

Policy Backgrounder

Air Safety: DCA Plane Crash and NTSB Investigation

The midair collision between an American Airlines regional jet and an Army helicopter that took place over the Potomac River near Washington National Airport (DCA) on January 29 was the Nation's deadliest aviation disaster in nearly a quarter century. Immediately following the crash, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) launched an investigation into the cause of the incident, examining both the human and mechanical factors that caused the disaster.

Key Insights

- An early FAA report determined that one air traffic controller (ATC) was responsible for coordinating both helicopter traffic and arriving and departing planes, which was “not normal for the time of day and volume of traffic.” Now, the investigative focus shifts to the NTSB.
- Investigators are looking into factors that may suggest that the pilots from the Black Hawk experienced [vision impairment](#) as well as whether the helicopter deviated from its normal altitude and efforts the airplane made to avoid the collision.
- On February 4, the NTSB [shared](#) that the Black Hawk's altitude was 300 feet at the time of the collision. (This data is rounded to the nearest 100 feet.) Federal aviation rules for this airspace require that helicopters stay below 200 feet on routes above the Potomac.
- The NTSB's [investigation process](#) generally takes between 12 and 24 months to complete; in the meantime, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy has promised an effort at FAA reform and would be responsible, along with FAA, for making any necessary changes to flight operations at DCA.

Staffing “Not Normal” At the Time of the Crash

Last week’s tragic [crash](#) which killed 67 people aboard the two aircraft was the Nation’s deadliest aviation disaster in nearly a quarter century. The midair collision between an American Airlines regional jet carrying 60 passengers and four crew members and an Army helicopter occurred just before 9 p.m. over Ronald Reagan National Airport (DCA), one of the most tightly monitored airspaces in the world. Yet at the time of the crash, only one air traffic controller (ATC), was coordinating helicopter traffic and arriving and departing planes, rather than two. According to a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) report, “The position configuration was not normal for the time of day and volume of traffic.”

Investigating the Crash

The day following the crash, the [National Transportation Safety Board](#) (NTSB) – an independent Federal agency responsible for civil transportation accident investigations – launched an [investigation](#) into the incident. Every NTSB investigation goes through the same general [process](#), which includes the initial decision to launch an investigation, on-site fact gathering, analysis of facts and determination of probable cause, acceptance of a final report, and advocating for safety recommendations arising from the investigation. The process is not strictly linear. Investigations tend to take between 12 and 24 months to complete depending on the complexity of the investigation and the workload of the agency’s investigators.

An initial step is analysis of the flight data recorders, the “black box,” from each aircraft to determine an accurate timeline of events, coordinating the data from the flight data and cockpit voice recorders and radar data. On February 4, the NTSB [shared](#) that the agency received updated information that shows the air traffic control tower display at DCA is fueled by the Potomac TRACON. “The TRACON fuses information from multiple radar sensors and ADS-B data, providing the best quality flight track data to air traffic control,” according to the NTSB’s update. The data showed that the Black Hawk was at 300 feet (rounded to the nearest 100 feet) on the air traffic control display at the time of the collision, above the ceiling for that route of 200 feet. The NTSB plans to collect additional data points to confirm this report.

Preliminary data from the NTSB on Saturday shows the inbound flight from Wichita flying at an [altitude](#) of 325 feet, ± 25 feet, at the time of impact. Aviation rules require that helicopters stay below 200 feet on routes above the Potomac. The crash also reignited concern over DCA’s [crowded airspace](#), as the Arlington, Virginia airport is one of the busiest in the country.

Examining Human and Mechanical Factors

“We do not know enough facts to be able to rule in or out human factors, mechanical factors. That is part of the NTSB investigative process,” [said](#) NTSB member J. Todd Inman. Beyond the possible deviation from its expected altitude, investigators are looking into factors that may suggest that the pilots from the Black Hawk experienced [vision impairment](#). Inman said that the helicopter was on a training mission and would typically use night vision goggles.

The Army began issuing [night vision goggles](#) to its pilots in 1985 to allow pilots and aircrews to see more clearly at night with improved depth perception. The goggles work to amplify light in the wearer's field of view, allowing dim objects to become brighter. However, the devices can overwhelm a user, and military helicopter aircrews often wear their goggles several inches away from their eyes to allow wearers to see outside of the goggles when needed. A military pilot who frequently flew patrols along the same routes over Washington and Northern Virginia said that any limitations to a pilot's peripheral vision or depth perception caused by wearing night vision goggles are mitigated through frequent training and night flying. In a video posted to X on January 30, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth [said](#) the Army crew members aboard the Black Hawk had night vision goggles but did not specify whether they were in use.

FAA's Temporary Leadership and Paths to Reform

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, sworn in only the day before the crash, said last week that he will soon announce a plan to [reform](#) the FAA. In December Duffy [said](#) he wants to make sure the FAA has enough air traffic controllers and “that we have safe planes coming out of Boeing.” Mike Whitaker, who was unanimously confirmed as FAA Administrator in October 2023 for a five-year term after a vacancy of nearly 18 months in the position [stepped down early](#) on Inauguration Day. But the President designated [Chris Rocheleau](#) as Acting Administrator only the day after the crash. Rocheleau previously served the FAA for over 20 years in several leadership roles. [William “Liam” McKenna](#), who was most recently General Counsel for the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, was named FAA Chief Counsel and Acting FAA Deputy Administrator.

FAA has had a difficult few years, not least in connection with the safety record of [Boeing](#) aircraft but also with airspace safety. In November 2023, a group of experts from the National Airspace System (NAS) Safety Review Team (SRT) issued a 52-page [report](#) examining the FAA's safety record, noting the need for better staffing, equipment, and technology. The report followed several [close calls](#) at airports around the country. The majority of close calls that year resulted from either pilot error or air controller mistakes. Former Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety David Boulter said in a letter to the agency's advisory panel on rulemaking that alerting technologies “are only part of the problem” to avoiding close calls, and more consideration needs to be given to “human factors.”

The first Trump Administration in March 2017 [endorsed a plan](#) to cut over 30,000 FAA workers – including 14,000 air traffic controllers – from the agency. In June 2017, the White House formally endorsed a plan to [transfer](#) the 30,000 FAA workers into a private, nonprofit corporation. The Administration claimed that removing Air Traffic Control (ATC) operations from the FAA would allow it to focus solely on its role as a safety regulator rather than having a dual mandate, arguing that “[t]his will enable ATC to keep pace with the accelerating rate of change in the aviation industry, including the integration of new entrants such as Unmanned Aircraft Systems and Commercial Space Transports.” Congress took no action on the proposal.

In any event, controller training was put on hold during the pandemic, increasing the nationwide shortage of controllers. With the crash, FAA reform of some type is clearly on the agenda; one key question will be overall staffing levels for the agency as a whole and for ATC specifically. According to Nick Daniels, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, 41 percent of the union's 10,800 members are working six days a week, 10 hours a day, just to provide a [staffing level](#) that remains inadequate. Meanwhile, 14,600 positions are needed to meet the current demand.

Conclusion

It will take up to two years for the NTSB to determine formally the cause of the crash; until then, the FAA and Transportation Department will be responsible for implementing any changes to improve aviation safety not only at DCA but throughout the system. Beyond his forthcoming plan for FAA reform, Duffy [stated](#) that “[w]e have the safest skies in the whole world. Traveling by air is the safest mode of transportation [.]” Both the NTSB investigation and further reform of FAA should focus on that goal and improving the safety record for both aircraft and airspace.

About the Authors



David Young, President, CED



John Gardner, Vice President of Public Policy, CED



Mallory Block, Public Policy Analyst, CED

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