

*The skies are fairly friendly  
for the FAA and top airline execs,  
but not for passengers, pilots and other workers*

**BY AMY L. FRAHER**  
Special to The Washington Post

In recent weeks, six air traffic controllers were caught napping, cracks were found in at least five 737s and a record number of near collisions were reported, including one involving Michelle Obama's Air Force jet. And the Federal Aviation Administration is finally being confronted about its researching changes in the industry since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. I interviewed hundreds of airline pilots and reviewed dozens of federal documents and accident reports. There's ample evidence that industry fractures have been widening for years.

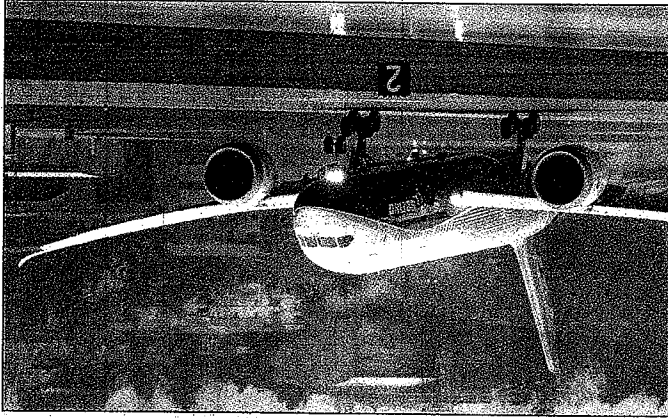
Consider the two FAA whistleblowers who testified before Congress in 2008, charging that the agency knowingly allowed Southwest to operate unsafe aircraft. These inspectors had tried to warn the FAA for years about the need for increased surveillance of Southwest, yet their efforts were repeatedly undermined by management. Other FAA employees also reported how difficult it was to bring action against airlines because their FAA administrators

appeared to be "too close to airline management."

Inspired by previous whistleblowers, another FAA safety inspector came forward. His job? Monitoring operations at Colgan Air, the regional airline whose plane crashed outside Buffalo, N.Y., killing 50 people. This inspector described numerous safety violations at Colgan, dating to 2005 — four years before the fatal crash. Yet efforts to bring enforcement action to Colgan met resistance: Colgan Air President "Mike Colgan is a friend of this office," FAA management said.

The bottom line is regulators have put airlines in control of their own aviation safety, and passengers are strapped in for the ride. Contrary to the FAA's claim that this is the "golden age of safety, the safest period in the history of the world," we are entering a period of unprecedented global risk.

Airlines want us to believe that the terrorist attacks caused an industry downturn, justifying fees for everything. Airlines distracted the public by blaming the industry's slump on war, recession, terrorism and travel scares such as SARS, while pointing to rising fuel costs, greedy employees, aggressive labor groups and frugal consumers to explain their insolvency. Meanwhile, airline executives quietly pocketed millions of dollars. In the past decade, U.S. air-



AP photo

lines have made nearly \$9.8 billion in profit. Will we soon see a major airline disaster? Nearly every pilot I interviewed agreed it's likely: Ninety-six percent reported witnessing increased stress on the pilot work force due to post-Sept. 11 cost-cutting measures; 98 percent witnessed mistakes or distractions on the flight deck because of cost cutting and work rule changes.

Although airlines have returned to profitability, airline employees continue to give up more than \$12 billion a year in wages, benefits, pensions and other concessions. Nearly 200,000 airline employees remain out of work and more than 14,000 pilot jobs at major air carriers have disappeared. Of the pilots I interviewed, 92 percent would not recommend an airline career to a young person.

Is this the "golden age of safety," as regulators and airlines would like us to believe, where airfares are inexpensive, airline executives are well paid and airline employees are competent, experienced, rested and safe? The 118 Southwest Airlines passengers on the damaged plane must have thought so, as every one of them boarded a replacement 737 and continued on to their destination.

Or is it a post-Sept. 11 managerial trick, where seemingly low accident rates and miraculous near collisions distract us from the cozy airline-regulator relationships and the real price of that \$99 ticket?

Amy L. Fraher is a retired U.S. Navy commander, naval aviator and former United Airlines pilot.

**Is this the "golden age of safety"? Or is it a post-Sept. 11 managerial trick, where seemingly low accident rates and miraculous near collisions distract us from the cozy airline-regulator relationships and the real price of that \$99 ticket?**