UBINODES

RESEARCH: ATC'S FUTURE

IN AMERICA

Ask twelve American pilots about the direction of ATC (Air Traffic Control) reform, and they will probably all give the same answer: they are against privatization! Pilots and aviation lobbyists have strongly opposed any discussion about changing the current ATC system. Because this issue is complicated, it is important to take a second (or even third) look to fully understand it.

Historical perspective.

The United States has been discussing the idea of privatizing air traffic control (ATC) for over thirty years. This conversation started after the 1981 ATC strike, which revealed problems within the FAA's ATC system.

In the nearly forty years since the strike, countries around the world have sought to improve air traffic management. Keep in mind that this isn't just a U.S. issue, it's a global concern. Twenty years ago, Canada faced financial challenges that prevented it from updating its ATC infrastructure. After careful consideration, the government decided to create a non-profit organization to take over the ATC system and handle the necessary upgrades. This approach had a clear advantage: the costs of modernization were made transparent through the contract, benefiting Canadian citizens.

Great Britain's NATS differs in structure as a public-private partnership, reflecting a shared trend of moving away from strictly government-controlled Air Traffic Systems.

Presently, many countries, including Germany, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, along with over 70 others, have chosen to privatize or partially privatize their air navigation services. This corporate approach to air traffic management is gaining global support, and more countries are expected to join this trend.

Diving deeper: The organizational structure of the U.S. system.

Many find confusion in the FAA's organizational structure and how a move towards privatization would impact it. The Air Traffic Organization (ATO), described as the "operational arm of the FAA," represents just one of fourteen headquarters offices within the FAA. While ATO governs all ATC, it constitutes a fraction of the entire FAA, with the remaining segments serving regulatory purposes, unaffected by potential ATC privatization.

Opponents of ATC reform often employ a scare tactic by linking the ATO to the regulatory portion of the FAA, creating a perception of lawlessness. However, this portrayal is inaccurate. Countries that have transitioned to private ATC, like Canada and the UK, maintain separate regulatory agencies—such as the Canadian Aviation Authority (CAA) and the UK Civil Aviation Authority—ensuring compliance with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Therefore, there is no basis to assume that a private ATC entity within the FAA would deviate from established regulatory practices.

Compare and contrast.

A common argument is that countries with state-owned or private air traffic control systems are much smaller or have lower traffic density. While this is true for some – such as Canada – which has a similar land area to the U.S. but much lower traffic density, it does not apply to all. Western European countries like the U.K. and Germany have very dense airspace and high traffic density, despite being smaller in size.

My perspective is different. I find it hard to believe that traffic density is not related to a nation's population and budget. The larger geographic area or denser population of the U.S. should not affect the proportional budget needed for a private contract. Essentially, the size difference between the U.S. and countries like Germany or Canada should not be a deterrent, as budgets would be adjusted accordingly.

Despite concerns that the U.S. National Airspace System (NAS) might not be suitable for private ATC, Canada, which handles 75% of the U.S. traffic count, has managed and updated its system efficiently. This challenges the idea that such a transfer is inherently unsafe or unmanageable.

Fear and loathing in...

In my personal observations, even respected peers share a deep-seated fear of disrupting the status quo. Videos from Air Venture show key EAA leaders strongly opposing the idea, calling it a significant setback for general aviation and even suggesting it could lead to its demise. Ironically, general aviation has been gradually declining, with nearly a 10% reduction in total operations since 2009.

To me, this decline seems more important than privatizing ATC services since it stems from factors unrelated to air traffic services. If any blame were to be assigned within the FAA, it would be to the regulatory aspect, which has remained unchanged. Outdated regulations have hindered general aviation growth for decades, overshadowing concerns about outdated equipment. People are increasingly unwilling to spend over $100 per flight hour on aging Cessnas or Pipers.

If organizations like AOPA and EAA truly prioritize expanding access to general aviation, they should consider redirecting their efforts towards reducing the costs of private flying, particularly through deregulation of the industry. By taking this approach, flying would become more appealing to people, as their desire to fly remains strong, similar to the time of DaVinci. However, the entry threshold must be made more reasonable for this to happen.