Here's how to fix America's air traffic control system

The air traffic control tower at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in
Arlington, Virginia, near the wreckage of a midair collision between
a Black Hawk helicopter and an American Airlines jet
in the Potomac River. Credit: AP/Alex Brandon

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Since the election, and again after the tragic airplane-helicopter accident in Washington last week, calls have been renewed to privatize the air traffic control (ATC) system, a bad idea whenever it is brought up. It has long been presented as a magic elixir to every problem in aviation.

While there is no evidence ATC staffing shortages contributed to last week's crash, it is a known problem that everyone agrees needs to be solved. But it would not be solved by privatization, as is evident by foreign privatized systems. ATC privatization only distracts from real solutions. Most root causes driving flight delays and ATC workloads are within the airlines' control. It is up to the airlines to "self-help"— to fix these issues through operational changes and available off-the-shelf solutions.

As incoming aircraft approach an airport, there is a natural, random variation in congestion. At times, the airspace can be very busy, at other times relatively quiet. At times with high volumes of flights, traffic piles up and creates a bottleneck, like more than one person trying to walk through a narrow corridor or doorway simultaneously. This can result in delays for landing aircraft, and especially for aircraft waiting for their turn to take off.

Improving congestion and flight delays requires embracing trajectory-based operations — essentially real-time adjustments to speed up approaching aircraft when needed and spread-out arriving flights, ensuring on-

time arrival or better. Those two people approaching the same doorway, through eye contact and a head nod, one speeding up a step and the other continuing apace, can each walk through the door without issue.

This kind of adaptive flight management would have significant benefits in terms of reduced delays, costs, and emissions and improved efficiency, and most importantly, would take some of the burden off overextended controllers. Airlines could, using proven off-the-shelf software solutions, establish practices within months that pace out arriving flights, smooth peaks in congestion, and reduce flight delays. These improvements can be fed back into schedule planning for better use of resources and greater financial returns. All constituencies — airlines, employees, customers, investors, air traffic controllers and economies — benefit.

Unfortunately, privatization proponents keep returning to the long-rejected plan, despite wide opposition. Air traffic control is a natural monopoly; even if privatized, it will not have the pressures of traditional business competition that spur innovation and efficiency improvements. Privatizing ATC would likely delay upgrades in air traffic management technologies and practices, as the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office has cautioned.

Privatized ATC systems in other countries have many of the issues proponents claim would be solved by privatizing, from widespread system delays to funding instability to air traffic controller shortages. Nav Canada, the privatized Canadian ATC system that proponents cite most frequently as a model, has had to raise fees several times, and even in fiscal year 2019, before the pandemic, suffered $100 million in net losses. Nav Canada also has a shortage of air traffic controllers; it cut more than 17% of its workforce in 2020, and lost its pipeline of new controllers. These shortages cause repeated mass delays, especially in Vancouver. Disruptions due to staffing shortages in the United Kingdom's privatized ATC caused delays in nearly half of British Airways flights last year.

Everyone agrees we need smarter, more dynamic air traffic management, and more air traffic controllers. But rather than privatizing the system, we need to address root causes — unmanaged aircraft trajectories and their direct impact on delays.

This guest essay reflects the views of Robert W. Mann, Jr., a former airline executive officer and current consultant to the aviation industry.

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