
Will FAA reduce flights this summer?

U.S. air travel reaching the limits to safety

by Marcia Merry

Whether you fly seldom or often, almost everyone has had at least one recent experience in the United States of what seems like a potentially serious flight mishap: The cabin door is jammed; an engine will not start; the captain announces a delay until "a part arrives," and so forth. In addition to that, aggravation has become the norm for passenger ground services: erratic departures and arrivals, missing luggage, and long lines.

In the old days—not so long ago—there were jokes about "Agony Airlines," or "Peoples Distress." But now, it's no joke.

The numbers of "critical" air incidents (defined in the industry as potential in-flight accidents averted *by chance*), is increasing monthly. The volume of air traffic is also increasing, but under conditions of cutthroat business practices caused by deregulation, and conditions of undercapitalized airspace and airport infrastructure. This situation is guaranteed to result in fatal accidents.

On May 13, the National Transportation Safety Board officially asked the Federal Aviation Administration to reduce the number of flights at the country's busiest airports during this summer's peak travel season, to guard against "a

catastrophic accident." The Board has never before made such a formal request in the name of safety.

The Safety Board chairman Jim Burrett spoke generally about the need for restricting flight numbers in an interview in April, but a month later, in the official request, the Board spelled out in detail the danger in terms of "the erosion of safety" that will occur when the overburdened traffic control system has to handle increased summer flights and unpredictable summer storms.

The FAA already has 21 congested flight areas known as "Red Sections" where flight traffic occasionally exceeds allowable limits. The Safety Board requested that flights be cut during peak hours this summer at all 35 airports monitored by the FAA for overcrowding. Earlier this year, the Safety Board conducted investigations in Chicago, Cleveland, Boston, and Los Angeles.

In the 1970s, *Executive Intelligence Review*, along with logistics and aviation experts, forewarned that the current threshold of catastrophe would inevitably be reached, if the policy of deregulation of the airlines were implemented. However, the Carter-Mondale deregulation program was initiated in 1978 despite all protests. Since that time, the air

TABLE 1
Increase of revenue passenger miles in the United States, 1972-87

Year	Revenue passenger miles (millions)
1972	152
1977	193
1982	259
1983	282
1984	305
1985	336
1986	363
1987*	385*

*Estimated by the International Trade Administration.
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce.

TABLE 2
Percent of late arrivals* of flights of six major U.S. carriers, for March 1987, and for 13-month period, March 1986-March 1987

Airline	March 1987	13 month average
Northwest	49.5%	44.7%
American	48.3%	40.1%
Eastern	43.9%	37.7%
USAir	31.9%	34.1%
Continental	43.1%	32.6%
Piedmont	22.6%	29.8%

*Arrived more than 15 minutes later than scheduled.

Source: *Wall Street Journal* compilation of airline reports, and Department of Transportation filing.

TABLE 3

Decline of U.S. air traffic control workforce

Types of workers	Numbers of workers	
	Spring 1981	Spring 1987
Fully qualified controllers	13,348	9,563
Controllers qualified for fewer functions (and FAA new graduates, etc.)	3,027	4,102
Clerical work assistants	0	1,467
Total:	16,375	15,132

Source: Federal Aviation Administration.

carriers have been plunged into a system of cutthroat fare discounting, hostile takeovers, and pressures for cash flow. The carriers are competing to carry a constantly growing volume of passengers, while the airline, airport, and airspace safety standards and maintenance are not keeping pace. Airport and air traffic improvements have been underfunded, especially in the last few years of "recovery," and under the strictures of the Gramm-Rudman act.

Air revenue passenger miles have grown from 246 in 1979 to 363 million passenger miles in 1986. (See Table 1.) Industry experts predict a rise of 5% a year to a volume of 600 million passenger miles 10 years from now. However, the system is already cracking under the strain.

Table 2 shows what most of us experience as the obvious sign of stress: flight delays. A recent comparison of the average percent of total flights arriving late for six major carriers, placed Northwest on top, with 45% late. Least late, was Piedmont with 30% of its trips late. Overall, the estimated annual cost to travelers, shippers, and the airlines themselves of late flights is \$4 billion.

Some of the pattern of late flights inevitably stems from

overscheduling flights at the customers' preferred travel times, which results in congestion and delays. However, apart from the inevitable weather problems, the system of air traffic control, maintenance, and other routine functions has been strained to the breaking point.

The number of air traffic control errors rose 18% in the first quarter this year (after falling in 1985 and 1986), compared to the same time last year. In April this year, there were 92 errors, compared to 81 in April, 1986. The number of errors customarily goes up in the summer months, which is part of the reason the Safety Board asked the FAA to reduce flight numbers this summer.

Table 3 shows the drop in the number of air traffic controllers today, over the number six years ago, despite the rapid increase in passenger miles, since airline deregulation. The immediate cause for drop-off in 1981 was the face-off between President Reagan and the controllers' union PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Union). When PATCO undertook an illegal strike in August that year, over issues of pay and stress conditions, Reagan fired over 11,000 workers. Since that time, a post-strike, cost-cutting policy has prevailed, in which the necessary number of qualified controllers was never mustered. Instead, "assistants," and other staff have been hired, and certain mechanical systems added. However, the system is understaffed and overworked, as attested to by the Safety Board's request to cut flight numbers.

One-fifth of the nation's air traffic controllers work in what is called the Flight Service System, which provides pre-flight, in-flight, and emergency information in terms of weather, aeronautical, and air traffic data. While a certain amount of new equipment has been installed in recent years, to enhance the flight service capability, the staff numbers and service locations have been reduced. Table 4 shows the decline in the last five years (under the "Flight Service System" columns headed: Stations, Terminals served, and Centers used).

TABLE 4

Flight "assists"—emergency, life-threatening incidents, and the involvement (in percent of cases) of the Flight Service System, 1980-85

Calendar year	Total cases	People on board	Flight Service System:			
			Stations	Terminals served	Centers used	% of participation
1980	2,695	5,413	954	1,206	535	35.4
1981	1,933	3,654	867	777	289	44.8
1982	959	1,899	462	358	139	48.2
1983	1,005	2,323	459	406	140	45.7
1984	1,069	2,852	404	467	198	37.8
1985	1,181	2,093	436	529	216	37.0

Source: National Association of Air Traffic Specialists, from hearing records of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation.

TABLE 5

Flight service stations and staff have been significantly reduced in Central and Western United States

I. Central United States:

Michigan: Houghton
 Missouri: Vichy
 Kansas: Chanute, Dodge City, Emporia, Hill City (closed)
 Nebraska: Chadron, Sidney
 Iowa: Ottumwa
 South Dakota: Watertown

II. South Central United States:

Arkansas: El Dorado, Harrison
 Oklahoma: Gage, Hobart, Ponca City
 Louisiana: Lake Charles
 New Mexico: Carlsbad, Deming, Las Vegas, Truth or Consequences, Tucumcari
 Texas: Abilene, Alice, Childress, Dalhart, Lufkin, Midland, Mineral Wells, Palacios, Wink

III. Western United States:

Wyoming: Rawlins
 Colorado: Akron
 Oregon: Baker
 California: Blythe, Crescent City, Daggett, Imperial, Marysville, Thermal, Ukiah, Montague (closed)
 Nevada: Tonopah, Lovelock (closed)

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, *United States Government Flight Information Publication—Airport/Facility Directory*.

The Reagan administration has maintained that this has not impaired service, yet the FAA publication, "United States Government Flight Information Publication—Airport/Facility Directory," lists the specific locations where flight services are either curtailed, or closed down, "due to personnel shortages." Flight service users are simply informed, "The Federal Aviation Administration has temporarily closed or reduced operating hours for an extended duration at the following Flight Service Stations." Table 5 lists these locations.

As shown in Table 4, the number of "assists" or "saves" in air traffic flow has fortunately remained fairly constant. An "assist" refers to a case in which the pilot, crew, and passengers are in jeopardy. As shown in the last column, the percentages of involvement of the Flight Service System in these emergency cases is very high—from 35% to 48% in the past five years, considering the Flight Service System employs only one-fifth of the total national controller workforce. However, note that the number of stations is decreasing. A few years ago there were 5,100 staff in the Flight Service System. It is now operating with 4,410 positions. The FAA, for fiscal year 1987, had recommended to Congress that 4,717 positions are essential to be filled. Accordingly, the Flight Service System is now operating with 307 fewer people than the FAA's stated recommendation.

The airports themselves—runways, equipment, and cargo handling, as well as passenger comfort, and noise factors,

are all below grade. In many cases, there is a need for an entirely new location, just as new urban centers themselves are called for when the urban core of city areas—like parts of the Bronx—are too decayed to be salvaged. Table 6 shows a priority list of simple improvements already overdue at heavily used airports, in order to improve the capacity for current and near-term projected volume of air traffic. These recommendations are all to facilitate the "Runway Visual Range" capacity of the airports.

Figure 1 presents the contrast between the trend of increasing passenger volume—beginning in 1979 at the point of a sharp increase under airline deregulation, and the lack of a corresponding increase in airport capital expenditures under the Aviation Trust Fund program. Airport authority bonds and other sources of investment have not made up this gap, as shown in the constricted conditions of almost all American airports.

The Aviation Trust Fund is a federally-run user tax system, which collects about \$3.2 billion a year, for the stated purpose of capital improvement plans approved by the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). However, the Treasury Department has been withholding most of the money, and only about \$1 billion a year has been spent for airport capital improvements. By the end of fiscal year 1987, there will be an estimated \$5.2 billion "surplus"—unused money, in the fund.

At present, there are \$3 billion worth of FAA-approved airport improvement projects, waiting, with no funding. Another \$10 billion worth of projects were not approved by the FAA, but the plans have been developed and could be reworked for future implementation. The Airport Operators Council International estimates that \$30 billion is needed

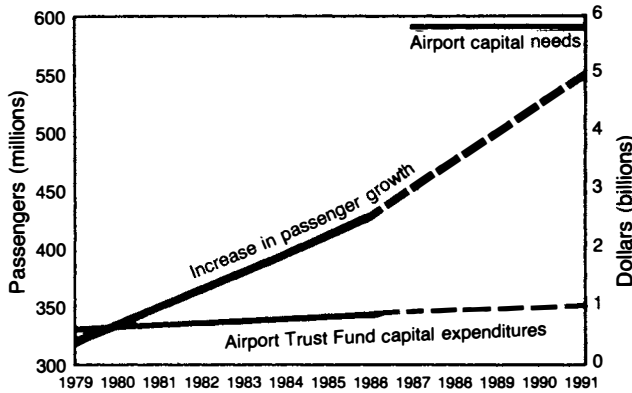
TABLE 6

Air Transport Association's priority list of airports needing 'runway visual range' (RVR) equipment improvements, May 1987

Airport	Runway	Type of Improvement
1. Baltimore/Washington	33 left	Touchdown and midpoint
2. Charlotte	36 right	Touchdown and rollout
3. Chicago O'Hare	4 right	Touchdown and rollout
4. Chicago Midway	31 left	Touchdown
5. Cincinnati/Covington	9 right	Touchdown and rollout
6. Denver	8 right	Touchdown
7. Detroit	3 center	Touchdown and rollout
8. Minneapolis/St. Paul	29 right	Touchdown
9. Philadelphia	9 left	Touchdown and midpoint
10. Pittsburgh	10 right	Touchdown and midpoint
11. Raleigh/Durham	23 left	Touchdown
12. Salt Lake City	34 right	Touchdown
13. Washington Dulles	1 left	Touchdown and midpoint

FIGURE 1

Increase in passenger growth, compared to level trend of expenditures from Airline Trust Fund, versus airport capital needs, 1979-91



Sources: FAA, Congressional Budget Office, Airport Operations Council International.

over the 1988-92 time period to prepare airports (in terms of safety, capacity, and noise mitigation) to handle the expected traffic growth. Of that total, \$23 billion is needed just to cope with the expected growth of commercial service alone. The FAA has a lower estimate of \$24.3 billion required for airport capital improvements over the 1986-95 period (72% related to commercial traffic increases), as determined in the FAA "National Plan of Integrated Air Systems."

However, Congress and the administration both are so far attempting to avoid the life-and-death nature of the problem, and talk only in terms of cost-savings and postponements. Earlier this year, the Senate passed a resolution supporting a freeze in airport development.

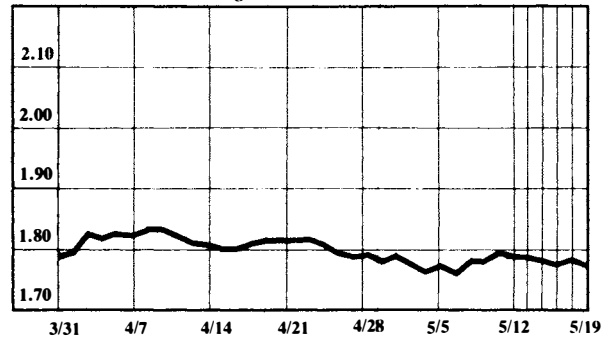
The thrust of the administration's proposals to date has been to recommend "defederalizing" airports, in terms of permitting local airports to charge their own user taxes—and commensurately to then reduce the federal airport grant flow (already inadequate). The administration proposes to maintain the Aviation Improvement Program disbursement at \$1 billion annually, and to retain the rest of the user tax revenue to make the general budget deficit look less bad.

Second, the administration has rationalized national air safety staff and research cuts in terms of asserting that the installation of new computer and other equipment will meet the air traffic needs. However, the General Accounting Office testimony showed that implementation of the nation's "Advanced Automation System" program has now fallen about eight years behind the FAA's original National Airspace System Plan. Automation improvements needed today for safety and efficiency will not be installed, at current rates of funding, until 1993. Can you wait that long for your next flight?

Currency Rates

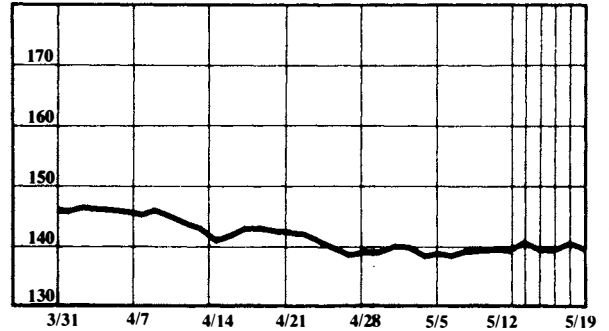
The dollar in deutschemarks

New York late afternoon fixing



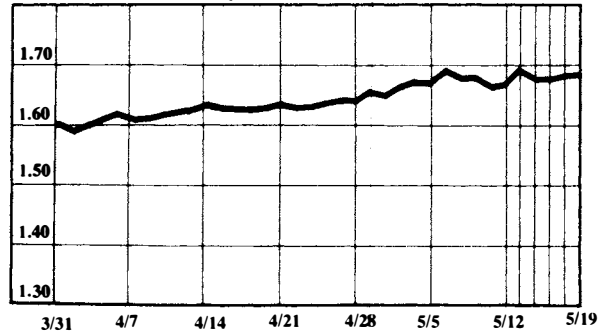
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing

