



LOWERING The Bar

Success has its rewards, but some are less clear than others. Take, for example, the record of aviation safety in the United States, a nation where 49 people have died in a single jetliner accident in nearly seven years.

Everyone connected with aviation should be justifiably proud of that record but remain unsatisfied that accidents continue to occur and people continue to die. Yet, the success we claim in minimizing the risk of an accident has not translated into increased public confidence. Instead, we've succeeded in lowering the bar for public fear. Where once an accident was needed, or at least a very close call, to set off calls for system reform and regulator clampdowns, accompanied by expressions of public fear, now all it takes is a misconnect in compliance with an airworthiness directive (AD).

For those without access to U.S. news, the recent uproar began when the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) proposed a fine against Southwest Airlines for failing to comply with an AD, a failure the airline reported. The issue quickly spiraled into examinations of the entire regulatory oversight system, the honesty of the people in that system and the close

relationship between the regulators and the regulated.

There is no doubt that something went awry. And it happened at a time when various groups were looking for an issue with which to gain attention or advantage. The general media took what they were given and ran with it. Even Kate Hanni, lately notable as leader of a consumer group protesting airline service, was quoted as saying, "People are afraid."

That kind of attitude is a reflection of the reality that everyone in aviation must learn to live with: Travel through the air still is a novel and alien experience. Many people remain very uncomfortable with the feelings, sounds and sights associated with air travel, a discomfort that escalates into full-blown fear with the slightest provocation.

Not only do we have to learn to live with this reality, we must use it to strengthen our safety efforts and resolve to minimize risk and devise mitigations to prevent accidents, and that is all good.

However, a great risk faces the U.S. industry at this point: The U.S. Congress has become heavily involved in the discussion. With elections on the horizon, those in Congress engaged in this issue

know they must discuss the situation in simplified ways that voters can easily grasp; and, in trying to show leadership, they feel the need to propose solutions of a similar nature. These solutions include ideas that would be a return to traditional hierarchical systems over the far more effective cooperative systems that have produced such fantastic results, a devolution of the safety culture that would be a real threat.

While some individuals in the system may have failed, the ideas and the procedures developed over the past several decades, and especially the past 10 years, absolutely have not failed. Some well-conceived adjustments may be beneficial, but the safety community must come together to weather the current storm in a way that doesn't cause lasting damage to the cooperative nature of a highly effective aviation safety system.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

J.A. Donoghue
Editor-in-Chief
AeroSafety World