

# No More Sequester Delays: Privatize Air Traffic Control

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Privatization: The sequester taught us two lessons. One, government can get by with less. Two, it can get by with much less. Drawing on that second lesson, we suggest Washington let go of its air traffic control monopoly.

Why does air traffic control have to be a government responsibility? It's not at all self-evident that it should be.

Indeed, the fact that government caused air travel delays so troubling last week that Congress jumped in with a fix is a clear indicator that government should get out of air traffic control. The politically concocted, fully avoidable delays never would have happened in the private sector.

Canada privatized its air traffic control system in 1996 and its friendly skies have not fallen in the ensuing years. The private company Nav Canada has won the IATA Eagle Award — which means it is the world's best air navigation service provider — three times during the era of privatization.

Nearly 20 years into this new era, Nav Canada "continues to exemplify high performance and cost-effectiveness," says Robert Poole, who's done decades of research on transportation privatization.

It's also set a higher standard of efficiency. Nav Canada estimates that its modernized navigation system, which the U.S. doesn't have, has cut the fuel bill of airlines flying in Canada and through its air space by roughly \$1.4 billion since it took over.

Australia and the United Kingdom also have private air traffic control systems, as do dozens of other nations. In fact, almost half — 48% — of European air passengers were handled by partly or fully privatized airports in 2011, Poole says.

And they must be working, or Langhorne Bond, Federal Aviation Administration administrator under President Carter, wouldn't have told Business Week that "only when it sinks in that other countries are doing better than we are will" privatization happen in the U.S.

While America limps on with its taxpayer-subsidized system, the private systems of the world are self-supporting. Because they can't levy taxes, they must raise revenue from their customers. This takes politics and taxpayer losses out of the equation.

Creation of a monopoly is a legitimate fear of air traffic control privatization. But the reality is a different story.

"Nav Canada's customer charges," the Cato Institute's Chris Edwards wrote last week in the Daily Caller, "have actually risen more slowly than inflation over the past decade."

Exchanging federal workers for private workers will no doubt prompt howls from some that government workers are superior to private-sector employees. But their concerns don't seem valid, either.

According to a Suffolk University Law School report, "service quality has improved in most cases" when air traffic has been privatized. Meanwhile, safety records "are not adversely affected by commercialization, and in some cases safety is improved."

The Suffolk study also found that "other risks of commercialization — such as erosion of accountability to government, deterioration of labor relations, or worsened relationships between civil and military air traffic controllers — have not materialized."

Privatizing air traffic control is not some lunatic plan hatched by a small cadre of government haters.

Even Peter Orszag has endorsed the notion. The former Obama economist wrote in September 2011 that Washington should strip responsibility of air traffic control "away from the FAA and assign it to a private, nonprofit organization."

Orszag pointed out that "the U.S. Government Accountability Office concluded in a 2005 review, these operators have maintained or even improved air safety, while they have lowered costs and boosted efficiency by investing in new technology."

He also referred to an expert panel convened in 2004 by the National Academy of Sciences that "concluded that the FAA lacks the technical expertise needed to build and manage complex air-traffic systems."

Yes, it's time for the government to ground its involvement in air traffic control.

On this, there should be no delay.