



A GRAIN OF Salt

Who doesn't like and welcome praise for a job well done? Exactly, nobody. So when a mass news media magazine, *U.S. News and World Report*, came out with its own safety ranking of eight major U.S. airlines, it would have been mighty tempting for carriers at the top of the list — the "safest" — to take a bow. To do that, I believe, would be a mistake.

Despite the fact that the author opened the piece by saying "commercial air travel in the United States today is about as safe as it gets," accepting praise from a general media analysis based on assumptions and judgments of the author's choosing is misguided in that it implies acceptance of the validity of those judgments, opening the door for future subjective judgments.

Certainly, the general media will continue to do this sort of thing, using whatever criteria they think appropriate, regardless of what the aviation community says about the effort.

It is easy to criticize "list journalism," but the fact of the matter is that the only reason it is so common and pushed on journalists by their editors is that people love to read this sort of stuff. In fact, the author behind this safety ranking list seems to specialize in lists, recently offering "World's Hottest New Year's Eve Parties," "America's Most

Infested Places" and "America's Meanest Airlines." You catch the drift.

The author's basic premise of scoring based on incidents per number of operations is not, in itself, a bad idea, and is similar to what we use in the industry to pinpoint areas of greatest risk. When accidents are so rare and random that they become statistically irrelevant, which is where we've been for quite a while, a larger dataset must be used. This was a breakthrough of the Commercial Aviation Safety Team and others a number of years ago that focused industry attention on controlled flight into terrain accidents and approach and landing accidents, the biggest killers at the time.

Recently, a presenter at Flight Safety Foundation's International Air Safety Seminar in Milan, Italy, introduced an idea to enlarge on that dataset, adding power by incorporating the mistakes and anomalies experienced during simulator training. This proposal is very interesting, since the scenarios commonly used in training sessions are seldom seen in real life, and learning the most common mistakes made in response to these scenarios may yield very useful training information.

But this most recent general media effort was not well informed. It did discount some of the events over which

airlines have scant control, such as bird strikes, but it also discounted injuries in the cabin caused by turbulence, a decision that sort of flies in the face of a major cabin safety concern. The success with which airlines keep their passengers and crews strapped in, especially with turbulence ahead, is, I think, a measure of a safe operation.

Nonetheless, this exclusion didn't stop the author from talking about one airline's turbulence events. Also discussed was an air traffic control error that caused another carrier's loss of separation, which also was not counted in the rankings. This story was ill focused, a grab bag of minor-league airline horror stories.

So, my opening point remains: When lame stuff like this comes out in the general media, stick to the narrative you know to be true. Be satisfied with, and defend, an exemplary safety record that is not improved by any subjective ranking attempts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue". The signature is fluid and cursive.

J.A. Donoghue
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