. railroads, which have avoided implementing a fundamental (and GNSS-based) safety technology — positive train control — for nearly 30 years.

Sure, NextGen is progressing slower than hoped, but the task is complex, the stakes are high, and the material resources to accomplish it have been unreliable.

Indeed, the whole AIRR initiative could be seen a way to draw attention away from Congress's stop-and-go approach to funding not just modernization of air traffic control but the much-needed rebuilding of the nation's public infrastructure as a whole.

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