PYRÉNÉES CAPITAL

Suite 9091, Building 15, Road 3801,
Adliya 338, Kingdom of Bahrain

+973 38873800
@ basil@pyreneescapital.com
www.pyreneescapital.com
CR No. 139655-1

Is America's aviation infrastructure fit for purpose?

A remarkable safety record, an ageing network and a rather large bill for putting things right.

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America is extraordinarily good at aviation.

Its airlines, airports and manufacturers support an astonishing amount of movement, most of which passes without incident. This is precisely how the passenger likes it. The aircraft takes off, the controller knows where it is, and the luggage - with luck - arrives at the other end.

It is a little awkward, then, when the machinery behind this achievement begins attracting headlines of its own.

In January 2025, an airliner and a US Army helicopter collided over Washington, killing 67 people. On 13 November this year, a nationwide ground stop brought departing flights across America to a halt. Between those events came other accidents and troubling disruptions. They were not all caused by the same thing, and treating them as evidence of one grand failure would be careless. But dismissing them as mere bad luck would be equally unwise. [1] [3]

Commercial aviation remains remarkably safe. Indeed, the latest annual US transport safety indicators tell a mixed story rather than one of uniform decline. What concerns me is something narrower and, in some respects, more interesting: **the distance between the sophistication of modern aviation and the age of some of the systems on which it still depends.** [2]

A warning is not a remedy

Consider Washington. The National Transportation Safety Board concluded that longstanding failures in airspace design, oversight and risk management contributed to the collision. There had been earlier warnings. The problem was not simply that something unexpected happened; it was that the institutions responsible for managing the risk had been given reasons to pay attention. [1]

This matters because aviation is particularly good at learning from mistakes. Investigations are exacting, recommendations detailed, and responsibility shared across airlines, controllers, airports, manufacturers and regulators. Yet an impressive apparatus for discovering problems is of limited comfort if acting on its findings becomes somebody else's problem. The NTSB issued 50 recommendations after Washington. The question is how quickly their substance becomes everyday practice.

That is also why I would resist the temptation to turn every incident into an indictment of flying itself. A runway accident is not a telecommunications outage. A manufacturing defect is not an airspace-design error. Statistics distinguish between them for good reason. Good judgement should do the same.

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The day America stopped taking off

The November ground stop is revealing for a different reason. According to the Federal Aviation Administration, network instability affected 17 of its 22 en-route control centres. Aircraft already in the air continued to land safely under established procedures, and the ground stop was lifted later that evening. In other words, the immediate safety response worked. [3]

The preliminary explanation, however, is almost disarmingly ordinary. The FAA reported a flood of network connection attempts, with possible origins at facilities in Arkansas and Texas. Its contractor, L3Harris, had been replacing equipment at the Arkansas site. The precise root cause is still being investigated, and it would be premature to assign blame. [3]

But the larger question does not require us to identify the guilty router. **Why should trouble at a relatively remote facility be capable of unsettling so much of a national network?** Backup systems are useful only if they work when the primary systems do not. Redundancy that allows a local fault to travel nationwide is a rather questionable form of reassurance.

And the FAA's recovery is not the airline industry's recovery. Once aircraft and crews have ended up in the wrong places, even a perfectly functioning control system cannot instantly restore the timetable. Passengers miss connections, freight misses deadlines and airlines incur costs long after the engineers have gone home. The FAA reported some 12,462 cancellations on the day of the outage, while cautioning that not all were caused by the ground stop. This distinction matters: **the technical fault may last hours; its commercial consequences can last days.** [3] [8]

Europe offers a useful reminder that there is no perfect system waiting across the Atlantic. A harmonised FAA-EUROCONTROL comparison found that, at selected major airports in 2022, US arrivals were more often punctual than European ones (78.5% against 70.9%), while American departures suffered more additional taxi-out time (6.3 minutes against 2.9). Those are older operational measures, not a verdict on safety in 2026. They do show why confident declarations that one continent has 'the better system' usually depend on which question is being asked. [6]

The bill is large. The task is larger.

The need for American modernisation is hardly a discovery of the past few days. In 2024 the Government Accountability Office reported that the FAA considered 51 of its 138 assessed air traffic systems unsustainable, with another 54 potentially unsustainable. That did not mean they were all about to fail. It meant that the risks posed by ageing technology, maintenance and replacement had become difficult to ignore. [4]

Congress approved $12.5bn for accelerated air traffic control modernisation in 2025. After the latest outage, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy called for roughly $50bn. The distinction between money appropriated, money requested and money actually put to productive use is worth keeping firmly in mind. Governments can announce $50bn over breakfast. Unfortunately, infrastructure cannot be built by lunchtime. [5] [9]

It takes rather more than a cheque to replace equipment while thousands of aircraft continue flying every day. New and old systems must work together, contractors must be supervised, failures must be contained and upgrades must be tested without creating fresh problems. The GAO's September review identified 11,389 individual project schedules that were not yet combined into an integrated master schedule. One admires the commitment to scheduling.

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Coordination might be the more useful accomplishment. [5]

For investors, this is where a public spending programme becomes an interesting but decidedly imperfect opportunity. Large contracts are not necessarily good contracts. They can be won at optimistic margins, delivered late and followed by uncomfortable conversations about who should pay for the overruns.

I am more interested in the unglamorous businesses whose value can be demonstrated: the firms that keep essential communications running, test upgrades safely, spot weaknesses before they spread or help an airline recover its operation after disruption. Their customers understand the cost of getting it wrong. That does not guarantee a good investment, of course, but it is a more promising starting point than mistaking a government announcement for future earnings.

And now, the blame game

Washington has found another use for the November outage: assigning ownership of it. President Trump blamed the Biden administration. His transportation secretary, Sean Duffy, acknowledged that underinvestment stretched across governments of both parties. The long record of warnings suggests that the problem is older than the latest political quarrel. [7]

Biden, after all, spent four years as the beef in a Trump sandwich. It would be quite a feat for the filling alone to have created problems that aviation watchdogs had been documenting for decades. That is not a defence of Biden. It is simply a reminder that infrastructure has a longer memory than the political news cycle.

Nor does it excuse today's leadership. Inherited faults still demand present-day choices: what to repair first, how to keep the system working during the transition and who is answerable when a costly upgrade disappoints. Blaming one's predecessor is considerably easier than supervising a contractor. It is also less useful.

Pilots and controllers kept aircraft safe during November's disruption. That deserves recognition. But a persuasive scorecard for Washington should be quieter and more practical: functioning backups, completed safety recommendations, shorter disruptions and credible delivery schedules. These tell us whether anything has actually improved.

Washington can argue about who broke the system. Investors might be better served asking who can actually fix it.

À bientôt, Basil

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About Pyrénées Capital

Pyrénées Capital is an independent Bahrain-based consultancy focused on cross-border investment origination, strategic introductions and relationships between businesses and investors. Founded in 2016, the firm works with family offices, institutions and international investment managers across markets.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

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