



Thanksgiving travels don't have to be a hassle

By Chris Edwards

November 27, 2013

To join their families for Thanksgiving this week, millions of Americans will face the drudgery of airline travel. Airports are crowded, flights are often delayed, and many travelers will get stuck in long security lines. It may get worse: a new study by the [U.S. Travel Association](#) (USTA) says that American aviation may be flying into a storm of "chronic congestion, delays, and frustration."

The problem is that our airports, security screening, and air traffic control are run by the government — an institution not known for good customer service or making efficient investments to meet market demands. The solution is to privatize all these activities, which is the successful reform approach taken by Canada and many European countries.

U.S. airport screening is run by the unionized Transportation Security Administration, which has a reputation for intrusive pat downs and inept management. Former TSA chief Kip Hawley called the agency "hopelessly bureaucratic." And studies have found that TSA security performance is [no better](#), and possibly worse, than private-sector screening, which is allowed at only a handful of U.S. airports.

The TSA has a penchant for wasting money on useless activities, leaving it less to spend on things that benefit travelers, such as more screening stations. For example, a new Government Accountability Office report finds that TSA spends [\\$200 million](#) a year on a program to spot terrorists by their suspicious behavior — yet the program simply does not work.

Congress should move responsibility for screening to the airports, and allow them to contract out to expert security firms. Private firms would be able to flexibly adjust their workforces to reduce congestion, and they would end low-value procedures that wasted passenger time.

Government control of airports is another barrier to [aviation efficiency](#). The USTA says that "Congress is not stepping up to modernize airports," and it also restricts airports from raising fees to fund their own improvements. If airports were privatized — as they have been in many other nations — they could access funding from customer charges, advertising, debt and equity to invest in new facilities to meet rising demands.

By contrast, federal funding for "airport improvements is provided in a highly politicized manner with little regard for return on investment," notes a new report by the prestigious [Eno Center](#) for Transportation. Government ownership and funding of airports is an albatross around the neck of U.S. aviation, unsuited to today's competitive aviation industry.

Air traffic control is even more unsuited for government. It is a complex, dynamic, high-tech business, and yet we try to run it as a giant bureaucracy from Washington. The Federal Aviation Administration's record on upgrading its technology has been dreadful. The USTA report says that our "air traffic control system uses technology from the World War II era that causes systematic delays and cancellations."

The FAA has been trying to move ahead with NextGen, a multiyear and multibillion dollar project to bring GPS and digital communications to management of air traffic. Those technologies would expand our airspace capacity and allow shorter flight paths, which would save time for passengers and reduce costs for airlines.

However, "NextGen remains mired by setbacks, cost overruns and delays as a result of FAA mismanagement," notes the USTA study. The Eno study similarly finds that "stakeholders are losing confidence in FAA's ability to move forward" with the crucial project.

The solution is privatization. In Canada, the air traffic control system is run by the nonprofit corporation [Nav Canada](#) after being privatized in 1996, and it is a huge success. It has an excellent safety record, is a leader in technology, and has won international awards for performance. A growing number of aviation experts are pointing to Nav Canada as a great model for U.S. reforms.

America was the global leader in aviation in the 20th century, but today we risk falling behind. To meet growing passenger demands and to make air travel fun again, policymakers should adopt the best practices of 21st aviation — and that includes privatizing airports, security screening and air traffic control.