NOT-SO-FRIENDLY SKIES
Why air travel in America has become such a hassle
Not-So-Friendly Skies

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Introduction

Washington has been described as a “city of illusions” and among the most persistent of those illusions is the idea that the commercial air travel industry was deregulated in 1978 by President Jimmy Carter and then-Civil Aeronautics Board Chairman Alfred Kahn.

Deregulation was Kahn’s goal and in some ways he achieved that goal. But the fundamental premise of deregulation – the minimizing of federal interference in the normal functions of a market – was never realized except incidentally.

As Neil McCabe writes in his five-part series on America’s “Not-So-Friendly Skies,” Kahn mostly just re-arranged the deck chairs on the S.S. Washington Bureaucracy:

“Kahn's reforms did open up the industry to some degree, but the federal government retained all of the key regulatory pressure points to exercise whenever ambitious politicians and bureaucrats opted to do so. But that fact has never prevented pundits and TV talking heads from pointing to deregulation as the cause of all the industry's problems since 1978.”

And while the newspaper reporters and broadcast correspondents talked about “deregulation,” members of the Washington regulatory network continued doing pretty much what they’d always done, including “most notably the Federal Aviation Administration for regulating day-to-day operations, the National Labor Relations Board for labor-management relations, and the Anti-Trust Division of the Department of Justice and Securities and Exchange Commission for mergers and acquisitions.

The tumultuous decades that followed have seen an epic series of bankruptcies, labor distress and corporate mergers as the airline industry has sought to adjust to Washington’s changing regulatory dictates, as well as a steady succession of other challenges following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that involved four hijacked airliners and killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Pennsylvania and the nation’s capital.

As McCabe details, the industry has increasingly concentrated its operations in 29 “large-hub” airports, each of which serves at least one percent of all commercial flights.

That concentration is leaving behind 109 medium and small hub airports serving the nation’s other metropolitan areas. The result is a growing economic problem for cities like Oklahoma City, Colorado Springs and Portland.

The medium and small hubs get fewer flights, offer less competitive rates and make do with a reduced menu of connecting services. That introduces a sort of downward spiral in which fewer customers are attracted to these facilities, which in turn makes it harder to attract new businesses that would bolster the employment and economic growth the airlines require to justify adding flights.

Centralization is characteristic of regulated industries, so the growing problems associated with large hubs growing bigger as the medium and small hubs shrink shouldn’t come as a surprise. What is surprising perhaps is the dearth
of discussion the problem receives in the public policy community, many members of which are among the nation’s most frequent fliers.

But centralization is only one part of a much wider discussion that is needed about the nature and structure of the American commercial airline industry. Neil McCabe’s “Not So-Friendly Skies” is a significant step in the effort to spark just such a national discussion.

Mark Tapscott
Executive Editor
Washington Examiner
Americans are flying to more places, more often, than at any time in the country's history, but they are also unhappier about the commercial airline experience than they were 20 years ago.

According to the 2013 edition of the annual American Customer Satisfaction Index survey, the commercial airline industry gets a D+ rating as only 69 percent of passengers interviewed said they were satisfied by the service they received. That compares to 72 percent in 1994, the first year the survey measured airline customer satisfaction.

The 2013 survey, which was released in June and was based on interviews with hundreds of commercial air travelers, gave the highest grades to two non-traditional "no frills" carriers, JetBlue at 83 percent and Southwest at 82 percent.

Among traditional full-service commercial airlines, Delta scored highest, but still fell considerably behind JetBlue and Southwester at 68 percent, followed by American Airlines at 65 percent, US Airways at 64 percent and United at 62 percent.

There are numerous factors to explain the decline in support for traditional airlines, including among others multiple intractable employee unions, staggering pension and health care obligations, extraordinarily high recurring capital equipment expenditures, and, since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, heavy security costs.

Air travelers must cope with jam-packed jetliners, extra fees for baggage, frequent departure and arrival delays, and long tedious lines for security inspections by Transportation Security Administration agents barking at passengers who forget to take off their shoes or remove their laptops from backpacks.

It gets much less attention than those barking TSA agents, but further aggravating the flying experience is the industry's accelerating concentration around "large-hub" facilities.

These are the 29 airports serving major population centers like Atlanta, Dallas and New York where passengers typically have a comparatively wide selection of non-stop flights at competitive fares.

But passengers in medium- and small-hub cities like Colorado Springs, Oklahoma City and Portland - which make up the majority of major locations served by commercial airlines - must cope with fares that tend to be higher, make do with fewer direct connections and lengthy layovers between connecting flights that can make driving an hour or more to a larger facility a near-necessity.

Adding to the underlying difficulties is the fact many of the medium- and small-hub airports were often expanded in the early years of deregulation at heavy cost to municipal governments hoping to use them as economic growth magnets.

So more people are flying commercially than ever before but much of the promise of the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act that ended the reign of the New Deal-era Civil Aviation Board remains as elusive as ever. The CAB was a classic agent of centralized government regulation. The board treated commercial air travel as a public utility like telephone service.
Profitable long distance routes subsidized short-haul service in a fare system that prevented ruinous price wars and substituted competition on the basis of amenities.

Championed by Cornell economist Alfred E. Kahn, the last CAB commissioner, deregulation supposedly freed the airline industry from central command-and-control management to unleash the free-market forces that in other industries led to improved service, lower costs and bigger profits.

Deregulation was the vision, but federal regulators never really took their thumbs off the scales, they just moved their offices from CAB to other government agencies, most notably the Federal Aviation Administration for regulating day-to-day operations, the National Labor Relations Board for labor-management relations, and the Anti-Trust Division of the Department of Justice and Securities and Exchange Commission for mergers and acquisitions.

As competitors like Lockheed and McDonnell-Douglas either merged with rivals or were bought out by Boeing, the U.S. Export-Import Bank became a virtual extension of the latter's marketing efforts. Nearly 83 percent of Ex-Im's loan guarantees went to Boeing last year, according to the bank's 2012 annual report.

Federal levies on air travel didn't go away, either. Depending on the destination, as many as 17 separate taxes are collected on an airline ticket, including the Flight Segment Tax, Passenger Ticket Tax, Frequent Flier Tax and the September 11 Security Fee, according to the Airlines for America trade association.

Less conspicuous are smaller levies like LUST, the one-penny "contribution" collected on every ticket transaction for the Environmental Protection Agency's Leaking Underground Storage Tank trust fund. As a result, as much as 20 percent of a $300 ticket goes to federal taxes, according to the association.

Problems with Kahn's "deregulation" didn't take long to appear. Braniff International Airways, which had been founded in Oklahoma City in 1930, was the first major victim.

The airline that flourished under CAB with celebrity designer interiors, fuselages painted by famous modern artists and edgy advertising campaigns created by the real Mad Men on Madison Avenue floundered in the new era.

Braniff grounded its fleet in 1982 after a chain of events that included a threatened pilots' strike, the 1981 strike by federal air traffic controllers and problems created before deregulation when regulators forced the airline to move its base of operations from Dallas' Love Field to the Dallas-Forth Worth International Airport. Braniff's decline and fall was just the first of many that would follow.
Not-So-Friendly Skies: Tough To Be A City Left Out of the Large Hubs
By Neil McCabe, Special to the Washington Examiner

(Originally published December 10, 2013 as the second part of a five-part Watchdog investigative series)

When the Interstate highway system was begun in the 1950s, a common fear was that regional cultures and unique local communities that were bypassed would be forever lost due to the vastly increased commerce between distant cities.

Those fears have been fulfilled in many respects on the nation's roads in the decades since, and something very much like that phenomenon is happening in America's skies today.

A May 2013 paper, "Trends and Market Forces Shaping Small Community Air Service in the United States," published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's International Center for Air Transportation, describes extensive changes in the industry that are driven by an esoteric management technique known as "capacity discipline," or "right-gauging."

A cousin to the just-in-time inventory approach to supply management, capacity discipline is why flying while sitting beside an empty seat has become a distant memory for the vast majority of commercial airline travelers.

After years of aggressively expanding into new markets, airlines now schedule fewer flights in smaller planes or purposely overbook flights on larger aircraft to ensure that as many seats in the cabin as possible are occupied on every flight. Doing so is essential to maintaining the profitability that keeps the airplanes flying.

According to MIT's Michael Wittman and William Swelbar, the 29 large-hub airports -- defined by the Federal Aviation Administration as having at least one percent of the nation's total annual commercial air traffic -- saw airlines cancel 8.8 percent of their scheduled flights from those facilities between 2007 and last year. But at the other 109 medium- and small-hub airports, the number of flights plunged 21.3 percent during the same period.

As a result, hundreds of cities like Colorado Springs, Colo., Memphis, Tenn., and Oklahoma City, with airports accounting for between 0.25 percent and one percent of traffic, have lost huge portions of the air connectivity they once took for granted.

Connections to other places from those cities are becoming more difficult, often require awkward scheduling compromises and frequently are more expensive to purchase.

Oklahoma City travel agent Kathy Dorough, who with Toni Caldwell owns Break-Away Travel, remembers a time years ago when Will Rogers International Airport was a much busier place.

"We basically have American, United, Delta and Southwest," she said. "Back in the Dark Ages, we used to also have Braniff and Continental, American, Pan-Am, Delta, Northwest, Eastern, TWA, but they have all gone by the wayside," she said.

Ironically, Oklahoma City has long been home to one of the FAA's major facilities, the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center, which, among much else, trains the nation's air traffic controllers.

More than 5,600 federal employees work at Monroney, as well as hundreds more contractors and subcontractors, making the facility one of Oklahoma City's 10 largest employers. But things have been tough in recent years for Will Rogers officials as airlines have increasingly concentrated their operations around the large-hubs.
Asked about changes at Will Rogers, Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett diplomatically observed, "I would say the planes seem a little more crowded, and the opportunities to squeeze additional dollars from the travelers seem evident. I am a businessman myself, it is probably necessary. It seems like a really tough business."

Even though Oklahoma City is not a large-hub, Cornett said, "I can get to almost anywhere I want to go in a direct flight, but there might only be one flight a day, so you have to kind of work it, to know the system and the best way out of Oklahoma City."

Dallas is a 30-minute connecting flight or a three-hour drive south from Oklahoma City, Cornett said. "You can either get there from here, or you have to get to Dallas, and from there you can go anywhere in the world," he said.

Karen Carney, marketing manager for Will Rogers, said the airport's connectivity is improving in some respects. United recently added a Cleveland flight, and the airport is one of the few nonhub cities to gain new routes.

“We did lose Kansas City from Southwest," she said. Southwest was using Kansas City to feed passengers to its Chicago Midway International Airport hub, but the interim stop became unnecessary when Southwest added some direct flights from Oklahoma City to Midway.

On the down side, though, Carney pointed to what happened in Memphis after Delta acquired Northwest Airlines.

Memphis had been a hub for Northwest, but, as Delta incorporated Northwest routes into its system, it has been drawing down its flights in and out of Memphis, including service with Oklahoma City.

"The airlines are pulling away from the point-to-point services. They are all about making sure that their routes are profitable. If a route is not profitable, or a route just isn't making it, then they are not going to just keep it," Carney said.

Unfortunately, when airlines make such decisions, it's not just their passengers who feel the affects.
Not-So-Friendly Skies: Colorado Springs Airport Faces Adversity, Gets Entrepreneurial
By Neil McCabe, The Washington Examiner

(Originally published December 11, 2013 as the third part of a five-part Watchdog investigative series)

Most Americans probably think of Transportation Security Administration security lines at the airport when asked about Washington's role in commercial airline travel, but the federal government is a major player at virtually every level of the industry.

That's a mixed blessing for many in the industry, especially those associated with the 109 commercial airports the Federal Aviation Administration defines as medium- and small-hubs.

They must play second fiddle to the 29 large hub airports that each account for at least 1 percent of all commercial flights, according to the FAA.

It's great to be a large-hub like Denver International Airport, but the system increasingly leaves mostly crumbs for the rest, including the small-hub Colorado Springs Airport that is an hour south.

Daniel T. Gallagher, interim aviation director at the Colorado Springs facility, said his airport is taking drastic steps to become more competitive after years of decline. He said traffic at the airport is down 37 percent since 2007.

"Smaller airports have been hurt by high and volatile fuel price, the sluggish economy and airlines merging and consolidating," he said.

Regional aircraft that frequently serve non-hub airports are less fuel-efficient than the larger planes serving longer routes, so airlines cut regional flights before cutting routes serviced by larger planes, he said.

Airlines are parking the regional planes rather than routing them to Colorado Springs at a loss, he said. But the biggest factor is that Denver International Airport is so close.

"What really kicks our tail is our proximity to Denver and its three hubbing airlines," he said. The Denver facility is a major connecting airport for Frontier Airlines, United Airlines and Southwest Airlines.

"We are competing with airlines at Denver that are not even making a profit on routes because they are trying to kill the competition," he said. As the country's fifth busiest airport (based on enplaned passengers), Denver also offers a wider selection of direct flights to more destinations.

An example of the fierce competition at Denver is the recent complaint with the Department of Justice filed by Frontier against Southwest for allegedly unfair and predatory trade practices.

Frontier filed its complaint after Southwest raised prices everywhere except Denver, where it competes head-to-head with Frontier, Gallagher said.

Despite the pull of Denver, Colorado Springs still attracts nearly 700,000 passengers every year, he said. "So, the deal made sense for those 700,000."

Gallagher said airlines eventually will stop flying routes that lose money, but rather than wait that out, his airport is taking drastic steps now to make itself more enticing to travelers and airlines.

"We can't sit back," he said. The airport administration has cut positions from 121 to 96, with more cuts coming later, he said. The airport is also refinancing its bonds to take advantage of lower interest rates.
Cash freed up by cost-cutting will enable the airport to lower rents, terminal leases and landing fees, he said. "We're going to go from $69 per square foot inside the terminal to probably $51 a square foot in the terminal."

Gallagher said his pitch to the airlines is that if so many people from around Colorado Springs are flying out of Denver, it makes sense for the airlines to go where the travelers are and expand in his city.

There are one million passengers who should be flying out of Colorado Springs who are instead using Denver, he said.

What can be done for facilities like Colorado Springs Airport? The key is encouraging genuine deregulation, according to Chris Edwards, who edits the Washington-based Cato Institute's downsizinggovernment.org website.

As a starting point, Edwards says TSA, after a decade of making commercial flying much more difficult, should be privatized.

"One way it has gotten worse is all of the extra security that has slowed down airports and made it so people have to get to the airports much earlier before flights," said Edwards.

"None of this should be in government control," he said. In Canada, airport security, as well as air traffic control, is privately owned and operated. The same is true for a growing number of countries in Europe.

“It's crazy,” he said. "America was the great entrepreneur in aviation for the 20th century, and here we are, stuck in the 21st century with a backward, socialistic industry -- it makes no sense at all."

Edwards argues that terminal leases illustrate how excessive government controls create incentives that favor large-hubs at everybody else's expense.

"Because airports are government-owned, they are not very entrepreneurial," he said. "What they tend to do is give one big airline an essential monopoly on gates."

This practice is a major contributor to development of the hub system, he said. "Governments like the one, big tenant."

A new approach pioneered in Europe is to hold real-time auctions for gates, so prices rise and fall with demand and the airlines can manage gates as they would any other inventory, he said.

In the large-hub, mega-gate-deal system, large airlines hold onto gates they do not need to block competition, which is often the smaller upstart firms, Edwards said.

Privatizing airport security, air traffic control and gate management would all improve service and efficiency, he said.

Ultimately, entire airports could be sold off by their government deedholders through initial public offerings or distributions of shares, he said. In most airport cases, there could be an IPO with some stock given directly to stakeholders, such as the unions.

If there were more private airports, it would be in the interests of everybody who suffers under the current hub system to work hand-in-hand to create more competition, he said.
Conventional wisdom holds that President Jimmy Carter withdrew the federal government from the airline industry in 1978 through a landmark process that came to be known as "deregulation."

Carter, so goes the tale, heeded the advice of his appointee Alfred Kahn, the last chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board, which for decades had presided over a heavily regulated commercial aviation system by approving all fares, schedules and routes.

It's true that Kahn was the central player in the process. He wanted to get the government out of regulating the industry and his ideas had backing of a wide range of advocates from across the ideological spectrum, including consumer crusader Ralph Nader on the Left and an ambitious young political entrepreneur on the Right by name of Grover Norquist.

As the American Spectator's Andrew Wilson noted in 2011 on the occasion of Kahn's passing, Carter's man "set out on a mission of writing himself and his agency out of a job -- opening the industry to real competition for the first time.

"Kahn gave airlines the freedom to enter (and exit) domestic markets and to price [their services] as they pleased. He also allowed new low-cost, low-fare airlines to challenge the incumbents."

But Wilson points to a crucial factor that would be central to the failure to achieve comprehensive deregulation: "With the exception of United, all of the established airlines were adamantly opposed to deregulation, as were the unions representing airline pilots, flight crews and baggage handlers. But as Kahn recognized, this was a classic instance of the capture of the 'regulators' by the 'regulated' -- to the disadvantage of the traveling public."

Kahn's reforms did open up the industry to some degree, but the federal government retained all of the key regulatory pressure points to exercise whenever ambitious politicians and bureaucrats opted to do so. But that fact has never prevented pundits and TV talking heads from pointing to deregulation as the cause of all the industry's problems since 1978.

Delta Airlines CEO Richard Anderson addressed the issue in a speech last year to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Whenever airline companies, such as Delta and Northwest, attempt a merger or acquisition lawyers from the Department of Justice's Antitrust Department jump onto the process, often blocking, delaying and perverting the deal, he said.

However, other businesses in the industry, caterers, aircraft makers and engine manufacturers are allowed to create similar combinations unmolested, he said.

Anderson said that, although the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act eliminated the Civilian Aeronautics Board, the DOJ attorneys to this day use the old CAB antitrust regulations to interfere in airline mergers and acquisitions.

Marc Scribner, a research fellow at the Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute, agrees, noting that President Obama's administration aggressively pursues an antitrust agenda with the airline industry, including its initial opposition to the merge of American Airlines and US Airways.
"Despite significant economic evidence suggesting a positive result of the merger, the Justice Department is attempting to derail it in order to flex its antitrust enforcement muscles," he said a few weeks before the government opted to allow the merger to go forward.

Anderson had a long list of complaints, including the tax burden borne by the airlines and air travelers, but nothing upsets him more than the taxpayer-supported Export-Import Bank financing of Boeing aircrafts for his overseas competitors.

"I'm just telling you--the CEO of Delta is telling you it hurts," he said.

Anderson pointed to Ex-Im's assistance with Air India's purchase of Boeing 777 wide-body jetliners on terms that were annually $4 million below the terms Delta secured for its previous purchase of similar jetliners for its Indian routes.

On those Indian routes, Air India sold tickets $300 to $400 cheaper than Delta, in part because of the federal government's sweetheart deal for the benefit of Boeing, he said.
Not-So-Friendly Skies: Airline Industry Faces Immense Problems, But There Are Solutions
By Neil McCabe – Special to the Washington Examiner

(Originally published December 10, 2013 as the fifth part of a five-part Watchdog investigative series)

It has been 35 years since President Carter signed the 1978 Airline Deregulation Act, but the measure's promise of lower costs, more convenient commercial air travel and a wider range of choices for consumers have in many respects gone unmet.

Before 1978, commercial travel had the glamor of a cruise ship, with passengers dressing up and swanky cocktail lounges in the first-class cabins of larger aircraft. But it was also a private reserve for corporate fliers and the well-to-do. Not anymore.

As more people have taken to air travel, the practice of "capacity discipline," or "right-gauging," has resulted in airlines scheduling fewer flights, and those flights that are on the schedule are typically packed to the gills. Right-gauging flights leads to right-gauging routes, as airlines cut direct flights from medium-sized airports and feed more flights into central hub airports.

There are now 29 hub airports that account for at least 1 percent of the country's total air traffic volume. Airports outside that elite circle of 29 are finding it increasingly tough to remain economically viable.

For the nation's smaller airports, a federal subsidy program helps keep them open, even if there is little demand. In Colorado, for example, three airports that feed passengers to Denver International Airport -- San Luis Valley Regional Airport, Pueblo Memorial Airport and Cortez Municipal Airport -- receive a combined $6 million annually to keep the runway lights lit. Nebraska has seven airports receiving Essential Air Service payments. Alaska has more than 40.

The airports receiving EAS payments are small and used only sparingly, so cutting the program would not impact a huge number of people.

But the real problem of isolation is not with the 150 hobbyist airports that secured a place at the feeder. Rather, it is the many larger airports that generate less than 1 percent of the nation's total annual commercial air traffic, but more than enough to make them ineligible for EAS subsides. These airports are trapped in the middle between the hubs and the hobbyists.

As Michael Wittman and William Swelbar note in a study published by MIT earlier this year, the biggest factor in determining where airlines locate flights is always profitability:

"At the end of the day, the airlines' individual route profitability will continue to decide which airports are served and which are not. Financial incentives may attract service for several months, but only economically viable routes will survive."

In other words, it's not enough to offer tax incentives and related cost-reduction incentives to airlines. The non-hub airports -- all of which are publicly owned -- must somehow persuade more travelers to use them, while lowering costs and boosting revenues for the airlines providing flights.

There are general reforms that would make the airline industry stronger overall, including privatizing security and air traffic control, opening up gate leases to more competition, creating a level negotiating field between airline management and employee unions, and reducing or entirely ending anti-trust interference by the Department of Justice in the industry's mergers and acquisitions, based on New Deal-era concepts of publicly enforced equity.
But more specific reforms to help the 246 airports caught in the middle primarily focus on reducing or eliminating the 20 to 25 percent of each fare that goes to the federal government for flights departing from those facilities.

At airports already in the 1 percent club or growing to become members, commercial airline travelers would pay the full tax, and those departing on flights from airports that aren't in the club would qualify for a lower tax, possibly under a progressively graduated traffic schedule.

Busy airports stressing the system would continue to contribute more, and airports bringing less stress would get a break that would also be an incentive for passengers to use them more frequently.

Another, more radical, approach to the problem for non-hub cities is contracting out airport operations to private firms, much as thousands of municipalities do with services like garbage pickup and road maintenance, or even privatizing the airports entirely like the federal government does with national park services.

"The benefits of a more entrepreneurial approach to running airports include increased operating efficiency, improved amenities, and more rapid and efficient expansion in capacity to reduce congestion. Airlines, passengers, private-plane owners, and taxpayers can all benefit from this new commercial approach to airport management," according to the Cato Institute's Chris Edwards and Robert Poole.

"For existing state and local airports, the simplest form of privatization is to contract out management of the airport on a short-term basis. But long-term leases can shift much greater responsibility and entrepreneurial incentive to the airport company, while liberating much of the city's previous investment in the airport," Edwards and Poole said.

"To create new airport facilities, the private sector can be brought in as a partner and granted either a long-term or perpetual franchise to finance, design, own, and operate the new facility. Full private ownership and management of airports is also possible and is becoming fairly common in Europe," Edwards and Poole said.

The FAA has been experimenting for more than a decade with a demonstration project known as the Airport Privatization Pilot Program, which currently has 10 slots for interested participants, according to the agency's website.

Under the program, long-term airport leases are negotiated between municipalities and private entities. "Airline rates and charges are frozen for the initial years and then increase at the Consumer Price Index," according to Poole.

Such an arrangement provides airlines with predictable costs, which can be an incentive to long-term agreements. In addition, Poole notes, "for airports in fast-growing areas like Austin that need expansion, investor-financed expansion projects can bring new sources of capital to the airport, as well as shifting or all of the project risks to the investors."

To date, the industry has been lukewarm toward the demonstration project, with only two applicants -- Luis Munoz Marin International Airport in Puerto Rico and Hendry County Airglades Airport in Florida -- currently participating. Five airports, including Chicago Midway International Airport, withdrew applications after submitting them.

One facility completed the program: Stewart International Airport in Newburgh, N.Y., which is now operated by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.
About the Author

Neil McCabe is a Washington-based journalist who has covered Congress, executive branch agencies and congressional political campaigns for Human Events, as well as news reporting and photography for the Boston Pilot, the newspaper of the Boston Archdiocese. He is also a veteran combat historian who most recently served with the U.S. Army in Iraq where he was awarded the Bronze Star.