

FLYING BLIND, FLYING SAFE, by Mary Schiavo with Sabra Chartrand,
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Mere weeks before ValuJet's DC-9 crashed into the Florida Everglades killing the 110 people on board the Department of Transportation recommended that ValuJet be grounded for safety reasons. However, Department of Transportation officials, including Secretary Frederico Peña, began appearing on television immediately following the accident, reassuring the public that the airline was safe to fly, and "seemed only concerned with protecting ValuJet." Additionally, in 1995, the Inspector General's Office for the Department of Transportation conducted a study of airport security. During this study, Federal Aviation Administration ("FAA") agents "posed as gun-wielding or bomb-carrying passengers and wandered. . . through some of the biggest airports in the U.S." These agents boarded planes, getting into cargo areas and other secured portions of airports unchallenged 40 percent of the time. When the Inspector General at the time, Mary Schiavo, reported her findings to the FAA, the FAA officials responded by requesting the report be buried indefinitely. As Schiavo notes, "[t]he 1996 Summer Olympics were approaching, and the Department feared our findings would frighten athletes and tourists flocking to Atlanta for the international games."

In her new best-seller, *FLYING BLIND, FLYING SAFE*, Schiavo, the recently-resigned Inspector General for the Department of Transportation, states that this is due to the fact that consumer safety is not the primary concern of the FAA. For thirty-eight years, the number one objective of the FAA has been "to promote commercial aviation." This approach has bred a reactive approach to safety — assessing the need for certain modifications by the number of human lives that have been lost, an approach that has resulted in the FAA being deemed the "Tombstone Agency." The onset of deregulation, however, coupled with the exponential increase in demand that is projected for the airline industry, spawns fears that the FAA's previously manifested inability to keep step with the ultracompetitive mutations of the airline industry will result in a posi-

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tively frightening frequency in airline disasters, as many as "one a week," according to some experts.

The FAA's inability to manage the deregulated industry is discussed through the examination of a number of circumstances, including the ability of component manufacturers to effectually "grant themselves federal certification of their own aircraft designs." The ever increasing modernization of on-board systems has reduced the role of FAA inspectors who struggle to understand and assess the viability of such improvements. "Fortunately, manufacturer expertise and commitment to safety have covered for the FAA." These manufacturers, according to Schiavo, are not the only ones to blame. Market forces incident to deregulation have resulted in widespread manufacture and sale of artificial or counterfeit airplane components known as "bogus parts." A five year study conducted under the author's administration resulted in widespread seizures of bad parts, described as follows:

In the end, we would seize bad parts from almost every kind of aircraft: helicopter blades, brake components, engines, engine starters, fuel bladders, generators, bearings, speed drives, avionics, cockpit warning lights, landing gears, valves and switches, wheels, combustion liners, parts of helicopter tail rotors, windshields and entire wing and tail assemblies. We would confiscate parts made in basements, garages, and weld shops, or from major U.S. manufacturers and from Germany, France, England, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, China, the Philippines, Taiwan or unknown countries of origin. They even showed up on the President's helicopters and in the oxygen and fire-extinguishing systems of Air Force One and Two.

Schiavo identifies and discusses other areas that demonstrate the FAA's inattention to safety. Aircraft inspectors are often untrained and do an incomplete job inspecting the safety of an aircraft. Many aircraft, airports, and air traffic control systems are aging and becoming unsafe — yet federal grants to improve facilities are often squandered or used for purposes other than improving facilities.

In this regard, Schiavo attempts to "arm" the consumer with information about the age of various airplanes and airport facilities. Schiavo also supplies her recommendations regarding which airlines are safest. Further recommendations are made as to what a customer can do as a passenger and a citizen in making the airlines safer (e.g., "[g]ive the [National Transportation Safety Board] more authority [or s]harpen Congress's oversight of the FAA.") Addresses and telephone numbers of various other resources are also provided.

Schiavo raises awareness that the FAA, by its charter, is not concerned primarily with safety. This focus is lost during intervals of frustration; for example, in chapter seven, Schiavo discusses cult-like management seminars attended by FAA officials. Schiavo recommends

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“[c]hang[ing] all top management personnel at FAA. . .[who have] proved they are not up to the task.”

Overall, Schiavo does well to express sincere concern and alert consumers that safety is not the number one priority at the FAA, by providing insight of frustrated efforts to innovate the Inspector General’s role concerning air safety. Although a number of Schiavo’s allegations, and the tone with which she expresses them, drew considerable criticism from transportation officials, it cannot be denied that as demand for airline services increases, the need to address the concerns she raises will continue to be relevant — hopefully not at the expense that is suggested.

