



TROUBLING Retreat

We suddenly have become aware that attention must be paid to even the apparently most secure safety bastion.

Before this week I readily would have identified American Airlines (AA) as a beacon of enlightened aviation safety thinking. But then we heard that American's management and the Allied Pilots Association union failed to renew the airline's Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP) and it would stop operating.

"But," I said in disbelief to a colleague, "they *invented* ASAP."

Labor-management relations at American have traced a tortured arc. The "B scale" pay plan for new hires was born there in a burst of common-cause cooperation. It fed an AA growth spurt before becoming the poster child for poisonous labor relations. Then there were the post-9/11 pay cuts AA unions accepted, the unions' mood later turning when executive bonuses were revealed.

A friend of ours at American tells us, "In my opinion, both [parties] are at fault and neither side is willing to give an inch. That sums up the entire labor relations spectrum at AA today. I watched years ago as a strong, anti-management faction came into control of the APA. The pendulum swung back towards

cooperation, and swung again last year with another anti-management group winning control."

Other airlines have toxic labor relations, but we always hope that safety issues can remain above the fray. Sometimes, apparently, the battle expands to include scorched earth tactics, with no prisoners taken.

Reports say that the ASAP for pilots has been part of the bargaining for many months. It was due to expire early this year, but the Federal Aviation Administration extended it to allow cooler heads to prevail. That didn't happen, and now the birthplace of one of the bedrock aviation safety reporting systems is without the program it created.

Reaction in AA's local Texas news media outlets to the failure of this ASAP has been negative: "Broadly speaking, the union tried to get new language that better protected pilots. Broadly speaking, management tried to get new language to not protect pilots that they didn't think should be protected," wrote Terry Maxon on the *Dallas Morning News* Web site. "The loser, of course, is everybody."

An APA communication to its members said, "You don't have ASAP because management ... has lost the trust of its pilots."

A pilot in management said the failure was "sad and incomprehensible."

The Flight Safety Foundation position is summed up by FSF President and CEO Bill Voss: "The entire industry is facing difficult times and disputes are inevitable, but no one should ever allow safety to become a bargaining chip."

By the time this is read, all parties involved may have come to their senses. That, however, will not quiet our concern. This troubling retreat on the safety front is a warning shot signaling that we cannot simply walk away from a safety victory, dusting off our hands and congratulating each other on a job well done, looking ahead to new horizons, new companies and new cultures to bring into the safety reporting revolution. Attention must continue to be paid to nurturing these programs wherever aviation exists, from the glass executive towers of Fort Worth to the dusty control towers of the developing world.

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

J.A. Donoghue
Editor-in-Chief
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